

Feminism and Peace Movements: Engendering Anti-Nuclear Activism

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Abstract

In this chapter, I argue for the reinvigoration and expansion of research on feminist anti-nuclear activism. I draw on a diverse range of sources —from the vibrant literature on the Cold War women’s peace camps, through postcolonial framings of anti-nuclear activism in Asia and the Pacific, to claims about feminist influence on the negotiation of a global ban on nuclear weapons. Sketching the contours of a bolder and more inclusive research agenda on feminist anti-nuclear activism, I advocate that feminist peace researchers should renew their engagement with, and contribution to, the struggle for a nuclear-free world.

Introduction

This chapter focuses on feminism and peace movements and more particularly on organised, collective, women-led, feminist activism in opposition to nuclear weapons. An undeniably significant phenomenon during the later Cold War, such activism was the subject of considerable media attention and academic analysis and continues to be of interest in history, sociology and cultural studies. The topic has become rather marginal in contemporary feminist peace research, however. This is despite the fact that nuclear weapons, and feminist campaigning against them, have not gone away – and indeed, are currently returning to the headlines. This chapter makes the case for the continued significance of feminist anti-nuclear activism, and for the renewal and broadening of enquiry in this area. After defining terms, I examine the literature on Cold War women’s peace camps before challenging the apparent reluctance of current feminist peace researchers to study the phenomenon. By way of illustrating the continued pertinence and diversity of feminist anti-nuclear activism, I map its contours in India, using this as a jumping-off point to outline a future research agenda on the topic.

What is Feminist Anti-Nuclear Activism?

I begin with a couple of definitional clarifications. Most obviously, feminist *anti-nuclear* and *peace* activism are not coterminous. The latter has a much longer history, with examples including the 1915 International Congress of Women and consequent founding of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), discussed in this Handbook by xxxx (see also Hellawell, 2018; Siegel, 2016), as well as the 1920s Pan American women’s conferences (Bergmann et al., 1992). On Jill Liddington’s account (1991), the Cold War feminist anti-nuclear protestors were in important ways inheritors of this longer-standing tradition of engagement in peace movements, as reflected in their similar anti-war, anti-militaristic politics; in the connections drawn by some between female subjectivity, motherhood and pacifism; and in their endeavours to forge transnational relations of solidarity between women. Feminist peace work is also broader in scope than anti-nuclear politics, encompassing ongoing campaigns against war, the arms trade and everyday militarism as well as issue-specific interventions aimed at ending specific wars, eradicating particular weapons and military tactics, and building peace in post-conflict situations (e.g., Handbook chapters by xxxx; see also Cockburn, 2007; Zulver, 2017; Chigudu, 2016). Feminist anti-nuclear activism should

be understood as one element in this larger struggle, and as actively drawing on and contributing to it.

Second, it should be acknowledged that *feminist* and *women's* anti-nuclear activism are not entirely congruent. In this regard, Christina Ewig and Myra Marx Ferree usefully distinguish '*feminist organizing* [that is] efforts led by women explicitly challenging women's subordination to men' from '*women's movements* (movements composed of women seeking social change but not necessarily addressing women's subordination)' (2013: 437, emphasis in original). This distinction reminds us that not all women's peace activism challenges female subordination, that men may participate in feminist action, and that feminist women also organise in mixed-gender peace movements. Having said that, the boundary between 'women' and 'feminist' remains porous and unstable in this context. As we shall see, feminist anti-nuclear activism is most often formulated and driven by women, with its enactment in and through women's bodies retaining symbolic value. Moreover, women's anti-nuclear activism that invokes gender-conservative frameworks may simultaneously or over time articulate feminist content and have feminist effects, challenging female subordination and reconstituting female and male subjectivities in unexpected ways.

