

# RADIOACTIVE: TRUMP'S MASCULINITY AND HOW WOMEN MUST RID THE WORLD OF NUCLEAR BOMBS

By Heidi Hutner

Panic. Donald Trump is elected and everything I love and hold dear are at grave risk—women's and LGBTQ+ rights, abortion rights, racial rights, religious rights, immigration rights, the rights of the disenfranchised and poor, environmental rights. We now face a world of racist, sexist, xenophobic, heterosexist, unrestrained white male hate—a world of unethical and immoral destruction in which the weakest are disproportionately and unfairly threatened and harmed.

There's more to this (cluster-fuck of a) nightmare:

The president's provocative, hostile, hypersexualized masculinist language and behavior, coupled with his unmediated access to the nuclear button, puts all life on earth at risk.<sup>1</sup>

*This is the presidency of Dr. Strangelove.*

We need women and a feminist antinuclear force to save the world.



Today, experts say, we are inching closer to nuclear catastrophe. *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* defines how close we are to nuclear war with their metaphorical Doomsday Clock.<sup>2</sup> On January 25, 2018, the *Bulletin* moved the minute hand to two minutes to midnight. As Trump's presidency continues, things have grown worse. North Korea has a greater capacity than ever to harm other countries, including the U.S., as does Russia. North Korea has provoked international tensions. So has Russia. In South Asia, Pakistan and other nations

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<sup>1</sup> In her essay "Vigil of Hope," therapist Meg Weber notes her patients' heightened fear of nuclear war under the Trump presidency, in *Fury: Women's Lived Experiences During the Trump Era*, edited by Amy Roost and Alissa Hirshfeld (Regal House Publishing, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Janice Sinclair, "Watch the 2018 Doomsday Clock Announcement," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 17, 2018.

are increasing their arsenals, tensions over the Iran nuclear deal are mounting, and weakened U.S. international diplomacy under President Trump has advanced nuclear dangers worldwide. Most recently, Trump pulled out of the nuclear weapons treaty between the U.S. and Russia, and he's modernizing nuclear weapons. Expert nuclear war planner Daniel Ellsberg, author of *The Pentagon Papers* and *The Doomsday Machine*, warns of the likelihood of "nuclear annihilation."<sup>3</sup>

During this dangerous time, women are leading the charge to eradicate weapons of mass destruction and forestall nuclear war. We saw this leadership most recently in the 2017 U.N. Treaty to Prohibit the Use of Nuclear Weapons. Approved with 122 states voting for and one against, it is the first legally binding global ban on nuclear weapons, with the intention of moving toward their complete elimination. The preamble to the treaty recognizes the maltreatment suffered by all beings as a result of nuclear weapons, including the disproportionate impact on women and girls and on indigenous peoples around the world. The treaty has been predominantly championed and promoted by women.

My interest in nuclear issues began over ten years ago when I first uncovered my mother's work as an antinuclear activist with a group called Women Strike for Peace.<sup>4</sup> Learning about my mother's work radically changed my perception of her. It also changed my life. I have been following women engaging in nuclear activism all over the world—writing about them, making a documentary film about them (*Accidents Can Happen: The Women of Three Mile Island*), protesting with them, teaching about them in my university classes—and I often bring my daughter with me. My mother's story is being passed down through an intergenerational maternal line, and with it, the activism that may help save the world, or at least help shift its view on disastrous weapons.

