Black Lives Matter: Feminist-AntiRacist Challenges to national security discourses

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Patriarchal discourses and policies on peace and security are framed nationally in terms of power projection, wars and weapons capabilities. By contrast, feminist research demonstrates that military-industrial economic systems have been and continue to be major drivers of regional and global insecurity, including environmental destruction, racist oppression and violence against women and children.

My title takes as a starting point the Black Lives Matter actions and analyses that have surged up around the world. At the outset I want to make clear that I am not speaking about Black Lives Matter. I am a white European who supports BLM protests against racism, and make this connection to national security in that regard.¹

In accepting the invitation to give this lecture and including "Black Lives Matter" in the title, I am of course recognising, with sorrow and respect, the recent police murders of Breonna Taylor² and George Floyd in the United States, and the origins of the BLM movement in protesting other murders and calling out all forms of racist and institutional violence against People of Colour.

I argue that these killings need to be contextualised in histories of violence against minoritised³ citizens in many countries. Under rubrics of "law and order" and "domestic and national security", states and their agents in police and defence forces have for centuries abused positions in security roles to target, brutalise, injure and kill unarmed civilians.⁴

¹ I hold to the feminist maxim that the personal is political – and the political is personal. We are called on to acknowledge and question our historical legacies of privilege as well as of oppression. Wherever we live, we experience hierarchies of power and resource allocation. These influence what we do and what we feel able to do. As a feminist campaigner for human rights, disarmament and climate justice, I seek to understand the intersections in our lives and politics so that as many people as possible can engage and act in ways that liberate our individual and collective capabilities to prevent nuclear and ecological destruction.

² Breonna Taylor was killed in her own home in a hail of bullets fired by Kentucky police two months before Floyd. If the name of this 26 year old African-American emergency medical technician is a less familiar name to you than George Floyd, think about how media tend to prioritise male lives over female lives.

³ The term "minoritised" is used among a growing number of English-speaking progressives as a verb rather than the more familiar word "minority". I don't know if this usage translates into other languages, but is used to draw attention to the fact that the problem is not about numbers within our societies, but about the disproportionate levels of disadvantage, vulnerability and violence that are experienced by some communities because of the dominant practices of patriarchal national security narratives and systems.

⁴ Afua Hirsch, The Racism that killed George Floyd was built in Britain. The Guardian, 3 June 2020 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/03/racism-george-floyd-britain-america-uk-black-people
African-American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989 to describe the ways in which Black women experience connecting forms and levels of discrimination and marginalisation based on their race and gender. Nowadays, the term is widely used to denote how a range of discriminations and oppressions interact on minoritised lives, requiring multilayered strategies for building justice and equality. My talk today takes a feminist, intersectional lens to national security discourses and poses questions about what we can do to address and diminish violent uses of national security powers and resources.

Who benefits? Who bear the burdens? Who are harmed?

As you participate in this session, I want you all to reflect on who, in the context of your own countries and experiences, are the lives that are minoritised and treated as if they don't matter?

Communities are "minoritised" in different ways but exist in all our countries. For example, despite comprising over 50 percent of births in most countries, women are minoritised by sexist, patriarchal systems as well as by certain dominant cultural beliefs and narratives shared and used by people given power through domestic and national security structures. Examples include femicide, surgical and chemical mutilations, and selective killings of girl children, as well as sexual violence.

According to Million Women Rise, Britain’s Black-led women's movement opposing violence against women and girls, killings of Black and minoritised women routinely get less attention from media and mainstream society.

In your own national discourses and practices, which lives are treated as if they matter less than the lives of others? Why do you think this is?

The specifics of our governments' national security policies are different. By reflecting on these questions, we can take forward a conversation where we share insights from our own experiences of national defence and security practices in the countries we know best. Learning from each other, we can discuss and develop solidarity strategies for enhancing progressive, feminist, anti-racist alternatives for everyone's security.

I'm of the generation contaminated by strontium 90 and other radionuclides dispersed across the world by atmospheric nuclear testing and use. Reflecting on this, yesterday was the 75th anniversary of the first nuclear weapons test, code-named "Trinity" and carried out in Alamagordo, New Mexico on 16 July 1945.

Nuclear testing and the production, deployment and use of nuclear weapons illustrate why understanding Black Lives Matter concerns is critical to 21st century analyses of security, peace, and national defence discourses. This must underpin strategies to transform security and disarmament objectives, behaviour and institutions in order to prevent the twin threats of nuclear and climate extinction.

