AFFPC AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

Who will Bell the Cat? Building Feminist Foreign Policy Routes to Facilitate Nuclear Disarmament

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AFFPC ISSUE PAPER SERIES. ISSUE NUMBER 14. OCTOBER 2023

When nuclear weapons are seen as symbols of masculinity, when will any state willingly do away with them? – Carol Cohn[i]

Introduction

Even as a pandemic forced the world to confront its broken systems, global military expenditure surpassed the two trillion US dollar mark for the first time, reaching USD 2.113 trillion in 2021. Of this, the US government spent approximately USD 44 billion on nuclear weapons, China spent nearly 12 billion, Russia 9 billion, the UK 6.8 billion, France 5.9 billion, India 2.3 billion, Israel and Pakistan around USD 1 billion each, and North Korea a little over half a billion.[ii] By comparison, the total budget of the UN Peacekeeping missions from July 2021 to June 2022 was just USD 6.3 billion. This represents two major disparities: the inherent threat to peace when military expenditure remains the top priority, no matter if a global pandemic is raging; that peace is not viewed as being as profitable a business prospect as military expenditure.

The challenge inherent in a business-as-usual approach to militarization is that we are steadily moving away from prioritizing efforts toward achieving sustainable peace, and in the process, diverting resources and causing catastrophic devastation on people and planet alike. As a non-nuclear weapon-possessing, wealthy, US-allied nation, Australia has the ability to right a historical wrong by stepping up to hold its Global North partners accountable to the achievement of nuclear disarmament and a peaceful future. The route for this, as this paper argues, is a mindful feminist foreign policy.

The Nuclear Weapons Regime: Necropolitics in Action

As nuclear weapons are constantly used to represent power, as tools of dominance and control, and as a means to assert exceptionalism and elitism, they effectively serve as a symbol of heteropatriarchal cis-het male strength.[iii] The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) makes it mandatory for the five states that had nuclear weapons before 1967 (US, UK, Russia, China, and France, or the P5) to negotiate and achieve nuclear disarmament, and for all other states to not develop or acquire nuclear weapons. These five states, however, do not treat the NPT as a mechanism to reduce their stockpiles, but, as a "sanctification of their right to possess them."[iv] However, even as non-signatories to the 2017 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the nuclear-armed states are bound by the long-established *jus cogens* norms of international law – or peremptory norms from which no derogation is possible. This was affirmed by the International Court of Justice in 1996, in its Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons,[v] where it noted that Article VI of the NPT imposes a legal obligation on nuclear-armed state parties to the NPT to conclude negotiations toward nuclear disarmament, and achieve the elimination of all their nuclear weapons programs. In effect, possessing nuclear weapons effectively transgress the obligation of states to prioritize peace and to avoid the use of force on all counts.

From the perspective of feminist foreign policy, it is also important to note that the development, testing, deployment, and disposal of nuclear weapons have significant gendered impacts, and these impacts are

more strongly felt on the bodies of colonized Indigenous communities. Data from the Nuclear Information Resource Services[vi] show that radiation is 50% more likely to cause cancer and death among people assigned female at birth. After the nuclear bombs were used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, women were more likely to develop cancer than men. Following the nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl in 1986, a similar trend was seen. The US has tested nuclear weapons in the Bikini Atoll and the Marshall Islands, causing significant damage to the health and means of livelihood of the communities in these regions.[vii] "Jellyfish babies" were born in the Marshall Islands – living a mere three or four hours, with translucent skin, and heavily under-developed anatomical structures.[viii] India's nuclear tests in Pokhran resulted in what came to be known as "Pokhran's disease," where many women and children and livestock have died from cancers, birth defects, and mysterious tumours.[ix] Similar effects have been found in Chagai, Pakistan, where lung, liver, blood cancer, skin diseases, typhoid, and infectious hepatitis, and a range of impacts on newborn babies.[x] Exposure to nuclear radiation puts women at greater risk of dying at childbirth, as well as the increase in the number of still births and birth defects. Social stigma gets ascribed easily on women who have faced nuclear radiation, as they are perceived as unfit for reproduction.[xi]

In effect, the deployment and use of nuclear weapons is an exercise of necropower, defined by Achille Mbembe[xii] as "The use of social and political power to dictate how some people may live and how some must die, driven by racism, wherein racialized people's lives are systemically cheapened and habituated to loss." By situating their military needs over the right to life of Indigenous communities and the colonized other, there is an obvious "cheapening" of the lives of racialized people. The notions of masculinity tied to the image of a nuclear weapons-state make it nuclear disarmament tremendously challenging.[xiii] A small scale nuclear war could create extreme poverty, drought, and famine, and destroy the entire region, rendering it uninhabitable.[xiv] These impacts are inherently gendered. As Acheson argues,[xv] discussions on nuclear weapons often exclude and reject the experiences of those who have faced the long-lasting, intergenerational harms of nuclear weapons use and testing.