Between 1945 and 1963, more than two hundred atmospheric, underwater, and space nuclear-bomb tests were conducted by the U.S.,

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<sup>3</sup>Lucy Feldman, "'Don't Wait Until the Bombs Are Falling' Pentagon Papers Leaker Encourages More Like Him." *Time*, January 17, 2018, <http://time.com/5106039/daniel-ellsberg-nuclear-war-north-korea>

<sup>4</sup> Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

primarily in the Nevada desert and the Marshall Islands. Hundreds more took place around the world. In many instances, citizens were not informed of the tests, nor were they warned about their effects. The negative health impacts of the testing and the resultant exposure to ionizing radiation turned out to be vast: early death, cancer, heart disease, and a range of other illnesses, including neurological disabilities, weakened immune systems, infertility, and miscarriage. Ionizing radiation damages genes, so the health ramifications of exposures are passed down through the generations.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1950s, scientists concerned with the health impacts of bomb testing and the spread of ionizing radiation conducted the St. Louis Baby Tooth Survey.<sup>6</sup> The survey showed that radioactive fallout had traveled far and wide. Cow and breast milk contaminated with the isotope strontium 90 had entered children's teeth. Strontium 90 metabolizes as calcium and this isotope remains active in the body for many years. When Dagmar Wilson and Bella Abzug—who went on to become a Congresswoman and co-founder of the National Women's Political Caucus with Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan—learned the results of the Baby Tooth Survey, they formed Women Strike for Peace. The group brought together concerned mothers from across the U.S. The women organized, first within their own communities, and then fifty thousand mothers protested across the country, and fifteen thousand more descended on Washington, D.C., for Women Strike for Peace Lobbying Day on November 1, 1961. My mother was one of those fifteen thousand protesters. The group's efforts brought considerable political attention to the dire

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<sup>5</sup> Numerous scientists—including the father of physics, Karl Zimmerman, Rosalie Bertell, John Gofman, Steve Wing, Alice Stewart, Tim Mousseau (and many others)—agree that there is no 'safe' dose of radiation, and low levels of radiation may cause inheritable genetic mutations. On health and genetic impacts from radiation exposures, see, for example: National Research Council. *Health Risks From Exposure to Low Levels of Ionizing Radiation, Health Risks From Exposure to Low Levels of Ionizing Radiation (BEIR VII Phase 2)*, (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.17226/11340>; Keith Baverstock, "Some Important Questions Connected With Non-Targeted Effects" *Mutation Research* 687 (2010a): 84–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mrfmmm.2010.01.002>

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Becker Medical Library, Washington University School of Dental Medicine, "St. Louis Baby Tooth Survey, 1959-1970," accessed February 25, 2019, <http://beckerexhibits.wustl.edu/dental/articles/babytooth.html>

health consequences of radioactive fallout; in 1963, the signing of the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty led to the banning of atmospheric bomb testing by the U.S., Great Britain, and the Soviet Union.

Women Strike for Peace reflects a cultural, nuclear, gender binary, with women constructed as peaceful antinuclear protectors of children and the nation, and men positioned as perpetrators of nuclear war—the designers, planners, and regulators of weapons of mass destruction.

Has the exclusion of women from nuclear decision-making led to our current crisis—a host of locations worldwide contaminated with radioactive waste and the great potential for nuclear war? Leading antinuclear activists seem to think so. Since the dawn of the nuclear age, men have dominated and controlled nuclear weapon design and policy. As Benjamin A. Valentino—associate professor of government and coordinator of the War and Peace Studies Program at the Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College—says, it is only recently that women have had access to positions of power in the military sphere.<sup>7</sup> This is true in weapons sciences and engineering as well. While many women worked on the Manhattan Project, most held administrative roles as opposed to scientific and decision-making positions.<sup>8</sup>

Carol Cohn, founding director of the Consortium on Gender, Security, and Human Rights at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, suggests that nuclear weapons discourse is deeply rooted in hegemonic patriarchy. In nuclear technology language, metaphors of male sexual activity are used to describe nuclear violence. Nuclear language is sexualized; terms such as “missile envy,” “deep penetration,” “orgasmic whump,” are commonly utilized among men in industry parlance. The violence of nuclear war is described in abstract and impersonal terms, such as “collateral damage.” In her recent *New York Times* op-ed, Cohn finds it unsurprising that hypermasculine nuclear language has surfaced so blatantly today with Trump’s tweets

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin A. Valentino, phone interview with author, February 12, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Cohn, “The Perils of Mixing Masculinity and Missiles,” *The New York Times*, January 5, 2018. See also: Carol Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12, no. 4 (Summer 1987): 687-718, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174209>

about the size of his nuclear button and his overall muscular championing of expanding the nuclear weapons complex.