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5 Kimberlé Crenshaw, hosted podcasts.
6 See Million Women Rise website http://www.millionwomenrise.com/
The governments that conducted nuclear testing chose to do so in areas where they considered that the people who would be most harmed didn’t really matter. This "nuclear colonialism" has underpinned all nuclear arsenals. Between them, the United States, UK, France, Russia, China, India, Pakistan and North Korea tested nuclear weapons in places occupied by First Nation and Aboriginal peoples, Pacific islanders, Algerians, Kazakhs and Nenets from Novaya Zemlya, Uighurs in Xinjiang Province, people living near Pokhran, Rajasthan in India, Chagai, Balochistan in Pakistan, and Pungye-ri (Kilju, Mount Mantap, North Korea). Israel is widely recognised to have nuclear weapons and may have collaborated with the Apartheid regime in South Africa on a nuclear test in the South Atlantic in 1979, but this has never been confirmed.7

From the practices of slavery and colonialism to current national security policies and nuclear weapons, women and children are disproportionately harmed by the actions that dominant governments take in the name of their national and economic security.

During the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, for example, the British colonial state presided over horrendous famines in India and Ireland. While failures of agriculture have natural causes, the human impacts were greatly worsened by political decision-making that put the perceived military interests of the UK above starving people in the colonies. In the Bengal Famine of 1943, for example, Winston Churchill put his assessment of British military interests during the 1939-45 war above the needs of Indians, resulting in some 3 million people dying of starvation.8

A century earlier, in the midst of the Irish potato famine, the British state put its economic policies and corn laws above saving the lives of millions of starving Irish people.9 History indicates that the initial rapid spread of the A/H1N1 virus that caused an estimated 50 million deaths in the 1918-20 "flu" pandemic was facilitated if not originated through military deployments by US, French and/or British troops in the carnage of the 1914-18 war in Europe among rival European states who sought to shore up their versions of capitalism, including control of colonies elsewhere in the world.10

Whose Security? Nationalist discourses leading to genocide, femicide and ecocide11

Many countries make public tributes and memorials to men who die in wars. Today, let's recognise and remember all the non-combatant women who have been raped and killed in all known wars.

Raping and killing women and children in war are often a matter of policy and strategy.12 Leaders may trumpet the need to "defend our women and children", but

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8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_major_famines_in_India_during_British_rule
9 https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/irish-potato-famine
11 Vandana Shiva, Reclaiming the Commons: Biodiversity, Traditional Knowledge, and the Rights of Mother Earth, 2020. See also Vandana Shiva, Foreword to This is not a drill, the Extinction Rebellion (XR) Handbook, 2019
12 Vimochana, Courts of Women, https://www.vimochana.co.in/courts-of-women/
these tropes are PR to mask the fact that in war as in peace, the actual safety and security of women and children are generally low on the list of government policies and resources. Claiming to do this in our names is a common patriarchal ploy. It’s also PR to justify high military expenditure and go to war.

Black Lives Matter protests and anti-racist activists in many countries clearly connect systemic inequality and police violence with the racist, imperialist legacies of white supremacy and slavery that have shaped our world today.

Whether we come from ancestors who colonised or were themselves subjected to colonisation, we all now live with national defence and security structures and policies that are shaped – in varying degrees – by:
• "nation states" and borders that seldom if ever correspond with cultural, linguistic and geographical realities;
• nationalist and national identity narratives that identify "others" as problems and threats;
• military-industrial exploitation and extractivism in pursuit of growth-based capitalist and statist ideologies, including the enslavement and impoverishment of minoritised people and destruction of natural ecosystems;
• production, trade and use of many kinds of inhumane weapons, from rubber bullets to tanks and bombers, from nuclear weapons of mass destruction to chemical, biological and cyber attacks;
• state-sanctioned violence in national and international affairs, generally accompanied by patriarchal economic and social inequalities and violence perpetrated against minoritised people domestically.

Threats, Challenges and Questions

Our environment and climate are at risk of irrevocable and existential destruction, while over 13,000 nuclear weapons are in the hands of nine national leaders. Some leaders behave as if ignoring climate risks and issuing nuclear threats are a test of their personal and national virility.

Living with the patriarchal legacies of rapacious colonialism, racism and military-industrial systems of genocide, exploitation and war, the whole world now faces interconnected annihilation-level threats to our survival, which include:
• climate destruction, with sea level rises, extreme weather and climate chaos;
• species extinction – of ourselves and all life on Earth;
• nuclear war, with "nuclear winter", mass famine, and radioactive pollution of our air, lands and seas;
• global health crises and rapidly spreading coronavirus pandemics, such as today’s Covid-19...

