

# In Conversation with Professor Cynthia Enloe

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*Well-known for her book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, exposing the embedded systemic and institutionalised patriarchy that is evident not only in global politics, but in the political science and literature of international relations, Professor Cynthia Enloe is one of the most compelling feminist theorists and political scientists of the twenty-first century. Currently a Research Professor of Political Science at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, Professor Enloe has written countless articles and books on the important role gender plays in the areas of militarism, war, and globalisation. In this interview, Professor Enloe outlines the difficulties faced by feminist theorists and researchers, how to identify gender disparities during crises (with reference to the current pandemic), and the questions one should ask in order to be able to expose patriarchy, as well as the importance of asking these gender-curious questions.*

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**CJLPA:** In your most recent book, *The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging the Persistence of Patriarchy*, you write that, contrary to common belief, patriarchy is not weakening, but modernising and adapting to current times. Why has this happened?

**Professor Cynthia Enloe:** First of all, I'm not a pessimist. I'm not somebody who says that all the efforts of women around the world in so many different countries that challenge patriarchal practices, patriarchal beliefs, and patriarchal institutions are fruitless. That's not my message. But what I am more and more aware of is how those people who are committed to patriarchy—even if they don't call it that; they call it 'preserving normalcy'—constantly are updating their ways of preserving their privileges. That's what I mean. Here's one example: when a comics artist and a comics company, for example, together created *Wonder Woman* in 1940, that looked then like a big breakthrough: a woman could be a fictional superhero! But *Wonder Woman's* creators and marketers—she was created by a man and a male-owned comics company—deliberately dressed her in a sexualised costume. *Wonder Woman* didn't look like most women in the world. Opposition to her sexualised portrayal motivated dozens of UN staff women dramatically to protest this comic book figure being named (by a male-led UN department) the 'ambassador for women and girls' in 2016. To these hard-working international civil servants, that UN choice looked like an updated version of patriarchy. So, on the one hand, the creation of a woman superhero seemed to challenge the patriarchal presentation of the usual masculinised superhero; on the other hand, though, the creative innovation seemed designed to perpetuate the sexualisation of women with power. Patriarchal imagination was simultaneously being challenged and confirmed.

Here's another example of patriarchy's adaptability. There used to be no women cabinet officers in virtually any government. I have a friend whose mother was the first woman to be a cabinet minister in Chile, becoming the Minister of Education back in the 1960s. She was a Chilean feminist pioneer. Women's breaking into the

masculinised world of government cabinet officers has been indeed a real gender achievement in any country. Nevertheless, while we recognise that, we still have to keep asking when and how the male political elite transformed their cabinets so as to feminise some cabinet posts—for instance, now routinely appointing women to the posts of Ministers of Environment, Culture, Health, and Education, while carefully ensuring that the most powerful cabinet posts have remained in the hands of male ministers (Defence, Interior, and Finance today still are the most commonly masculinised).

You'll notice that the 'patriarchal sustainability formula' relies on masculinising some things, while feminising other things, and—that is key to any patriarchy's perpetuation—always acting as though the things that are masculinised are more serious, more valuable, more significant than the things that are feminised.

With this understanding in mind, we can take a fresh, feminist look at the still-unfolding history of women and men in governments' cabinet posts. Patriarchal people's preferred scenario is: first, men (and a few 'Margaret Thatcher's) with political power stubbornly resist women being allowed to take up senior cabinet posts. But then, though, when women begin to stick their collective feet in the political door, thereby managing to gain a few senior cabinet offices, the male political elite begin to appoint them to ministries that, in their shrunken masculinised political imaginations, are deemed less politically important.

Now is the point where you probably want to intervene and ask, 'But nowadays, in our current era of climate crisis, how can even patriarchal politically powerful men imagine that their own government's environment ministry is less important for their country than, say, their defence ministry?' Or, put another way, you might ask, 'With climate change threatening entire populations' ways of life, how can patriarchal men kid themselves into thinking that environmental policy-making can be feminised, that is, shoved to the political margins?'