Following the Women Strike for Peace model, legions of antinuclear non-governmental organizations worldwide are predominantly led by women, including Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament; Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; Reaching Critical Will; the German Green Party; Mothers for Peace; Just Moms (St. Louis); International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN); Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp; Green Action Japan; the women of Koondakulam in India; the antinuclear nuns, Megan Rice, Ardeth Platte, Carol Gilbert, Alice Slater, Petra Kelly (cofounder of the Green Party in Germany); Leona Morgan of Dine Nonukes, and many more. The leading voice for the antinuclear movement from the last quarter of the twentieth century through the present is Dr. Helen Caldicott, an Australian physician.

At the UN conference to ban nuclear weapons in 2017, I asked civil society experts and Russian participants about the importance of women as leaders in the antinuclear movement, and about the hegemony of masculinity in the nuclear weapons complex. They stated that women understand why we must ban nuclear weapons and how women take the lead in actions to do so.

"Of course, many men support disarmament and have participated in the treaty and current antinuclear efforts in general, but women overwhelmingly spearhead the actions," said Tim Wright, of the Australian branch of ICAN.<sup>9</sup> ICAN won the 2017 Nobel Prize for its work on the Treaty to Prohibit the Use of Nuclear Weapons.

Ray Acheson, of Reaching Critical Will, said the proliferation of nuclear weapons is deeply embedded in "a misogynist and hegemonic culture of violence."<sup>10</sup> She stated that this culture is oppressive to women, LGBTQ+, the poor, and people of color, and that "we must smash patriarchy." Such is the feminist cry heard around the world, but in this case, it might actually save us.

Beatrice Fihn, director of ICAN, explained that men are raised to be violent, to think it's necessary to resolve differences through

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<sup>9</sup> Tim Wright, interview with author, July 6, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Ray Acheson, interview with author, July 6, 2017.

force, while “women, conversely, are socially trained to negotiate and compromise.”<sup>11</sup> According to Fihn, the problem in a patriarchal world is that peaceful negotiations are viewed as weak. The U.S. Misogynist-in-Chief, Donald Trump, feels that we must drop nuclear bombs, expand our nuclear arsenal, and strong-arm competing nations such as North Korea and Russia. The very act of supporting disarmament efforts in a patriarchal framework places “you in a feminine category,” Fihn stressed. “Those in favor of abolishing nuclear weapons, whether male or female, are characterized in negative, feminized terms. This characterization must be changed. It is not weak to abolish weapons of mass destruction. It is life-affirming.”

Women most often function as caretakers of children and the elderly; they are aware of the human cost of war and radioactive disaster. When thinking about nuclear war, they wonder, “If war breaks out, how will we feed our children, how will we feed our sick? What will happen to our communities?” Fihn says she fears nuclear violence in respect to the safety of her own children. Fihn’s concern for her children echoes the concerns of my mother and her antinuclear cohort in the 1950s and ’60s. Like Fihn, they worked to save their children—all children—from radiation contamination and nuclear war. I hope I can carry on that legacy, and that my daughter chooses to pick up the cause as well.

For the 2017 U.N. Treaty to Prohibit the Use of Nuclear Weapons, women helped prepare key elements of the document and gave vital health testimony. Particularly poignant were tales from Australian indigenous, Marshallese, and Hibakusha (Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors) women. I interviewed many of them. Abacca Anjain-Madison, a former senator of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, told me that between 1946 and 1958, the U.S. conducted sixty-seven nuclear bomb tests on the atoll islands.<sup>12</sup> Many babies born during the testing period resembled jellyfish and died quickly after birth. The Marshallese developed very high rates of cancer and other diseases as a result of ionizing radiation exposure. Now, with climate change, the radioactive dangers persist. Rising sea levels threaten the Runit

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<sup>11</sup> Beatrice Fihn, interview with author, October 20, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Abacca Anjain-Madison, interview with author, July 6, 2017.