Cold War Feminist Anti-Nuclear Activism

With the revival of the Cold War in the early 1980s and the accompanying worldwide resurgence of an anti-nuclear movement, and in the wake of the second wave of feminism, larger numbers of women than ever before mobilised against nuclear weapons. A new generation of all-women groups and women-led actions was launched. The US, for example, saw the emergence of WAND — Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament (Caldicott, 1997: 296-9) — and "the Ribbon", which involved 20,000 women and their male supporters wrapping embroidered cloth around the Pentagon (Pershing, 1996). Moreover, many women did not confine themselves to ostensibly feminine or civil modes of political organizing, instead advocating and enacting feminist challenges to gender hierarchy as well as participating in unruly direct action (Wittner, 2000; Gusterson, 1996: 193-7, 213-4). It is in this context that 'Women's Pentagon Action' organised dramatic demonstrations and blockades, for example (Linton and Whitham, 1989; Women's Pentagon Action, 1982), and that the women's peace camp phenomenon arose. Women made their homes at Seneca Falls and Puget Sound in the US (e.g., Krasniewicz, 1992), at Pine Gap in Australia (e.g., Bartlett, 2013) and at various nuclear bases across Europe,¹ with Greenham Common camp in the UK being the earliest, largest and most well-researched example (e.g., Roseneil, 1995; 2000).

The Greenham camp directly inspired many feminist engagements with the fields of peace studies and peace education (Weigert, 1990; Harris and King, 1989; Cook and Kirk, 1983) as well as of International Relations and security studies (e.g., Enloe, 2004: 174; Sylvester, 1994: 184-197). Notably, the literature on the camps, and particularly on Greenham, continues to grow apace across sociology, history, and media, cultural and literary studies (e.g., Feigenbaum, 2015; 2013; Olsen, 2017; Mayer, 2017; Bartlett, 2016).² However, in feminist peace and security studies, the fascination with Cold War women's peace camps, and with feminist anti-nuclear activism more generally, has sharply declined.

As I have indicated elsewhere (Eschle, 2013), there are two likely reasons for this. The first is the assumption that a focus on feminist antinuclear activism replicates a biologically-

¹ See the list of camps at <http://www.fredsakademiet.dk/ordbog/ford/f254.htm>.

² See also this recently launched popular oral history project and exhibition in the UK: <http://www.scarylittlegirls.co.uk/press-release-calling-all-greenham-women/>

determinist linkage between women, motherhood and peace (and between men and violence), which has played a significant part in peace activism over the centuries and which has long been seen as problematic by many feminists because of its conservative implications for gender roles (e.g., Forcey, 1991; Sylvester, 1987). This critique is well-founded, but can be overstated. While determinist claims have certainly been articulated in feminist anti-nuclear activism (e.g., Bartlett, 2011; Kirchhof, 2015; Odawara, 2018), they have had unpredictable and sometimes subversive political effects. Thus participation in the Cold War women's peace camps and protests often precipitated a challenge to gender hierarchies and heteronormativity in the lives of activists, for example (e.g. Roseneil 1995, 2000) or functioned to turn the political gaze and media attention back onto military masculinity or male-bodied authority (e.g., Managhan, 2007). Furthermore, determinist claims have been challenged by rival activist framings of the connection between gender and nuclear politics. In this vein, lesbian and queer discourses circulating in the camps displaced motherly duty with resistance to patriarchal stereotypes and the pleasures of sexual transgression (e.g., Roseneil, 2000; Feigenbaum, 2010).

In any case, biologically determinist claims need not be unquestioningly reproduced and reified in academic analysis, as demonstrated by the growing literature on Cold War women's peace camps from across a range of disciplines. My recent overview of this vibrant field of scholarship (Eschle, 2017) shows it to be largely characterised by poststructuralist-influenced methodologies that track the discursive constitution of gendered subjectivity, brings with them an emphasis on the shifting and contested nature of what it means to be a woman. Louise Krasniewicz's narrative about the rivalry between maternalist and lesbian discourses of womanhood at Seneca Encampment is one example (1992: chap. 11). Connectedly, the literature highlights that gendered subjectivities took different forms in different camps. Compare, for example, Alison Bartlett's (2013) discussion of the ways in which the women of Pine Gap challenged the white supremacist, hyper-masculine imagery of the 'red centre' of Australia, with Tim Cresswell's account (1996: chap. 5) of how the modes of dress and living arrangements of Greenham Common drew upon and subverted the cultural codes of the English countryside (see also Feigenbaum 2015). Finally, this literature converges on the view that the political significance of camps lay less in their challenge to nuclear weapons than in their transgression of patriarchal norms and heteronormativity, whether it be through uncomfortable juxtapositions, radical inversions or cultural reworkings of gender roles and tropes (Feigenbaum 2010; Cresswell 1996: chap. 5; Laware 2004: 29-30). In such ways, this body of work shows that there remain significant insights to be gleaned about and from the Cold War camps, and provides feminist peace researchers with innovative methodological tools for studying them.