These are exactly the sorts of questions feminists— as thinkers, researchers, and activists— pose. So we have to stay on our toes. Will ministries of environment today start to acquire more political saliency? As they do, will the proportion of all of the world's ministers of environment who are women begin to drop? As climate change acquires the precious mantle of a 'state security issue', will male political elites begin to deem environmental policy 'too important' to be left in the hands of mere women? Stay tuned!

People who are invested in patriarchal ways of doing things, I've learned, are always trying to update their strategies, trying to convince the rest of us that their revised formulas amount to 'progress'. Patriarchal people, in other words, are never just old fusty men in pinstripe suits, smoking cigars in their private clubs. Patriarchal people are now the hip Silicon Valley guys working out, eating salads, and sporting black T-shirts. I think it's a big mistake for us ever to imagine that patriarchy is old-fashioned. It can be as up-to-date as tomorrow.

**CJLPA: In your opinion, what current challenges do feminist thinkers like yourself face more generally, and more specifically within the field of international relations?**

**CE:** Lots of people who ask feminist questions about international politics face not so much direct hostility as *inattention*. Feminist questions—and their answers—about the gendered causes and consequences of Brexit, Iran's weaponry, Palestinian rights, Myanmar's military coup, the world trade in Xinjiang cotton, implementing the Paris Climate Accord, the trials at the International Crimes Court, too often are met with 'Who cares?' The scores (really scores!) of us who are seriously pursuing these and many similar questions (nothing is out of bounds for feminist international politics specialists!), have become convinced, as a result of what we've uncovered in the workings of international politics, that we can help citizens and policymakers be more effective by helping them become more realistically informed about the complex workings of power.

Our findings over the last 50 years of gender-curious research have shown us, first, that there are a lot more wieldings of power in more sites (especially efforts to control women—as mothers, wives, girlfriends, daughters, sex workers, factory workers, plantation workers, domestic workers, refugees, and widows) than non-feminist commentators want to admit. Non-feminist commentators constantly underestimate power. Second, our collective investigations have revealed that power takes many more forms than most commentators acknowledge. That's one of the findings that all the activists and their academic allies who've made #MeToo into a genuinely global movement have lit up in neon.

In the academic field of what is called 'IR', gender-curious scholars have made a lot of headway. There are now new books and whole book series by publishers like Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Palgrave, and Routledge focused on gender and international politics. That's big. Major transnational NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, The International Crisis Group, and Refugees International now fund and publish gender-conscious investigatory reports. In no small part that is due to there being a lot more feminist-informed staff people inside those NGOs. We also have created or transformed dozens of academic journals that publish very interesting articles that explore the workings of gender and power—that explore the relationships between diverse women, men, and power, as well as the contests over the norms of masculinity, femininity, and those contests' implications for gaining, losing, and wielding power.

Furthermore, we've created academic associations and caucuses within academic associations around the world. Both the US-based International Studies Association and the British International Studies Association have large and lively gender studies sections. Just recently, I was talking with women who have created a Women and Gender Caucus inside the Brazilian International Relations Association. Last week, I was talking with a professor in Bucharest who has launched a new network of South-eastern European feminist security experts. There also are now at least two separate Feminist Foreign Policy groups.

Still, it can be hard for feminist researchers to get a hearing in the most prestigious media or most prominent international politics academic forums. What oftentimes happens is that you look at undergraduate and graduate course syllabuses and what do you see? The faculty member teaching the course doesn't think of themselves as knowing much—or, frankly, caring much—about the workings of gender in international politics, yet nowadays feels they've got to give at least a token nod toward gender and IR (this is progress!). So, they squeeze the topic of gender and international politics into just one week. One week for the world's workings of masculinities: *really?* One week for exploring women's resistances to abuse and privilege: *really?* And, of course, this single week is put at the end of the term. This means that by the time the faculty member gets to the end of the term, she—or usually he—hasn't covered everything else they consider important and therefore zips over gender political analysis without serious consideration.

