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A FEMINIST REFLECTION ON NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT AND CHANGE

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Few things concretise conservative perceptions of gender as much as security policy. When Margot Wallström, Sweden’s Minister for Foreign Affairs (Social Democratic Party), announced that she wanted Sweden to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) – a treaty that the Swedish Government had been involved in negotiating, conservative commentators fell into collective hysteria. Things became even worse when it was revealed that Donald Trump’s Secretary of Defense had threatened Sweden’s Minister for Defense Peter Hultqvist, informing him that if Sweden signed the TPNW its future relationship with Nato would be at risk. This article provides a feminist reflection on how we can understand resistance to nuclear disarmament and the obsession with the logic of masculinist protection.

On 7 July 2017 a majority of the UN member states agreed on the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). This was achieved despite the fact that the nuclear armed states refused to sit at the negotiating table. Shortly thereafter Margot Wallström, Sweden’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, announced that the Swedish Government would conduct an inquiry into the possible consequences of Sweden signing the TPNW with a view to ratifying it.¹ This marked the start of an intense debate

in Sweden. Although the Minister had support from a coalition of civil society organisations, who a few months later would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts in bringing about the treaty,² she was met with massive distrust and criticism. As a feminist researcher in international relations with a focus on Swedish security policy, disarmament and nuclear weapons during the Cold War, it struck me how clearly the criticism of Wallström echoed the misogynistic voices in the Swedish nuclear weapons debate of the 1950s. In this article I use media debate on the TPNW as an empirical lens through which to understand nuclear weapons and disarmament from a feminist perspective.³

A look back

Nuclear weapons have a special place in Sweden’s security policy history. The same year as the United States bombed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a nuclear weapons research programme was launched in Sweden. It was, however, a secret programme at the time and it was not until the 1950s that the topic reached a broader public and an intense debate got under way.⁴ One of the main advocates for the research programme was Nils Swedlund, Supreme Commander of the Swedish Armed Forces. The party on the right (*Högerpartiet*), also had



a positive view of it. The liberal party (*Folkpartiet*) was cautiously optimistic and the party in the centre (*Bondeförbundet/Centerpartiet*) adopted a wait-and-see approach. The social democrats (*Socialdemokraterna*), the party in power at the time, was deeply divided. In 1958 a grass-roots organisation against a Swedish atomic bomb (*Aktionsgruppen mot svensk atombomb, AMSA*) and SSKF, the social democratic women's federation led by Inga Thorsson, who is often described as leading the opposition, ran an intense campaign against Swedish nuclear weapons.⁵

Despite feminist research having gained ground in several academic disciplines, there is little research – neither in Sweden nor internationally – on gender and nuclear weapons. The Swedish research that is relevant in this context mainly relates to nuclear weapons, political actorship and gender. Historian Anna-Greta Nilsson Hoadley holds the view that SSKF was limited in what it could do and faced strong internal resistance.⁶ Historian Gunnel Karlsson explained that this resistance was a reaction to the fact that women were involved in an area previously reserved for men, namely defence policy.⁷ This is exemplified by the reactions after Thorsson, in February 1956, informed the party executive that SSKF was not in favour of Sweden obtaining nuclear weapons. Per Edvin Sköld accused her of putting forward “a more emotional than well-reasoned argument”. Prime Minister Tage Erlander appealed to Thorsson to change her opinion, and MP Ragnar Lassinantti believed that “just as in so many other critical situations, the women will follow the men on this issue”. According to Lassinantti there was no reason to “walk along two lines”.⁸ These reactions demonstrate a portrayal of Thorsson as being more emotional than rational; that she was the one who should change her point of view; that the male norm should be kept intact. In a report produced for the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, three gender researchers argue that among defence experts nuclear weapons are supposed to be discussed in a “rational” way. Rational logic is, according to them, associated with a

masculine identity, while the opposite, i.e. expressing emotion, is associated with a feminine identity. When there is a masculine right of interpretation and where qualities associated with women are belittled, all arguments that deviate from rational logic are dismissed and ignored.⁹

As the debate on Swedish nuclear weapons continued the opponents focused on the international disarmament negotiations, in which the Swedish government was involved. This was a time when formal negotiations on preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons were in their infancy.¹⁰ It was not until 1968, when Sweden signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), that Sweden's plans for nuclear weapons were abandoned. Historian Karl Molin wrote that, when Sweden signed the NPT, “the undisciplined opposition had been ‘proved right’”.¹¹ Disarmament would become a key aspect of the active foreign policy shaped at the time when Olof Palme was Prime Minister. It was not until after the end of the Cold War that interest in the issue waned. However, when Margot Wallström became Minister for Foreign Affairs and declared plans to pursue a feminist foreign policy, there was an opportunity to turn this around. Wallström established a special international law and disarmament delegation at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs with representatives from the Ministry of Defence and the armed forces, as well as academics and civil society organisations. I interpret this as an intention to re-prioritise disarmament in Sweden's foreign policy.


