

War, Militarism, and Gender: An Interview with Cynthia Enloe

Interviewed by Dan Ginsburg

On 11 January 2010, *WPJH* Senior Editor Dan Ginsburg sat down with Clark University Professor Cynthia Enloe to get her perspective on a wide range of issues. Enloe's feminist teaching and research has focused on the interplay of women's politics in the national and international arenas, with special attention to how women's labor is made cheap in globalized factories and how women's emotional and physical labor has been used to support governments' war-waging policies—as well as how many women have tried to resist both of those efforts. She is the author of numerous books, including *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* and *The Curious Feminist*. Her latest work is *Nimo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War*.

Dan Ginsburg is pursuing a master in public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Ginsburg is a graduate of Wesleyan University. He served as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine from 2005 to 2007.

WPJH

The Bush administration often co-opted women's rights empowerment as justification for the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. President Barack Obama's December 2009 speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point articulating U.S. strategy in Afghanistan moving forward emphasized national security as the primary driver for the U.S. presence and military action. There was very little mention of human rights and no mention of women and women's rights.

ENLOE

So that's the good news. It's not just instrumentalist. With Bush, Rumsfeld, and Cheney, the main architects of the Afghan war, I think it really was instrumentalist. During 2003 to 2008, one didn't see any follow-through on women's security or women's education. There were people in the field who cared about it, but not at the level of "U.S. national security." It is interesting to note that Obama's very internationally strategized speech in December really left women's rights and security out altogether. So then what you want to know is, where was it in the drafts? . . . Did somebody at some point say, "Okay, we do actually care about women's security in Afghanistan; in fact, we care about it more than the Bush administration did"? . . . I bet in an early draft it was there, and I bet there was a discussion, and someone there asked, "How can we mention women's rights as part of our surge mission without sounding shallow and instrumentalist?"

But the real question is what the discourse will be at the mid-levels and at the ground levels of U.S. officials. And what the new police force will look like. Now that the Obama plan is to expand the whole Afghan security sector—not just the army—one needs to ask if there

will be women in the military and police. I have mixed feelings about women in militaries, but it is one organization that is due to become very powerful in Afghan political life. Where will women be in the civilian bureaucracy, particularly in the ministries that are now headed by the warlords in [Afghanistan President Hamid] Karzai's cabinet?

WPJH

In the same speech, Obama used the phrase “successful conclusion” for Afghanistan and asserted that, “Today, after extraordinary costs, we are bringing the Iraq war to a responsible end.” In *The Curious Feminist*, you wrote, “Wars don’t simply end. And wars don’t end simply.” What are we ignoring when we see an end to a military presence and combat operations as a simplified “end” to a “war?”

ENLOE

I'm not sure whether Obama or any of his senior advisers really believes that. Certainly nobody on the ground in Iraq believes that when the U.S. troops pull out in August that it's the end of a war. . . . Wars don't simply end. In fact there are many people who think the Vietnam War isn't yet over. There are so many U.S. and Vietnamese veterans who are still distressed, so many families taking care of those veterans. And the Vietnamese people have had to think about how they choose to memorialize the war. It's never obvious after any war. There's a wonderful historian named Karen Turner who's written a book with a Vietnamese coauthor about what happened to those Vietnamese women who fought with the North Vietnam's army thirty years after the Vietnam-U.S. War. Their war definitely isn't over.

WPJH

Let's stay on Iraq, then. Can you describe the experiences or insights that inspired your latest book *Nimo's War, Emma's War*?

ENLOE

In the lead-up to the Iraq war in 2003, I was teaching at a university in Tokyo. My Japanese feminist friends took me along to anti-war marches. And I stood with the local members of Women in Black in Tokyo. . . . My interest in those months was in trying to imagine women's relationships to the coming Iraq war. The first people I tried to imagine were Japanese women married to those Japanese naval officers then being sent out to the Indian Ocean as the Japanese government's contribution to the Afghanistan war. . . .

Soon, I was asked to do talks around the U.S. and in Europe about militarism and feminism. Does asking feminist questions shed any light on the Iraq war? We learn better, I think, when we are specific. I began to use an Iraqi woman and an American woman as the anchors to all my talks. If you can tell a story and then build your analysis off the story, people may forget about your analysis but they'll remember the story. And if they remember the story, they might even remember a bit of the analysis.

The first woman I learned about, because of really good reporting by *New York Times* reporter Sabrina Tavernise, was Nimo. Tavernise decided to spend an afternoon in Nimo's small Baghdad beauty parlor in April of 2003 as a way to cover the war. I thought that was brilliant. And I got very interested in this woman, Nimo, who ran this very modest beauty parlor on a back alleyway in the midst of a foreign military invasion.