At this point, however, we need to consider a second possible reason for the lack of recent attention to feminist anti-nuclear activism in the field of feminist peace and security research, which is the perception that it is an outdated topic and, as such, best left to the historians. Such a view would have some justification, given that the end of the Cold War superpower standoff precipitated the demobilisation of large-scale women's peace activism in the US and its allies in the Western bloc. Nonetheless, nuclear weapons have not disappeared and neither has feminist campaigning against them. My own research has explored how feminist arguments have been reframed and recirculated since the Cold War in texts by prominent US and UK-based activists (Eschle, 2013), and shown that feminism remains a recurring if contested influence in a long-standing mixed-gender anti-nuclear protest site at Faslane naval base in Scotland (Eschle, 2017; see also Eschle, 2018). Moreover, I venture to suggest that to assume feminist anti-nuclear activism ended with the Cold War is to rely on a limited, Eurocentric view of the form and timing of such activism. The next section centres a small but

important body of research on opposition to the nuclear tests in India that powerfully illustrates the point.

Post-Cold War Feminist Anti-Nuclear Activism

The first wave of nuclear protest in India, represented by groups such as the Movement in India for Nuclear Disarmament (MIND), emerged in the mid-1980s in the context of the revival of the anti-nuclear movement worldwide (Das, 2007: 17; Chowdhry, No date). Yet it was in the post-Cold War era, at a time when large-scale mass actions and lobbying around nuclear weapons became less prevalent in the West, that anti-nuclear protest expanded rapidly in India. The ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) conducted a series of nuclear tests in the spring of 1998, which precipitated the revival of MIND and its later transformation into the Coalition for Nuclear Peace and Disarmament (CNDP), along with the proliferation of new anti-nuclear initiatives, and brought thousands into the street (Kothari and Mian, 2001; Chowdhry, No date: 17-19). According to Runa Das (2007), women's organising was integral to this new anti-nuclear activism, in the form of women-only groups and also the extensive mobilisation of women in mixed-gender organisations and protests. And this brought with it a distinctively feminist strand of anti-nuclear activism, with feminists 'among the first' to march according to Geeta Chowdhry: 'all the feminist activist organizations like Jagori, Saheli, AIDWA [All-India Democratic Women's Association], and numerous regional ones condemned the explosions' (Chowdhry, No date: 16).

As Chowdhry emphasises (No date: 12-14), feminist opponents of the tests did not speak with a single voice: AIDWA, for example, followed the line of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) with which it is affiliated. Nonetheless, there emerged a shared feminist critique of the masculinist character of the resurgent Hindu nationalism that underpinned the nuclear tests (see also Das, 2007: 8). Writer and campaigner Arundhati Roy articulates this in her usual trenchant style:

'We have proved we are not eunuchs any more', said Mr Thackeray of the Shiv Sena [aligned with the BJP]. (Whoever said we were? True, a good number of us are women, but that, as far as I know, isn't the same thing.) Reading the papers, it was often hard to tell when people were referring to Viagra (which was competing for second place on the front pages) and when they were talking about the bomb – 'We have superior strength and potency.' (This was our Minister for Defence after Pakistan completed its tests). (Roy, 1999: 136)