Nuclear weapons, pandemics, species extinction and climate destruction should be high on national security assessments of world-changing threats. So why are most

governments failing to prepare, prioritise and urgently implement policies to prevent such real world risks from turning into humanitarian catastrophes?

- Is it because of the structures of power and leadership that currently dominate the world and its security and economic institutions?
- Is it because many governmental leaders have vested interests in denying and minimising the real dangers because of short term financial and electoral benefits?
- Is it because many governments and profiteers rely on military-industrial expansionism?
- Is it because of leaders that equate security with their own political and economic ambitions and national military-industrial freedom of action, which are prioritised over the rights, security, survival and well-being of women, other nations, and minoritised communities within their national borders?
- Is this because they don’t think those lives matter as much as their own?

Today’s dominant national security narratives and weaponry have developed out of the US-Soviet Cold War, which arose from the 1939-1945 wars. These wars developed from the wreckage of previous wars, and track back to centuries of leaders that fought wars, expanded into other lands, subjugated, enslaved, colonised and impoverished the peoples they encountered and plundered their resources.

In previous eras, “deterrence” was understood to be a component of defence that could prevent violent conflict by signalling to others that aggression and violence would not give them what they wanted. Deterrence strategies and tactics have been successfully employed for millennia by states and peoples who have wished to avoid the costs and consequences of violent conflict. Deterrence was also recognised as most effective when combined with solution-oriented diplomacy, which meant strengthening institutional, international and interpersonal ties. Big arsenals and displays of power with threats and the latest weaponry were found to undermine deterrence and peaceful relations. They signalled leadership weaknesses, not strengths.

After 1945, the US began to deliberately associate deterrence with nuclear weapons. The general concept of deterrence as a defence strategy involving multiple diplomatic, political, psychological, economic and political tools became submerged beneath complex (and mutable) military-theoretic constructs based on possessing, deploying and threatening to use nuclear weapons.

As well as co-opting deterrence for nuclear purposes, US, UK and other military-industrial bureaucratic and academic (MIBA) establishments gave a hodgepodge of theories constructed to justify nuclear weapons, nationalist and war-mongering policies

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"realist". Based on Hobbes, Morgenthau and 19th century "realpolitik" patriarchal worldviews of violently competitive states pursuing nationally-perceived interests, these spread through academic institutions around the world and came to dominate national security discourses, justifying inhumane military and authoritarian actions and closing off debate about cooperative security in many governments. These MIBA activities also contributed to undermining ideas, analyses and activists who asked awkward questions such as whether nuclear weapons deter and whether anyone’s security requires massive arsenals, power projection and war-fighting. Nuclear weapons were given names like "Peacemaker".

The linguistic opposite of realist is idealist, defined as a believer in impractical ideas and ideals. When militarised states like the UK define and call their nuclear weapons "the deterrent" they are harnessing PR techniques to instil false consciousness and get rid of inconvenient questions. Linguistic chicanery is a symptom, not a cause. The central problem how power is constructed and used.

Prior to the nuclear age, no tool of deterrence or defence was capable of annihilating all life on Earth. Everyone understood that deterrence was not infallible. To be effective, the tools of deterrence require sensible leadership. Nowadays, groupthink and gaslighting are deployed by powerful abusers to cause confusion and undermine facts, evidence and discussion – to the detriment of genuine security. Colluders, whether acting from fear or ambition, enable naked emperors to carry on until someone stands up and blows the whistle.

If the tools we currently have limit what can be done, we have three choices:

- do our best with what we've got;
- adapt these tools to increase our effectiveness for tackling the challenges we face; or
- design new tools for transformative purposes.

And we have to make these choices while living in today’s world, with all its patriarchal weapons, mindsets, and institutions of power, oppression and insecurity. In other words, we need to get real, not 'realist'. Audre Lorde, who described herself as "Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet", noted that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house".