Emma, the other woman in the book's title, is a Latina woman from San Antonio, Texas. I focused on her

because the U.S. Army and even the Marines began to have trouble filling their recruiting quotas, particularly as the war dragged on and became more unpopular. San Antonio high schools welcome recruiters. I wondered how Emma thought about it, because she had one son in the Air Force and another son in the San Antonio high school system. . . . I've been very interested in recruiters—how they appeal to men and how they appeal to women. If you want to do a bit of field research, just watch the two sets of military television advertising strategies. One is during NFL games—very much to the guys. But, during weekday afternoon reruns, the ads are aimed at mothers. Nobody has yet done a single study of the advertising agency's ways of working with the Pentagon.

WPJH

Strategies for young women?

ENLOE

The U.S. military's recruiting ads don't seem to be as aimed at young women. They seem to be aimed at parents, to reassure mothers and fathers that it's okay for their daughters to join the military. They're not as nervous about the parents of young men, though this began to change around 2006 or 2007. The Pentagon is one of the biggest users of social science research in the U.S.—something to keep in mind when you chart the militarization of sociology and psychology. The Pentagon learned from 2005-2006 studies that African American mothers and fathers were cooling on their enthusiasm for the kids joining the military, parents who had thought that their children joining the military was a step up, a way to get future education, a way to be seen as a first-class citizen. But that changed in the middle of the Iraq

war. So now, some of the Pentagon ads aimed at mothers are aimed deliberately at African American mothers—and mothers of sons—to convince them that military enlistment still is a good thing for their sons.

Military recruiters in any country love bad economies. They could never say it out loud, but every time the unemployment rate inches up a percent, it makes them very happy. Since the financial crisis in 2009, recruiters are all filling their quotas. Have African American parents remained cool with the surge in Afghanistan?

WPJH

What were your key takeaways from working on the book? And what do you hope readers will get out of it?

ENLOE

The book focuses on eight women—four Iraqi women and four American women. The main thing I want readers to take away is that Iraqi women are thinkers. They are activists. They are organizers. They have histories. They have memories. They have strategies. They have analyses. Iraqi women in wartime have had to constantly strategize about how to take care of their kids if they have kids, how to get a job, how to keep a job, how to have any lobbying influence in the Green Zone. A lot of Iraqi women who stayed in Iraq organized to have influence on the drafting of the new Constitution. Today they lobby the Iraqi Parliament. And there are some feminists. Twenty-five percent of the Iraqi Parliament is now women, but those women are very diverse. Some are under the influence of male party leaders, not all have developed a feminist consciousness—just like the U.S. Congress, right?

The other takeaway is to realize that wars cannot be waged unless you persuade or pressure enough women to do the kind of work it takes to wage a war. If women went on strike and refused to give permission for the kids to join the military, or refused to take care of wounded sons and daughters when they came home as veterans, or refused to be silent as military wives...if women refused, states couldn't wage a war.

WPJH

In a talk you gave here at the Kennedy School, you spoke about governments privatizing care for the physically and mentally war wounded. It's something we very much take for granted, that it's an expectation.

ENLOE

Yes! It's what mothers and wives "naturally" do, right? Wars are waged by officials who count on women to feel no option but to do it. British feminist historian Ana Carden-Coyne is investigating what happened to the war wounded after World War I. It's opened my eyes. The whole profession of physical therapy was created out of World War I. And it was a feminized profession right from the start. Now I think about the wounded a lot more, including mentally wounded. The number of wives and girlfriends and mothers who live with sons and some daughters with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] is just amazing. PTSD is not just an "American disease." It's an Iraqi disease. It's a Cambodian disease. It's an Afghan disease. It's a Vietnamese disease. And it's completely hidden. Most governments don't want to hear about the mental health repercussions from their military operations. War-waging governments always try to shed responsibility. If governments took full responsibility for

the aftereffects of their war waging, they wouldn't be able to persuade many people to support a war.

There's now a PTSD ward in one of the Baghdad hospitals just for Iraqi children. One. Militias began targeting doctors, nurses, and psychiatrists, so there are very few left in Baghdad. We don't think about Iraqi PTSD. When you read about the latest bombing in Mosul or Kirkuk or Baghdad, you learn about how many were killed and how many wounded. But do we become curious about who's going to take care of those severely wounded, at what emotional and economic cost?

In this book, I really dug more deeply than I ever have both into the militarization of mental health care and the dependence of war-waging U.S., Iraqi, and British governments on wives and girlfriends and mothers.

WPJH

So was that one of the surprises for you?

ENLOE

Yes. You'd think that after years of working on this stuff, I'd have thought of everything. Well, I haven't. Now I think a lot more about the politics of wives and mothers of wounded soldiers, how much governments hope they'll stay silent, hope they won't realize they're doing political work, and hope they won't publicly lobby for more assistance.

WPJH

We're engaged in a highly militarized "war on terror." It seems to me that public discourse often simplifies or glosses over the motivations of "terrorists," even when the terrorists themselves articulate them. Those motivations often include our conduct in "the war on terror," creating a vicious circle of violence. Is this a fair assessment?