That's how patriarchy works. It was a big success to get most people who teach international politics—especially in the introductory undergrad or grad courses—at least to assign one reading on gender in international politics, and to devote at least one week to the topic, but neither in a way that might infuse the entire course and its students with a deeper feminist curiosity. Despite tokenisms, though, there are nowadays more and more graduate students in more and more countries—South Korea, Japan, India, Sweden, Poland, Argentina, Brazil, Romania, Turkey—who are really serious about investigating and teaching about the multiple gender dynamics shaping international politics. There's where hope lies.

**CJLPA: That's exactly why I wanted to ask that question because I have spoken about it quite a lot recently with some of the female peers in my course. We have asked in seminars, for example, why should feminist critiques not be incorporated in other module topics?**

**CE:** You are so right: ask 'Why?' See if you can get the instructor in the course to be a little uneasy about their own segregating of gender dynamics into a separate section, as if it had nothing to do with everything else you all are investigating. I call this 'patriarchal siloing'. It's a teaching practice that is designed to foster the risky notion that most of international political life is pristinely un-gendered—as if contests over manliness do not shape militarism, as if practices of making women's factory labour 'cheap' does not affect international trade, as if efforts to control women's reproduction do not play roles in migration, development, or nationalism. You could even suggest that the instructor reorganise the course. Everyone is very possessive about their own course syllabuses. Still, you might suggest, 'Next term, couldn't you place the gender-curious analytical questions up in the second week of the course so that then we will be prepared throughout the rest of the course to ask those probing questions?' That's not asking the faculty member to completely reorganise his or her thinking, though it might have that effect on the students! Give it a try, and then tell me what happens!

**CJLPA: What has been the effect of COVID-19 on gender inequalities across the world, and what are we likely to see happen to these inequalities post-pandemic?**

CE: This is so interesting. In recent months as the pandemic lockdowns have rolled across diverse countries, I've been hearing two things: first, that the 'politics of care' finally, after decades of neglect as a mere 'women's issue', might be taken seriously; second, that what has happened in so much conventional (that is, not gender-curious) political commentary is that a lot of people who are treated as 'experts' because they presumably know how to talk about budgets, balance of payments, and national security, but haven't a clue about the workings of child care, are having to move over and give at least a bit of authoritative space to those feminist economists, feminist sociologists, feminist historians, and feminist labour researchers who do know the broad policy implications of low-paid and unpaid gendered child and elder care.

One of the things I'm very hopeful about in the new Biden–Harris administration here in the US is that both care and experts on care are getting a lot of official attention. Joe Biden has appointed specialists in the gendered political economies of care to senior posts both in the White House and in several cabinet departments. Women representatives in the House (for instance, Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut) and the Senate (Patty Murray of Washington stands out) are finally getting the legislative and executive backing their childcare and family bills deserve.

Perhaps the biggest conceptual innovation in US politics today is that 'infrastructure' now includes not only the conventional bridges and highways, but also family care provision. Talk of government funding for bridges and childcare in the same policy sentence—that's big!

Since eldercare and childcare in so many countries relies not only on women's unpaid labour but also on the low paid labour of migrant women workers, of course, that means—as it has long meant—that the political economy of care is an international political phenomenon. This means that in the not-quite-yet-post-COVID world, all of us who do international political analysis had better get up to speed on the gendered international politics of care.

During my doctoral studies at the University of California, Berkeley, nobody ever urged me to investigate the politics of paid and unpaid care. But when I was researching what became the first edition of *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, it dawned on me that I should look at the international migration of domestic workers. It was Filipinas who stirred my curiosity. I've been interested in Philippines politics for decades because of its experience as an American colony, because of its serving as the site of major US military bases, because of its vibrant electoral politics, and because of its prominent women's movement. So, when researching *Bananas*, my attention was caught by the data showing that remittances sent back home by thousands of Filipina women and Filipino men working abroad was a significant factor in the Philippines's balance of payments. The men were working especially as crew members on globalised cargo ships. The women were working as nurses and as domestic workers. Suddenly I realised, 'I should pay attention to that'.