Dangerous naivety

Back to 2017. In her desire for Sweden to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, Wallström put the issue in a historical context of active commitment to disarmament. “Since taking office, the Government has once again placed Sweden at the centre of global disarmament efforts. While working to enhance our own conventional military capacity and increase our international cooperation, we also

understand the importance of dialogue, diplomacy and efforts to promote peace. A nuclear weapons-free world cannot be achieved through naivety or passivity but by striking a balance between pragmatism and clear ideals".¹² This statement contains a reference to past disarmament policy. She also emphasised the importance of not interpreting this as naivety or passivity. The reactions were not long in coming. "Margot Wallström is naive about nuclear weapons" was the headline in an op-ed in *Expressen*, a national evening newspaper, on 29 August 2017. In light of North Korea's missile testing Wallström was seen as being "out of touch with reality" when she pushed for Sweden to sign the nuclear weapons ban treaty.¹³ Gunnar Hökmark, head of delegation for Sweden's Moderate Party in the European Parliament, used similar language in an op-ed in the *Aftonbladet* evening newspaper. He argued that, in addition to being naive, Wallström was out of touch and dangerous in her naivety.¹⁴ Christian Democrats Mikael Oscarsson and Sofia Damm wrote the following: "The international balance of power may be jeopardised by naivety about nuclear weapons and a cynical security policy reality".¹⁵ An op-ed in the *Sydsvenskan* newspaper said "The country's security must take priority over a vision which, while attractive, is also unrealistic".¹⁶ Naive, out of touch and unrealistic – these are the words used to describe Margot Wallström.

Feminist researchers have shown that concepts such as naivety and being unrealistic have historically been linked to being female – feminised attributes associated with emotion. Being realistic, on the other hand, is associated with the opposite of naivety, i.e. being rational and sensible. These have been linked to being male and can be seen as masculine-coded language in their use over time. Similarly, there is historically a separation between attributes that are considered "soft" and "hard". Soft is tied to emotion and femininity and hard to reason and masculinity. This can be seen as a generalised and simplified pattern rather than a necessary condition. These are, however, established notions. In defence of the Government's position on the TPNW, Olov Abrahamsson writes in the *Norrländska Socialdemokraten* newspaper: "Swedish foreign, security and defence policy is not about 'either-or' but about 'both-and'. It needs to encompass both soft (such as efforts to promote peace, diplomatic solutions and nuclear disarmament) and hard (such as having a strong defence force and building military cooperation with other nations)".¹⁷ In defending Wallström's position, he recreates the links between nuclear disarmament and softness on one hand, and defence and hardness on the other. These associations existed before Wallström wrote her op-ed and they were reproduced in the reactions that came after.

What exactly are the critics afraid of? The main fear expressed in the materials I have studied is about jeopardising Sweden's ability to cooperate with/join the military defence organisation Nato. Wallström argued in her first op-ed that the ban would not impact Sweden's relationship with the USA. But a letter from USA's Secretary of Defense James Mattis to Sweden's Minister for Defence Peter Hultqvist resulted in the critics claiming the opposite. According to the *Svenska Dagbladet* newspaper, Mattis warned that "Swedish-US defence cooperation will be more difficult if the Government signs the treaty".¹⁸ In an op-ed, Moderate Party commentators Karin Enström and Hans Wallmark wrote: "Nuclear disarmament is important but we have been warning for quite some time that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons may jeopardise Sweden's relationships. There is, for example, said to be a letter from the US Secretary of Defense James Mattis confirming our fears. According to the media, Sweden's relationship with Nato and important nations will be negatively affected if Sweden signs the Treaty". They went on to say: "In an uncertain world Sweden's security needs to be strengthened. That means preserving our country's freedom of action".¹⁹ Although nuclear disarmament was seen as a key goal, there were other more important priorities. Sweden's ability to join Nato and, in doing so, be part of a defence doctrine tied to the possession of nuclear weapons, seems to be the primary objective. When nuclear weapons advocates



in the 1950s argued in favour of retaining Sweden's nuclear weapons research programme, they used freedom of action as their main argument. Sweden would retain the ability to obtain nuclear weapons if it needed to. Today freedom to join Nato is the dominant argument. The paradox of maintaining freedom of action while at the same time basing the country's own actions on statements of a representative of another nation's government is not addressed.