As feminist critics make clear, this BJP discourse had its roots in a colonial context in which the British elite feminised and infantilised Indian men (Oza, 2006: chap. 5). It retained resonance in a postcolonial era in which Indian elites sought entry to scientific modernity on equal terms (Chowdhry, No date: 8-12), but were persistently viewed by western allies through an orientalist lens as backward, weak and untrustworthy (Das, 2017). In this light, it is unsurprising that assertions of masculinity, intertwined with claims to Hindu superiority, were so central to the BJP justification of nuclear tests, and to their discursive resonance. This had particularly regressive implications for women. Drawing upon stereotypes of the Muslim-as-rapist and of vengeful Hindu goddesses to mobilise women's support for the nuclear tests, the BJP and its allies simultaneously called upon women to guard their chastity and purity and thus helped to enforce control of female sexuality and personhood (Das, 2006; 2008; 2010; Basu and Basu, 1999). It is for these reasons the feminist anti-nuclear campaigners interviewed by Das charge that the Indian nuclear programme 'reinforces the Othering of women as a gendered category vis-à-vis men', means "'domestic violence"' is likely to

increase', and will function to 'diminish allocations for women's developmental policies' (Das, 2007: 8).

The Indian case is a sharp reminder of why a feminist peace research agenda on feminist anti-nuclear activism should expand its geopolitical and temporal purview beyond the Cold War women's camps and why it should engage more fully with postcolonial critiques of the global nuclear order (e.g., Biswas, 2014; Teaiwa, 1994) and of nuclear colonialism (e.g., Schwartz, 2016; Intondi, 2015). Certainly, any such agenda should pay more sustained attention to the multiple empirical instances of anti-nuclear organising across the global South over recent decades. As well as the opposition to the Indian tests documented above, activism against nuclear testing in the Pacific region into the 1990s, and its legacy of nuclear fallout and forced displacement, springs to mind (de Ishtar, 1998; Smith, 1997). Also worthy of further study are the mobilisations in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster (Brown, 2015; Kimura, 2016), and the subsequent building of new nuclear reactors elsewhere in Asia (Yang, 2017). Or what about the Korean peninsula, where international tensions have been running high recently, precipitating a resurgence of interstate and civil society peacebuilding efforts?³ Taken as a whole, the literature on these examples of anti-nuclear activism in the global South underscores the role of women and the circulation of feminist discourses and symbols in each of these very different cases. It also challenges the dominant view of what 'counts' as feminist anti-nuclear activism in the first place.

Future Research

Beyond the provision of a greater range of empirical case studies for a future research agenda, this literature on activism in the global South also points to several cross-cutting lines of possible enquiry. Perhaps most obviously, it raises the question of the extent to which the gendered identities and feminist discourses and practices evident in these instances of anti-nuclear activism are unique to their different contexts, or 'modular' and transferred from one country to another, or between North and South – and if so, in which direction? And through what mechanisms? Another potential line of enquiry concerns the analytical and political significance of the transition from Cold War to post-Cold War era in understanding the trajectories of anti-nuclear activism. The cases above undermine the notion that the end of the superpower stand-off has been fundamental in reshaping the global nuclear order and opposition to it, pointing instead to important continuities, such as how indigenous peoples and land are rendered invisible or framed as dispensable in justifications of nuclear testing and waste disposal (e.g., Runyan, 2018). Connectedly, the emphasis on opposition to nuclear power and nuclear waste in several of the cases above is instructive. When taken in tandem with intriguing glimpses of the centrality of women and feminism in mobilisation against Cold War-era nuclear power stations in the global North (e.g., Leeming, 2014; Welsh, 2001; Wernitzing, 2018; Culley and Angelique, 2003), it becomes apparent that the gendered dimensions of the extractive and exploitative dimensions of the nuclear power industry could be a fruitful locus of further research, along with the character and extent of connections between organised opposition to nuclear power and the struggle against nuclear weapons.

Finally, I suggest that future research should dissect the transnational dimension of feminist anti-nuclear activism much more closely than has thus far been the case. In my own work, I am currently examining the UK-based network 'Women Working for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific' (WWNFIP)⁴ that emerged from Greenham Common peace camp in 1984

³ See <https://www.womencrossdmz.org/>

⁴ Also known in its later years, as Women for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific, or WNFIP.

and that sought to work for and with women activists in the Pacific region. Organising several speaking tours of indigenous Pacific women across the UK between 1985 and 1997 (with many speeches published in de Ishtar, 1998), WNFIP also sent key organisers on an extensive research and networking trip to the Pacific (see de Ishtar, 2003). Moreover, it issued a regular bulletin about events in the Pacific region and local activities to members and supporters for a decade and a half, until the late 1990s. Bridging North and South, and the Cold War and post-Cold War era, this network is a rich source of data on the construction of feminist anti-nuclear solidarities across borders and over time.