In 2020, we are trying to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic and other global security challenges with 20th century institutions and ideologies. Life and death in this

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/18/the-myth-of-henry-kissinger> gives a brief and useful critique of Henry Kissinger’s 'realist' policy justifications for American military actions such as the bombing of Cambodia in the 1960s, as well as advocating the use of 'tactical' nuclear weapons in the 1950s. Kissinger was also reputed to have justified nuclear testing in the Pacific with the words "There are only 90,000 people out there, who gives a damn?" <https://bit.ly/2PrjVb6>

15 Bobo Lo, Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia and the West, 29 July, 2020

pandemic depend on the leadership of governments that failed to prepare for this predicted risk. The nations that have done worst are the ones with male leaders touting national narratives of greatness, glory and sovereignty.

Yes, it is true that late 20th century efforts to develop humanitarian law and a rules-based cooperative order among nations in the world appear to be failing. Conflict among rival nuclear armed leaders appears on the rise, with particular emphasis on so-called 'great power' policies and rhetoric, including media confrontations driven by Presidents Trump, Putin and Xi. Also on the rise are nationalist hostility and attacks against neighbouring nations and minoritised people within many countries. These have risen before, and have been overcome, but with today’s cyber and military technologies we have good reason to be worried.

We can turn these regressive developments around, but we need to rise above fear and ambition, and put humanity and Mother Nature’s needs above our own short-term interests. Feminist and anti-racist activists have long pointed to the necessity to expose the power structures underlying discussions of identity and interests, and illuminate the ways in which the structures of oppression operate so that they can be more effectively addressed in all their forms.

Solidarity is action not just words, and requires that we look at the personal and political implications of who we are and where we come from, and use the resources, privileges and power we have so that we enable rather than prevent others – so that all can become empowered, gain equal access to opportunities and resources, and be individually and mutually responsible and accountable. Solidarity is also love - for ourselves, other human and living beings, and the wonderful ecosystems that have developed on Earth. These are the basics we must work for, as we move forward together to build security and peace.

Feminists recognise militarism as the armed wing of patriarchy. Militarism and war are the primary patriarchal means to project fear, power and control over other peoples and enable the imposition of religious and economic belief systems, colonialism, capitalism and sexual violence. Through arming and fetishising violence, militarism continues to drive and enable gendered systems of oppression and violence against women and children.

From the distant past and across most if not all cultures, militarism has been constructed and perpetuated to subdue and defeat anyone and everything that gets in the way of those who pursue power. It defends, enables and spreads exploitative extraction and seizure of natural resources, land-grabs and myriad economic and religious practices that have enslaved people and destroyed billions of lives and homes. Patriarchy needs militarism to implement its wars against women, diversity, nature and Mother Earth. And patriarchy needs us to keep believing that these are all necessary, done in our names and for our sakes.

17 Unless the description of militarism as the armed wing of patriarchy is found earlier under someone else’s name, I think I originated and spread this understanding in my talks and writings from March 2013 onwards. See also Gender and Militarism: Analyzing the links to strategize for peace, Women Peacemakers Program, WILPF 2014.
From "scorched earth" practices to doctrines of "mutual assured destruction", militarism contributes massively to environmental and climate destruction, while continuing to weaponise technologies that project existential threats such as nuclear war into our future.\(^{18}\)

As well as abuses of power through the military-industrial institutions of state and government, it is important also to pay attention to the narratives and actions of individual sexist and racist predators that operate in places of education, aid, and civil society peace and development organisations, where the vulnerable are often befriended and groomed before being abused. These are connected.

**Moving beyond patriarchal insecurity**

Violence against women and children is embedded in the racism, sexism, colonialist-capitalist expansionism, destruction and warmongering policies that are the causes, drivers and consequences of militarism and war. That makes our work more difficult – and more necessary. When change is necessary it is never impossible.

I have spent years working at the interface between grassroots feminist activism and disarmament ‘think tank’ work incorporating treaty-making and the ‘women, peace, security’ agendas. For the past decade my professional work has focussed on humanitarian strategies and building up the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) to achieve the multilaterally negotiated, universally applicable Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW, a.k.a Nuclear Ban Treaty).\(^{19}\)

Feminist-humanitarian security legal instruments like the TPNW and the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, 2008 Cluster Munitions Convention, put the spotlight not on the technical, military and political value attached to inhumane weapons, but on the security needs and interests of people who have been harmed and all that would be hurt and destroyed if the weapons continue to be produced, deployed and used. Along with the ground-breaking UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions, feminist-humanitarian approaches emphasise that survivors, women and other minoritised, exploited people are not simply victims, but agents of security, social and political change.