ENLOE

I think your assessment really is... I was going to say—on target! Isn't that awful militarized language? Is a bomber pilot a terrorist? You can't be more terrorized by anybody than by having a piloted bomber directly above you or a drone being directed remotely by somebody on the banks of the Potomac.

We've done the world a discourse disservice by spreading this simplistic notion of "the terrorist," as if that's all you need to know about somebody. Or the "war on terror," without asking why. How does somebody become convinced that wielding violence—whether in a state uniform or civilian clothes—is the solution both to their problems and society's problems? Are men or women who form militias deluded? Are men or women who join states' militaries deluded? Delusion works at many levels—with us all!

WPJH

The word that gets me is "extremist." Not to discount the need for military, but to me a lot of military action is pretty darned extreme. But if you're in uniform, it's not extreme...

ENLOE

It's "legitimate." And if you're legitimate you couldn't be extreme.

WPJH

Is our discourse on and understanding of "the war on terror" sufficiently gendered?

ENLOE

What's happened in the last three or four years is that "the woman suicide bomber" has become a kind of public figure. So some people imagine they've gained gendered awareness, because they now recognize that women can hide bombs under their clothes. Actually, one of the

ways the Algerian independence movement of the 1950s defeated the French military was using women to carry bombs. So long as women are imagined to be apolitical and "harmless," insurgents can use them to wield violence. Motivated by this shallowly gendered analysis of terrorism, the Iraqi police has begun recruiting more women to search women at checkpoints. Now that isn't a gender analytical or policy breakthrough.

A more sophisticated—and useful—gendered analysis would ask about masculinities within Iraqi political parties and militias and look at masculinities within the U.S. Army and Marines—as they shape each other. A fruitful gendered analysis would look at the intra-family relationships between women and the men who join militias. Men who join militias often get paid as much as \$50 per month. So when there is high male unemployment, a wife, sister, or mother may be unenthusiastic about a young man in a household joining a militia, but will weigh that against her need for money to sustain family in wartime.

WPJH

We understand and experience our lives in highly gendered terms and organizations. Gender and women's studies is seen not as mandatory but rather as a specialized field. You can go all the way through institutes of higher learning without acquiring the tools of "gender analysis." Do colleges and universities need to put more emphasis on gender into the curriculum?

ENLOE

Yes. With so much mainstreaming going on now in all courses—this is the sanguine view—maybe we don't need women's studies anymore? I think of all the courses that nonfeminist faculty teach, courses during which gender just

...disappears. And these are good people. But gender? A course on elections and maybe it gets mentioned twice—you know, “the women’s vote” or the gender gap in American electoral politics. But is it mentioned in a course on the history of warfare? Or on military-civic relations? Or state-building? Or the politics of globalization? Uh uh. It just disappears. Too many faculty treat gender analysis as if it were an arcane specialty, rather than a way to make sense of the world. Gender analysis doesn’t displace other forms of analysis, but it certainly sharpens our exploratory capacity.

WPJH

Here at the Kennedy School there’s a lot of gender study, but again it’s if you’re interested.

ENLOE

It’s optional. Which means that probably 80 percent of all the people who go through the Kennedy School think that it’s a mere “extra” too, so they end up being kind of “gender dumb,” which I certainly was when I came out of Berkeley. To deprive oneself of sophisticated analytical tools is a mistake—a risky mistake.

A wonderful example: when the Obama administration first introduced its stimulus package in 2009, it looked like a 1930s stimulus package—public works construction. A national network of feminist economists and feminist social scientists who work on labor said, “Excuse us! Has anyone done a gender analysis of what this stimulus package is going to do? If you leave it at construction, it is going to prioritize men’s jobs.”

So these feminist economic analysts really rallied, and they wrote a very coherent, persuasive letter to the Obama administration and said, “You really need

to do a gender analysis here.” Women are unemployed too, especially they are underemployed. Some of Obama’s senior policy advisers listened. They revised their approach. The stimulus package they launched became one aimed at construction and education and the environment. Public policy didn’t demasculinize the construction industry, but at least it treated the current job market more realistically.

WPJH

That’s something I didn’t really see in the public discourse. It seems as though it worked behind the scenes.

ENLOE

That would be a really good learning moment. For us all to see how it happened. And I wouldn’t have known except I became one of the letter’s signatories.

WPJH

On that note, you use a “feminist curiosity” to call into question convention and orthodoxy in terms of militarization, national security, gender, patriarchy, even sneaker manufacturing. What questions should a good, curious feminist be asking in 2010?

ENLOE

Always ask, “Where are the women?” Especially if they’re not there or if they’re the only ones there. But then follow up and ask, “Why are women there, but not someplace else?” Ask, “Who has a stake in them not being there?” Keep going, ask, “Who has a stake in them being only there?” And, “What do they think about they’re being there?” And, “What are they doing while they’re there?” And, “Who is comfortable with them being there?” And, “Who is feeling uncomfortable?”