There is also scope for the further study of more institutionalised modes of transnational feminist collaboration on anti-nuclear campaigning in recent decades. Most notable here is WILPF's Reaching Critical Will campaign at the UN⁵ and its involvement over the last decade in the International Campaign to end Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), founded in Australia in 2005,⁶ and the inter-state Humanitarian Initiative, launched in 2013,⁷ culminating in the passing of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2017.⁸ ICAN and its partner organisations were subsequently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.⁹ The formal role of WILPF within this transnational advocacy network and its campaign to outlaw the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons on humanitarian grounds is of great interest from a feminist peace research perspective. So are the activities of key associated individuals, such as Ray Acheson, director of RCW and representative of WILPF on the ICAN steering committee (Acheson, 2018b; a), and Beatrice Fihn, formerly of WILPF and ICAN director since 2014 (Mekata, 2018) and what appears to be important alliances with the diplomats of states such as Ireland (The Irish Government, 2018). More broadly, research could track the remarkable impact on this 'transnational advocacy network' of longstanding feminist critiques of nuclear weapons. As Nick Ritchie and Kjølsv Egeland put it (2018: 126-127),

the diplomacy of resistance is characterised by broadening sensitivity to the ways in which gender connects with disarmament diplomacy. In the humanitarian initiative [and the connected campaign for a global ban], the structural power of nuclear weapons in global politics has been linked to a broader challenge to militarism and its connections with patriarchy. Women (as agents) and gender (as a power structure and subject of discussion) have become much more visible in the discourses, agendas and practices of nuclear disarmament diplomacy, and the specific effects of nuclear violence on women and girls have been brought to the fore.

The question remains how long-established claims about the differentially gendered impact of the use and storage of nuclear weapons, particularly in relation to ionizing radiation (Borrie et al., 2016), and broader feminist arguments about the gendered symbolic structure of nuclear weapons and militarism (Cohn et al., 2005: 262-263; Acheson, 2018b; Carson, 2018), succeeded in gaining such traction. The connection between feminist influence on the nuclear ban and the broader enabling environment of the Women, Peace and Security agenda at the UN, following Security Council Resolution 1325, also merits investigation, potentially revealing how feminist anti-nuclear activism is fed by and feeds into the mainstream concerns of contemporary feminist peace research (see, e.g., chapters by xxxx in this Handbook).

⁵ See <http://reachingcriticalwill.org/about-us/who-we-are>

⁶ See <http://www.icanw.org/>.

⁷ See <http://www.icanw.org/campaign/humanitarian-initiative/>

⁸ See <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/tpnw/>

⁹ See <http://www.icanw.org/campaign-news/ican-receives-2017-nobel-peace-prize/>

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to defend feminist anti-nuclear activism as a topic of continuing relevance to feminist peace research; to foreground disparate existing work on post-Cold War resistances to nuclear infrastructure and its postcolonial underpinnings in the global South; and to provide an outline of the contours of a more inclusive and expansive research agenda on the topic, moving forward. Such an agenda will have to move beyond Cold War, Eurocentric assumptions of what feminist anti-nuclear activism looks like and where it takes place and cast its net more widely, both geopolitically and temporally. It should also pay attention to recent developments in interstate diplomacy. Paradoxically, at the same time that feminist anti-nuclear activism has become of marginal interest in feminist peace research, it appears to have gained rather remarkable influence on the international stage. In this way, we are served a powerful reminder of the continued centrality of feminism to the struggle against the global nuclear order. By making diverse feminist anti-nuclear mobilisations visible, and by theorising their origins, dynamics and impact, feminist peace research could revive its role in this struggle and help bring us all closer to a nuclear-free world.

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