One reason that I think I was kind of ready—not an expert, but intellectually ready—for the COVID-19 era was that I had already been tutored by women in international domestic migration networks (which now include Brazilian, Sri Lankan, Ecuadorian, as well as Filipina women) to keep track of domestic work as

an international political phenomenon, even if most political commentators weren't paying much attention.

As we haltingly, stunningly, unevenly move beyond COVID, what will the gendered patterns of paid and unpaid work look like? Will the economic inequalities between women and men in post-pandemic UK, Brazil, US, India, and Australia gape even more widely than they did before 2020? What will be the consequences for both national and international politics? We had better start paying attention now.

**CJLPA: Do you think that we also need to keep an eye on the kind of crisis management that goes on afterwards?**

CE: What are the gender analytical skills required today by employers of anybody who gets a crisis management job? My guess is none. That likelihood is despite a burgeoning literature on the gender differences in what happens in all sorts of natural disasters and public health crises to men and to women.

For example, feminist geographers have investigated what happens to men in earthquakes, hurricanes, and tsunamis and what happens to women. Gender differences, they have found, loom large. Who was taught to swim, who wasn't? Whose customary attire enables them to run fast? Who must rescue the children? Who fishes in boats out the ocean, who harvests seafood close to shore? Who in any household is responsible for collecting firewood and fresh water? Who in a hastily assembled refugee camp is most likely to be threatened with sexual assault? If crisis managers don't know of these findings or do not integrate their lessons into their organisations' preparedness practices and their response practices, they will not only fail to address the particular needs of women and men; their gender-ignorant actions will deepen gender inequities.

**CJLPA: Would you say you are quite hopeful in this instance?**

CE: Wherever any gender analytical skills are being seriously taught is a cause for hope. Any university that is making the acquisition of gender analytical skills a degree requirement gives me even more hope. We can't wait until people are hired into policy-making or crisis management jobs, and then imagine that they'll suddenly become gender-curious—though, thankfully, I've seen this happen occasionally. Far more effective is to build gender curiosity and gender analytical skills acquisition into the career-building curriculum.

**CJLPA: Do you have any recommendations on how to be a conscious feminist?**

CE: Each of us is most likely to see the value of a feminist curiosity in our own lives as citizens and in our own work in any field if we can grasp how gender dynamics of any sort shapes the thing we care about. So, first, I'd suggest that everyone plunges into case studies. In most of my writings I try to mix case studies with larger analytical questions and patterns. The big picture and the small picture—I never choose one over the other. It's the relationships between the two that I've found most revealing. I'm wary of those commentators who imagine that their own badges of 'intellectual sophistication' are earned by talking only about the big picture.

I think we all learn lasting lessons from exploring grittily detailed case studies. We learn to appreciate complexity; we learn to stay wide awake to subtleties; we train ourselves to have long attention spans. We can learn a lot too from delving into case studies of poor policy-making.

Look, for instance, at the relationships between men and women and the operations of masculinities and of femininities in London's Grenfell Tower fire disaster, in Flint, Michigan's water contamination tragedy. Investigate the workings of masculinities in the Boeing MAX 8 disasters. Explore the sexual abuse of local Congolese women by international male health workers during the country's recent Ebola outbreak. Take a close look at the gender dynamics shaping responses to COVID in New Zealand, India, and South Korea.

Second, I would suggest that we all pay attention to what data are being collected and what data are not being collected—with what consequences. It's amazing how much feminist energy has been and is still being spent trying to get national and international agencies to collect gender-disaggregated data for the sake of making better, fairer, more effective, more sustainable policies. For years, the UN collected nutritional data by ungendered household caloric intake. Households, though, do not eat! Men and women and boys and girls eat—and, lo and behold, gender-smart data collectors found that, even within poor households, adult men consume more calories and especially more protein than do adult women.

Finally, data must be gender-collected and gender-disaggregated on everything: illness, deaths, carers, students, teachers, paid work, unpaid work, bankruptcies, arms manufacturing, policymakers, budget expenditures, policing, market vendors, vaccinations, contractors, detentions, weapons possession, mining, farming, banking, peacekeepers, donors, sexual assault perpetrators, child marriage... everything.

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