Notions of gender and what it means to be a woman, man or neither differ around the world and in different eras and contexts. Some notions are, however, hard to dislodge. In my research I have on multiple occasions been taken aback by the power of what political scientist Iris Marion Young calls "the logic of masculinist protection".²⁰ Young maintains that defence policy doctrines reflect conservative family ideals. In the family the man has historically acted as the protector by being the main breadwinner and the one to guarantee the family's security. He has also acted as a protector for his country through military service. These roles are traced to relative notions of a man's strength, courage and responsibility, and a woman's assumed need for protection. The strong man acts; the weak woman is passive. He protects her; she wants his protection. Similar dichotomies are found in several areas of international relations. They are neither constant nor obvious, and they have been challenged frequently. They do, however, have a particular tendency to linger – not least in security policy discussions. The reactions that arise when they are challenged more often than not have sexist and/or racist undertones.

"That's enough. Now it's time to overrule Margot Wallström"

While Margot Wallström is singled out as naive, out of touch with reality and even dangerous, a contrast is drawn between her and her antithesis, Minister for Defence Peter Hultqvist. An editorial in *Expressen* on 29 August 2017 said: "Minister for Defence Peter Hultqvist has painstakingly strengthened Sweden's

defence capability. Funding has been increased, a host nation agreement with Nato has been approved and at mid-year, Sweden joined the elite Joint Expeditionary Force. But naivety has not disappeared. While Sweden is investing billions of kronor to purchase fighter jets, submarines and anti-aircraft systems, Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström is travelling around the world advocating disarmament".²¹ The centre-leaning *Södermanlands Nyheter* newspaper wrote in its editorial: "If the objections of the parties on the right are too hard for her to swallow, Wallström should at least listen to the criticism from the defence minister's side".²² In its editorial *Dagens Nyheter* wrote: "Perhaps Wallström is wearing blinders; maybe she's refusing to listen to the Ministry of Defence. This is not the first time she has shown poor judgement. The Prime Minister should put his foot down".²³ Mikael Holmström, a defence-friendly commentator in *Dagens Nyheter*, quoted Jan Björklund, leader of the Liberal party: "That's enough. Now it's time to overrule Margot Wallström".²⁴ Others went even further. With the headline "What if Sweden needs nuclear weapons too?" Lars Ströman from the *MittMedia* group entered the debate. Despite the headline, he actually argued that it was "wise" for Sweden to refrain from obtaining nuclear weapons. But he also considered Nato's nuclear weapons essential for Sweden's security. "Sweden doesn't need nuclear weapons of its own. But our security is dependent on Nato's nuclear arms. Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist is not happy about the course that Margot Wallström is pursuing".²⁵

Hultqvist is linked to concepts of responsibility, defence and security. He, unlike Wallström, is portrayed as the tough one, the rational one, the realistic one. The way in which these two politicians – a man and a woman – are portrayed so differently is quite telling. It is almost too simplistic. Based on my conviction that gender identities can change and cannot necessarily be equated with dominant perceptions of biological bodies, I regard using such gender stereotypes for a man and a woman as almost provocative. In my teaching I usually talk about this in terms of



simplified patterns rather than constants – it is not about biological bodies. Political scientist Zillah Eisenstein maintains that sex, gender and power are more complicated than that. In a book about the administration under US President George W. Bush, she shows how placing women in high-level political positions was used as a means to legitimise imperialistic policies, with devastating consequences for women’s security. While the appointment of Condoleezza Rice as Secretary of State can be seen as a win for gender-equal representation, her sex was no guarantee of an anti-militaristic policy. Rather, Rice was a military hardliner, favouring an imperialist agenda over women’s rights. Women are not automatically peaceful, and men are not bellicose by nature. In many countries – Sweden among them – historical processes have helped create a link between masculinity, rationality and defence, and between femininity, emotion and weakness. Although a lot has changed in Sweden since the nuclear weapons debate of the 1950s and 60s, some aspects seem to have remained intact. Fear of the threat from others and the conviction that military might and the logic of masculinist protection are what can protect us from all types of threats live on.


Concluding reflections

Swedish history is filled with complex chains of events. After intense debate peppered with misogynistic statements when the Swedish Government was considering obtaining nuclear weapons in the 1950s, the nuclear weapons programme was scrapped and the Government decided to join the opposition instead. Rather than pursuing nuclear weapons, Sweden focused on nuclear disarmament. Those who had been portrayed as naive, emotional and dangerous in the debate were able to look back at a fight they had won. Will the Government that takes over after the 2018 election in Sweden have the courage to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons? Perhaps fear of the USA’s reaction will be too strong. Perhaps faith in Sweden’s ability to defend itself will be so limited and the desire to be protected by Nato so intense that signing the Treaty will be impossible.