Today's Feminist Foreign Policies: Opportunity Lost?

At the time of writing, 16 countries had either adopted or committed to adopting feminist foreign policies. All of these policies have fundamentally prioritized gender equality and the enhanced participation of women in a variety of spheres, and have grounded their ideas of security in the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, which focuses heavily on women's experiences of armed conflict. No feminist foreign policy, however, sufficiently considers or seeks to limit the harms caused by militarism, military spending, and weapons on the implementation of the WPS agenda or peace.

Furthermore, no feminist foreign policy has openly named nuclear weapons as a security threat, much less a security threat with deeply gendered ramifications.

As Maria Paulina Rivera Chavez cautioned,[xvi] the current template for feminist foreign policy could easily become the groundswell of the future of feminist foreign policy – or, borrowing from Ann Towns' scholarship, a new "standard of civilization."[xvii] This may only reinforce the notion that there is a universal way of doing feminist foreign policies, and that the one-size-fits-all framework can be adopted anywhere and everywhere without modification. While the past 12 months has seen a wave in adoption of feminist foreign policies by Latin American countries, most feminist foreign policies to date have been adopted by colonial governments, focusing on providing "aid" to address issues such as maternal mortality and gender equality in countries other than their own – in the process, they have neither addressed racialized and gender-based violence and other inequalities within their territories, nor addressed the impact of their militarism abroad and at home. In no uncertain terms, these feminist foreign policies risk a white saviour complex, in the process re-entrenching inequalities instead of interrogating systemic and structural violence and inequalities.

Contemporary feminist foreign policy approaches have called for enhanced participation of women in decision-making roles and positions of power. When viewed from the perspective of righting the exclusion alone, this may be a good start, for the gendered language and perceptions of nuclear weapons can best, if at all, be countered by the inclusion of women in these places. However, there is very little to be achieved through a mere add-woman-and-stir approach. The inclusion of women in these spaces will be reductionist if their participation is left exclusively to carry the container of the gendered impacts of nuclear weapons – the risk, in this highly colonial and capitalistic approach, is that their participation will be co-opted to further a new agenda in the name of innovation. This could look like, potentially, trawling new technological "solutions" to the gendered impact of nuclear weapons instead of interrogating the systemic and structural violence that has enabled the development and stockpiling of nuclear weapons – not very different from Elon Musk calling for an "innovation" to "remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere"[xviii] while simultaneously also clearing acres of forests to build factories.[xix]

Instead, feminist foreign policies should interrogate the military industry complex, the role of necropolitics, and the systemic violence that have all normalized the accretion of power in the form of the pursuit of nuclear weapons. The power hierarchies and dynamics that continue to maintain the nuclear weapons regime are rooted in racism, imperialism, and colonialism.[xx] Without interrogating these factors, simply bringing women into the dialogue will not only reduce their significant contributions, but also reduce them in entirety to the roles they play in their societies – as "moral mothers," nurturers, as "inherently peaceful" people.[xxi] A feminist foreign policy must be willing to look at gender, as

Cohn, Hill, and Ruddick (2005) noted, as a way of structuring power relations.[xxii] Not doing so, and focusing instead on the superficial understanding of gender as binary categories of men and women – or at the most 'pink washing' the rhetoric where appropriate – is squandering an opportunity for transformation.

An Opportunity for Australia: Adopting Feminist Foreign Policy calling for Nuclear Disarmament

As a state that has indicated that it does not intend to acquire nuclear weapons, Australia has a powerful site to amplify this call in a feminist foreign policy of its own. This should be integrated with Australia's existing commitment to develop a First Nations foreign policy strategy, led by the Ambassador for First Nations People.[xxiii] The following recommendations are intended as potential areas of engagement that Australia could identify and prioritize within its feminist foreign policy.

Recommendation 1: Signing the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)

Australia suggests that its "core obligations" as a non-nuclear-armed state are set out in the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and include a solemn undertaking not to acquire nuclear weapons.[xxiv] However, Australia has not signed the 2017 TPNW, which complements the 1968 NPT. Australia's feminist foreign policy can build on the strong foundation of the original NPT, but can also move toward acknowledging the complementary value the TPNW brings to the table, to call for the elimination of all nuclear weapon programmes, and holding the nuclear-armed states accountable to these standards.

Australia has already committed to "continue to work to preserve and strengthen the NPT and the norms it enshrines as the cornerstone of multilateral nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation efforts". Its formal end to five years of opposition to the 2017 TPNW by abstaining from instead of voting against the treaty at the UN General Assembly suggests a move in the right direction. However, Australia must go beyond this to ensure its people and the international community that it will never acquire nuclear weapons, and that it will renounce the use of nuclear weapons on its behalf. Under Australia's "extended nuclear deterrence" partnership with the United States, Australia tacitly supports the use and threat of use, as well as the preparation and planning for use of nuclear weapons. A feminist foreign policy would see Australia promoting nuclear disarmament, not promoting justifications for nuclear weapon possession.