Dome—a sealed space that contains large amounts of radioactive contamination. The dome has also begun to crack, and the U.S. has no plans to assist the Marshallese with this crisis. They finished the cleanup and sealed the dome in 1979. Abacca Anjain-Madison asserts that the clean-up was insufficient and that the dome was never intended to be permanent. The Marshallese do not have the means to protect themselves from the impending disaster.

Mary Olson, southeast director of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service, gave a presentation at the U.N. on the unequal health impacts of radiation exposures. Women’s and children’s greater vulnerability to radiation exposures is not taken into account in nuclear regulatory safety standards. Based on the data set from the BEIR VII report that both Olson and Dr. Arjun Makhijani, president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, have studied, women are twice as likely to get cancer, and nearly twice as likely than men to die from cancer associated with ionizing radiation exposures.<sup>13</sup> Children are five to ten times more likely to develop cancer in their lifetimes from radiation exposures than adult males, and girls are the most vulnerable of all. Scientists do not yet understand why there is an age and gender disparity. The standard “reference man” by which radiation safety regulations are set is based on a white adult male. Olson and Makhijani argue that safety regulations must change to account for age and gender disparities.<sup>14</sup> Further studies are needed to assess how people of different races are impacted by radiation exposure. To date, no such completed studies exist.

At the closing of the conference and signing of the 2017 U.N. Treaty to Prohibit the Use of Nuclear Weapons, two speeches were made—one by Setsuko Thurlow, a Hiroshima survivor, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and leading campaigner for the prohibition of nuclear weapons; the other by Abacca Anjain-Madison of the Marshall

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<sup>13</sup> National Research Council, Health Risks.

<sup>14</sup> Olson, interview with author, June 20, 2017; Arjun Makhijani, Brice Smith, and Michael C. Thorne, “Science for the Vulnerable: Setting Radiation and Multiple Exposure Environmental Health Standards” (Takoma Park, MD: Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, 2006), <https://ieer.org/resource/depleted-uranium/science-vulnerable-setting-radiation>

Islands.<sup>15</sup> Setsuko Thurlow told her story of beholding the bomb dropping on her city in 1945. She described how, as an eight-year-old child, she witnessed the death of her brother and the “unthinkable” violence that was thrust upon her people. For Thurlow, the signing of the U.N. Treaty to ban nuclear weapons was a miracle, but she believes we must rid the world of weapons entirely. She will not give up her efforts until that day comes. Neither will I.



Heidi Hutner, PhD, teaches, speaks, and writes about ecofeminism and environmental justice at Stony Brook University, where she is a professor. Much of her writing, research, and activism focuses on gender, nuclear power, and weapons. Until recently, Heidi was the director of the Sustainability Studies Program and Associate Dean in the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences (for nearly six years). Heidi gave her first TEDx talk, “Eco-Grief and Ecofeminism,” in November 2015. She gave a talk on ‘water rights as a human right’ on NBC News Think! in 2017. Hutner’s writing has been featured at news outlets and magazines such as the *New York Times*, *Ms. Magazine*, *DAME*, *Tikkun*, *Spirituality and Health*, *Yes!*, *Common Dreams*, *Garnet News*, *AEON*, and *Proximity Magazine*, as well as in academic journals and books (Oxford University Press, University of Virginia Press, Palgrave, Rowman and Littlefield, and others). With her film partner, Martijn Hart, Heidi is directing, writing, and producing the documentary film, *ACCIDENTS CAN HAPPEN: Voices of Women from Three Mile Island*. She is at work on a companion book of the same name.

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<sup>15</sup> Setsuko Thurlow, closing lecture presented at the U.N. Treaty to Prohibit the Use of Nuclear Weapons, New York, NY, July 7, 2017.