Maybe Wallström, with support from civil society and feminist politicians from various camps, will be described as the Thorsson of our time in tomorrow’s history books. Maybe the “undisciplined opposition” will be proved right again. If nuclear weapons do not annihilate humanity first, it will be up to the historians of future generations to close the books on this issue.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Margot Wallström, "En kärnvapenfri värld är möjlig", Svenska Dagbladet, 25 August 2017.
2. Nobelprize.org, "The Nobel Peace Prize 2017, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)", https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2017/ican-facts.html, available 18 July 2018.
3. This article includes commentary, news articles and op-eds in the Swedish press – both national and local – during one week after Wallström published her article in the Svenska Dagbladet newspaper on 25 August 2017. The debate continued and only subsided after it was announced that the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2017.
4. In a number of studies, Thomas Jonter has explored the technical preparations that were made for Swedish nuclear weapons. See for example: "The Swedish Plans to Acquire Nuclear Weapons, 1945–1968: An Analysis of the Technical Preparations", *Science and Global Security* 18, No. 2, 2010.
5. See for example Per Ahlmark, *Den svenska atomvapendebatten*, Utrikespolitiska institutet, Aldus Aktuell, Stockholm: Published by Aldus/Bonniers 1965; Karl Molin, "Partistrid och partiansvar: En studie i socialdemokratisk försvarsdebatt", i Misgeld, Klaus, Bergström, Villy, Åmark, Klas & Molin, Karl (eds.), *Socialdemokratins samhälle: SAP och Sverige under 100 år*, Tiden, Stockholm, 1989; Kjell Östberg, *I takt med tiden: Olof Palme 1927-1969*, Leopard, Stockholm, 2008.
6. Anna-Greta Nilsson Hoadley, *Atomvapnet som parti-problem: Sveriges socialdemokratiska kvinnoförbund och frågan om svenskt atomvapen 1955-1960*, Almqvist & Wiksell International, Diss.: Univ., Stockholm, 1989.
7. Gunnel Karlsson, *Från broderskap till systemskap: det socialdemokratiska kvinnoförbundets kamp för inflytande och makt i SAP*, Archive, Diss. Gothenburg : Univ., Lund, 1996.
8. "Protokoll, Socialdemokratiska Partistyrelsens sammanträde 21 februari 1956", minutes of the SAP Party Executive meeting, 1956-1959, Volume A 2 A: 017, Arbetarrörelsens Arkiv och Bibliotek. The minutes of the party executive's meeting have been analysed by several researchers, including Nilsson Hoadley (1989).
9. Cohn Carol, Felicity Hill and Sarah Ruddick, "The Relevance of Gender for Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction", *The Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission Report No. 38*, 2005.
10. Yngve Möller, *Per Edvin Sköld – humanist och samhällsbyggare*, Tiden/Athena, 1996, pp. 424-425.
11. Molin (1989), pp. 336.
12. Margot Wallström, "En kärnvapenfri värld är möjlig", Svenska Dagbladet, 25 August 2017.
13. Expressen, "Margot Wallström är naiv om kärnvapen", 29 August 2017.
14. Gunnar Hökmark, "Nordkorea visar att Wallström är fel ute", Aftonbladet, 30 August 2017.
15. Mikael Oscarsson (KD) and Sofia Damm (KD), "Svårt att ta Wallströms solospelande på allvar", Svenska Dagbladet, 31 August 2017.
16. Sydsvenskan, "Låt inte kärnvapenfrågan stoppa stödet från Nato", 30 August 2017.
17. Olov Abrahamsson, "Kritikerna borde tagga ner", Norrländska Socialdemokraten, 1 September 2017.
18. Jonas Gummesson, "USA:s försvarsminister varnar Sverige för kärnvapenstopp", Svenska Dagbladet, 30 August 2017.
19. Karin Enström (M) and Hans Wallmark (M), "Skriv inte på ett tandlöst kärnvapenförbud", Göteborgsposten, 1 September 2017.



20. Young, Iris Marion, "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2003.

21. Expressen, "Margot Wallström är naiv om kärnvapen", 29 August 2017.

22. Södermanlands Nyheter, "Kärnvapenavtalet bör förbli osignerat", 1 September 2017.

23. Dagens Nyheter, "Ge Wallström skrivförbud", 31 August 2017.

24. Mikael Holmström, "USA i möte med Wallström om kärnvapenstopp", Dagens Nyheter, 31 August 2017.

25. Lars Ströman, "Tänk om även Sverige behöver kärnvapen!", Nerikes allehanda, 3 September 2017.