As a key member of the AUKUS collaboration, Australia has sparked fears of potential proliferation with the nuclear-powered submarines deal – an arrangement that raises concerns even if it currently concerns propulsion, rather than arms.[xxv] The AUKUS as an institution is anything but a feminist enterprise – given that large sums of money are spent on nuclear-powered submarines, undermining the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and sparking major tensions around the risk of nuclear war in the Pacific region among other things – and this must be a point of reflection for Australia, which should examine the long-term implications of being part of this alliance. Australia's feminist foreign policy should prioritize Australia's withdrawal from the AUKUS.

Recommendation 2: Interrogating power

Much of the global advocacy on gendering approaches to nuclear disarmament have either centred the gendered impacts as a basis for inclusion, or have argued in favour of dismantling the patriarchy inherent in the nuclear weapons regime by constructing claims couched in "masculine v. feminine" rhetoric. This rhetoric risks reaffirming gendered stereotypes. The approach to disarmament will do no more than make tables longer and fences shorter, instead of interrogating the structural violence inherent in the current state.

Instead, a feminist foreign policy should speak to the kyriarchy, and not just the patriarchy inherent in the system. Australia has the opportunity to acknowledge and address the systemic violence that has normalized the possession of nuclear weapons by certain states, particularly the P5. As one of the states whose Indigenous leaders have called for reparations against the Commonwealth,[xxvi] Australia must strive for coherence in holding the colonial systems in place to account. By seeking to dismantle the systemic and structural violence that has normalized the possession of weapons by a few countries, Australia's feminist foreign policy could pave the way for a global shift away from the unsubstantiated zero-sum argument that nuclear weapons have a deterrent effect. It could help shift the focus on the mutually assured destruction that will leave no winners whatsoever – and impress upon states to prioritize meaningful expenditure that furthers human development domains (such as public health or education) from which a fully functional nuclear weapons regime diverts funds. In integrating this approach with the commitment to First Nations foreign policy, Australia could do well to learn from and centre the values of First Nations cultures,[xxvii] particularly the interconnectedness of First Nations ways of being wherein "individuals, rather than a state, share collective but individual responsibilities on law, caring for country, relationality and reciprocity" can go a long way to shift away from militarization.[xxviii]

Recommendation 3: Listening to Civil Society

Australia is geographically proximate to island nations that have faced the devastating impacts of both to climate change and nuclear testing, with particular population groups rendered especially vulnerable because of colonialism, racism, and necropolitics, to the risk of losing their lives, culture, and means of livelihood to one, if not both, of these catastrophes. Ensuring coherence in its feminist foreign policy, Australia can go a long way to centre the civil society within Australia, especially the most marginalized, and those in the Pacific Islands that are especially vulnerable to and have difficult experiences with nuclear testing, and

centre these voices while advocating for change. It is vital for Australia to acknowledge the majority world that lives within its territory and surrounding regions – to borrow Dr Toni Haastrup's turn of phrase, "the Global South within the Global North."

Recommendation 4: Prioritizing Positive Peace

States that hold nuclear weapons do so in the name of seeking deterrence. In reality, their presence offers very little assurance of a sense of safety or security. In effect, it creates a state of negative peace – a fragile situation characterized by a marked sense of anxiety around the potential of war, conflict, or mutually assured destruction, which is not good news for anyone. The heavy investment in developing, testing, storing, deploying, and preparing for the use of nuclear weapons means, as a necessary corollary, a diversion of resources meant for mindful expenditure toward public infrastructure. As Acheson noted, "Finding money for modernization of nuclear weapons and other military expenditures directly influences the amount of money available for investments in the public sector."[xxix] Australia has a real opportunity to centre the idea of positive peace, a principle that prioritizes focusing on offering means and mechanisms that enable every individual to live their life with a view to achieving their full and wholesome potential – by focusing on education, climate justice, sustainable and affordable housing, accessible healthcare, and support for survivors of gender-based violence, instead of focusing on nuclear submarines, militarism, and weapons production.

THE AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

The Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition is diverse network advancing feminist foreign policy in Australia. Convened by IWDA, its members work across a range of sectors including foreign policy, defence, security, women's rights, climate change and migration.

Feminist foreign policy is an approach which places gender equality as the central goal of foreign policy, in recognition that gender equality is a predictor of peaceful and flourishing societies. This Issues Paper Series aims to explore the opportunities and challenges for Australia in applying a feminist lens to a range of foreign policy issues, and provide practical ways forward.

Endnotes

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