These recognitions and purposes are expressed in the TPNW’s preamble, prohibitions and provisions. Paragraph 4 of the TPNW’s preamble, for example, states:

> "Cognizant that the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons cannot be adequately addressed, transcend national borders, pose grave implications for human survival, the environment, socioeconomic development, the global economy, food security and the health of"


current and future generations, and have a disproportionate impact on women and girls, including as a result of ionizing radiation...”

As noted by Setsuko Thurlow, who survived the atomic bombing of Hiroshima when she was 13 years old, this Treaty means that ‘No longer shall their abstract theories mask the genocidal reality of their practices.’

We know these histories, so what are we going to do? Some questions to get a reality check:

- **What does security mean to you?** Are weapons the bringers of security, or do you rely more on good health and care services for when you need them? Good education and opportunities for you and your children? Somewhere safe to live? Clean air, water and food? Jobs and a basic income? What makes you feel secure?

- **Who – in the context of your own country and experience – are the lives that are minoritised, marginalised and treated as if they "don't matter"?** How is this done? Do you accept, challenge or resist? Why and how? What are the impacts and consequences?

- **Whose lives have been treated as if they didn't matter in your country's national security policies?**

- **In your country’s national and security narratives and policies, what and who are state-controlled weapons aimed at and why?** Do you think of some types of people and/or nations as threats? If so, why? Where do your anxieties about these people or nations come from – media and political sources, parental views, personal experience, or what?

- **For whom are the weapons your country deploys?**

In the UK, progressives pose the question: "who are nuclear weapons for?" This asks not only who the weapons are targeted at, but also who benefits from nuclear policies and possession? "Who are they for?" is a question we need to ask about all kinds of weapons, laws and institutions of surveillance and control?

Looking to the future, the next step is to imagine and construct sustainable economies, cooperative institutions and post-patriarchal social relations in time to survive the global threats that are the highest priority challenges we face. I think about ecologically sustainable, humanitarian and socialist economies that are based around local needs, with regional and international cooperation and institutions to enable us to tackle global threats and challenges. Green new deal approaches offer ways for some states to do this, but to be progressive and effective, they need to reflect feminist priorities and

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**21** Setsuko Thurlow, Nobel Acceptance Speech on behalf of ICAN, Oslo, 10 December 2017
give priority to care jobs, mutual aid and shared responsibilities for our interdependent environments.\textsuperscript{22}

Recognising the disproportionate impacts of Global north national security policies and militarism on the Global South and on women and minoritised communities in many of our countries, what do we need to change locally, regionally and internationally?

We know we need to move beyond national security beliefs and systems, but what do we need to do to transcend nation states, national borders and tribalism? What strategies must we prioritise to make the necessary changes in each of our countries – and how can we work transnationally and together?

It’s not enough to talk the talk on opposing nationalism, racism, misogyny and violence. To move beyond patriarchal insecurity we have to take personal and political responsibility to change the policies enacted in our names that use violent means against civilians because of their ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation or other aspects of their humanity and beliefs. We have to build better ways to relate globally, share resources and transcend the stranglehold of military-industrial growth, competition and consumption.

**READING LIST for Reb Johnson’s lecture on Black Lives Matter: Feminist-AntiRacist Challenges to national security discourses**

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* – a selection of essays and speeches with an intersectional approach to talking about race and feminism, including 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'.

[https://communityactionmk.org/2020/06/10/black-lives-matter/](https://communityactionmk.org/2020/06/10/black-lives-matter/)


Afua Hirsch, The Racism that killed George Floyd was built in Britain. The Guardian, 3 June 2020 [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/03/racism-george-floyd-britain-america-uk-black-people](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/03/racism-george-floyd-britain-america-uk-black-people)

Layla F. Saad, *Me and White Supremacy* available in print and as an audiobook

\textsuperscript{22} See my panel presentation for SSFS7 on 'Green New Deals and Extinction Rebellion', for the panel on Ecological Justice through Socialist Transformation, 11 July 2020.

Keisha Blain, 'The Black Women Who Paved the Way for This Moment',

Gender and Militarism: Analyzing the links to strategize for peace, Women Peacemakers Program, WILPF 2014

Vimochana, Courts of Women, https://www.vimochana.co.in/courts-of-women/

Vandana Shiva, Reclaiming the Commons: Biodiversity, Traditional Knowledge, and the Rights of Mother Earth, 2020.

Vijay Kolinvijadi and Ashish Kothari, 'No Harm Here is still Harm There: The Green New Deal and the Global South', 20 May 2020.

Bobo Lo, Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia and the West, 29 July, 2020