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The Absence of Diverse and Divergent Voices in Policymaking around Nuclear Weapons: A Review

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Halfway through the 2023 film *Oppenheimer*, a group of people sit in a room with Henry Stimson, President Truman's Secretary of State. He holds a list of potential bombing targets and crosses off Kyoto. The reason is not definitively known. In the film, Stimson says it is because he honeymooned there (Nolan 2023). Stimson's memoirs indicate Kyoto's irreplaceable significance as a Japanese center of history, religion, and art (Sagan 2022). Nagasaki replaced Kyoto, thus illustrating a primary argument of feminist scholars: "The personal is political." Everyone in the room with Stimson was white and male. **The question this review seeks to answer is whether – in the intervening eighty years – the composition of voices in rooms, or consideration for the voices outside them, has substantively changed.**

An examination of the literature reveals three primary aspects to underrepresented voices in the nuclear debate. The first are publications by people from minority groups. The second is involvement and engagement by people from underrepresented groups at executive levels of policymaking in government, NGOs, and think tanks.

In 2020, Women in International Security (WIIS) published a policy brief commissioned by the Ploughshares Fund addressing gender disparity in international security and foreign policy. They considered two factors: the percentage of women in think tanks and the percentage of women publishing articles in 16 peer-reviewed journals. The brief found that in the 11 peer-reviewed international security journals, women authored 23 percent of articles, with another 13 percent authored by mixed gender teams. In the five journals dedicated to arms control, women authored 19 percent of articles between 2014-2019, though exact percentages can vary by journal (De Jonge Oudraat, et al 2020).

The same holds for think tank representation. WIIS found that women led six of the 32 foreign policy and international security think tanks surveyed. Of 10 think tanks dedicated to arms control and nuclear security issues, a woman led just one. Think tank Boards of Directors or Trustees averaged 27 percent (ibid).

The Stimson Center (named for that same Henry Stimson) is a nonpartisan think tank dedicated to issues of global peace. Several of its fellows, researchers, and staff publish on issues of nuclear weapons and are vocal in the debate, including Sahar Khan and Sylvia Mishra. Persons in present or former government roles who publish on nuclear weapons issues include Sneha Nair (formerly of the Stimson Center), current Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins, and Elayne Whyte, former Ambassador of Costa Rica to the United Nations.

While these are women, the world of nuclear science skewed male from the beginning. Few women were engaged in high-level scientific positions at facilities developing the atomic bomb. When chemists Lilli and Don Hornig arrived at Los Alamos, Lilli was asked how fast she could type (*The Atlantic* 2019). Positions in international politics and policy were similarly scarce. Of the 850 delegates who signed the United Nations Charter in 1945 – when a number of countries had not enfranchised women with suffrage – only four signees were women (Schaeffer 2020).

Women in nuclear security tend to be concentrated within certain subfields. A 2021 Government Accountability Office survey estimated less than one-quarter of nuclear sector employees were women. A much smaller number of women - five percent - worked to secure weapons grade nuclear material (Nair

and Roth 2023). Even as more women enter the discourse, their influence is ambiguous. On one hand, Ray Acheson, director of Reaching Critical Will, argues that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was achieved – in large part – due to the influence of women and other underrepresented groups (Acheson 2023). Some scholars and feminists argue the presence of women in governmental and other roles of influence has not caused any noticeable shift in disarmament or nonproliferation. The fact of women entering these male-dominated, militarized spaces has proved insufficient to alter their structure (Egeland and Taha 2023).

The third aspect of underrepresented voices is the lived experience of persons who historically have been disproportionately impacted by nuclear material and weapons. That lived experience provides insight into how issues like weapons testing and uranium mining have been and continue to be – due to economics or indifference – issues that hit marginalized communities harder.

The African American community's opposition to nuclear weapons began in the immediate aftermath of the bombings in Japan. While not monolithic, this support grew out of concern for how such weapons might be used against non-whites. For many, it became tied to colonialism as an outgrowth of institutional racism (Intondi 2014). At its 1946 conference, the NAACP called for nuclear disarmament and for nuclear power to be put into civilian hands rather than government control (ibid).

Another group negatively impacted by the production of nuclear materials are Black African uranium miners. In Gabrielle Hecht's research on uranium mining, she noted in South African mines, white foremen would frequently station Black workers nearer so-called "hot spots," areas higher in temperature and levels of radioactive elements (Hecht 2009). The National Institutes of Health in 1994 conducted a study re-analyzing radon exposure and lung cancer risks to miners in various countries but were unable to include data from African countries because those exposures had never been collected (ibid).

Marshallese people, evacuated from their native lands beginning in 1946, cannot return due to extensive nuclear fallout from fifty years of testing (Keown 2018). In 1954, the U.S. detonated BRAVO bomb on Bikini Atoll – 1,000 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Islanders were not given advance notice, and inhabitants of nearby atolls were only evacuated days later (ibid). Some displaced Marshallese have pursued paths of activism, seeking retribution for forced exile from their ancestral home (ibid).

The most impacted communities in the United States are indigenous peoples, especially in the Southwest. The taking of land, or materials mined from land without compensation, is a tactic that has been used against the Navajo Nation (Eichstaedt 1994). The use of native land for nuclear testing has been practiced on land belonging to the Western Shoshone (Johnson 2018).

In eight decades since atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, the composition of scientists, ambassadors, and policymakers has come to more closely resemble the world population. The number of people opposed to nuclear weapons has increased. A Gallup poll in August 1945 asked Americans whether they approved of using nuclear weapons on the Japanese. 85 percent of respondents said they did. Conducted 60 years later, only 57 percent of respondents answered in the affirmative (Moore 2005). In 2019, the International Committee of the Red Cross surveyed over 16,000 millennials, asking, "In your opinion, is the use of nuclear weapons in wars or armed conflicts acceptable under some circumstances, or is it never acceptable?" 84 percent replied never acceptable.

Today, the faces in the room making these decisions would likely not all be white men. But, as Salma Malik noted in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, President Obama launched airstrikes against Libya in

2011 with the advice of Samantha Power, Hillary Clinton, and Susan Rice (Malik 2014), confirming that underrepresented voices in the room does not necessarily change the outcome.

Carol Cohn's article relating her experiences at a nuclear weapons workshop informs this. The language of nuclear war, proliferation, and weapons is gendered and often sexual: penetration, thrust, erections, etc. (Cohn 1987). She describes how immersion among this male-dominated world and its associated terminology ("technostrategic speech") eventually led to her adoption of the vocabulary despite conscientious abstention. Cynthia Enloe notes, "...Women are taught that international politics are too complex...for the so-called feminine mind to comprehend. If a Hilary Clinton...enters, it is presumably because she has learned to 'think like a man' (Enloe, 2014)."

Americans in November 2024 were given an opportunity to elect a female president. Might that outcome have altered the technostrategic language of nuclear weapons and war, likelihood of engagement, or disparity of representation? It's impossible to know. However, President Trump in 2017 talked of unleashing "fire and fury" against North Korea, and in 2019, dismissed an offer by North Korea to dismantle a nuclear facility for sanctions relief. As Cohn wrote nearly 40 years ago, building a future absent nuclear warfare entails "diverse voices whose conversations with each other will invent those futures." May we all live to see such an age realized.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

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