



**RESISTING LAZY POLITICAL ANALYSIS: CRAFTING  
A FEMINIST CURIOSITY TO MAKE SENSE OF  
INTERNATIONAL POLITICS**

**Cynthia ENLOE\***

Before I started to ask feminist questions, I thought I was grappling with enough complexity to make adequate sense of international politics.

When I investigated the post-colonial politics of Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, I asked about class; I asked about ideology; I asked about race and ethnicity; I asked about rubber, sugar, tin and the state.

When I dug into the politics of state militaries, I tracked the ethnic identities of rank and file soldiers, as well as of their officers; I kept an eye on each military force over several generations; and I monitored the often tense, sometimes intimate relations between any state's military and its multiple police forces.

I thought I had enough on my research plate. I was wrong.

It is so easy, so enticing, I now realize, to *skip* gender questions. Just talk about any state's military without wondering about marriage - or rape or homophobia. Just track recruitment into insurgent armed militias without investigating contested masculinities. Demonstrate your analytical sophistication by referring to multiple actors: "state elites," "the media," "factory workers," "bankers," "youth," "refugees," "party strategists," "NATO officials," "religious clerics," "contractors," "peace activists," "arms manufacturers," "judges," and "voters."

It is quite easy for any of us to presume – without checking – that each of these political actors is *ungendered*. That is, it is all too easy to build our explanations without wondering if and how each set of political actors is shaped

---

\* Research Professor, Clark University (USA), cenloe@clarku.edu

\* Makale Geliş Tarihi: 18.07.2017  
Makale Kabul Tarihi: 19.07.2017

by the workings (some blatant, others subtle) of masculinities and of femininities. It is also reassuring not to take seriously the lives and ideas of diverse women. This allows us to craft analytical conclusions without asking whether each set of actors has had the identical relations with diverse men as it does with diverse women – and how those relations might matter for one’s analytical conclusions.

Of course, none of us imagines ourselves to be lazy when we think, write and talk using these ungendered categories. We merely think of ourselves as being efficient. To be analytically efficient is to define explanatory factors as specifically – narrowly – as possible. We seek to weed out extraneous conditions that do not measure up as genuine causal “variables.” We leave on the proverbial “editing room floor” those conditions, dynamics and actors that we deem to be mere side matters. In our pursuit of analytical efficiency, we have learned to be dismissive of anything we come to believe is “trivial.”

An example: Is it of any significance that the Iraqi Kurdish pesh merga is an armed force composed of women as well as men? Trying to answer that question scarcely matters in an efficient analysis, we efficient non-feminist explainers decide. What matters – that is, what we imagine will help us build a efficient analysis – is that the pesh merga is an armed fighting force commanded by contemporary Iraqi Kurdish political leaders.

Another example: Has the IMF over decades nurtured an internal institutional culture that has privileged a certain kind of masculinity among its senior economists? That question is scarcely worth spending one’s tight research budget on answering. What instead matters, the efficient analyst decides *a priori*, is the particular structural adjustment lending formula that those IMF leaders have imposed on indebted governments since the 1970s.

I think because I did spend over a decade conducting research – and teaching – without asking any gender questions, I am today especially aware of what I missed and what I got analytically wrong by not asking those hard questions. Here are the lessons I have learned.

First, I have learned that I had grossly underestimated the range and quality of state elites’ own political anxieties. I remember how surprised I was when I first discovered that male state officials (including many of the state’s elected legislators) were so nervous about military wives. I had been studying militaries and wars for a number of years, and yet I was stunned when a British feminist historian, Myna Trustram, published her book revealing the Victorian era British officials’ confusions and debates about what to “do” about women married to their soldiers: were these women good for the imperial military because they lessened male soldiers’ indebtedness and their rates of venereal

disease? Or, on the other side of the male security elites' ledger, were women as wives likely to divide their male soldiers' loyalties, making them less likely to be deployed at a moment's notice, less likely to give their all for the sake of the state's goals?

In the years since this surprise, I have kept a sharp eye on both state male elites' efforts to control women in their roles as military wives. These efforts, I have belatedly found, shape each government's military basing designs (do they, or don't they, build family housing?), each government's deployment and leave policies (under what conditions is a male soldier allowed to return home?), each government's policies regarding who a male soldier may marry (are women from certain ethnic or racial groups deemed off limits? Are women who once have worked as prostitutes reliable enough to be accepted as soldiers' wives?), and each government's policies on marital divorce conditions (what sorts of alimony benefits is a wife due?).

None of these decisions turns out to be easy. All require policy makers to make fine-tuned calculations – about military recruitment, retention and morale, about military-civilian relations, about state-defined trustworthiness. Each of these calculations, each policy and its implementation is political. Every one helps shape the dynamics of military affairs and thus international politics.

Just how much causal weight each and all together will carry cannot, of course, be known until it is taken seriously and investigated. You don't study government policies towards (and confusions about) military marriages and women who become military wives because you know ahead of time that those debates, confusions and policy decisions will significantly matter causally. You pay attention precisely because so many other researchers have found that they do and so you, in pursuit of a reliable, useful analysis, had better include them in your own studies of militaries, wars and security politics. Maybe you will not find they are causally significant; perhaps you will.

Here is a second lesson I have learned: to make reliable sense of international politics, pay attention to women, women in all their diversity. You do not pay attention to women because they are inevitably powerful, admirable or heroic. You pay attention to all sorts of women in all sorts of circumstances because they are *analytically interesting*.

Confession time: I spent the first twelve years of my career as a political scientist never interviewing a single woman – not in Malaysia, not in Guyana, not in Britain, not in the Philippines, not in Germany, not in Norway, not anywhere. I knew a lot of women in each place. They were colleagues, spouses of fellow researchers, civil servants and neighbors. But not for a moment did I

think I would learn anything of formal analytical value from listening to them or from observing them. I did not imagine that – did not even ask myself whether – those women’s experiences or their ideas would reveal anything about either the causes or the consequences of national or international political life. It is the handwritten, now-yellowing notes from only male interviewees that now fill my older field research files.

This second lesson may be harder to absorb and put into analytical practice than it first appears. The first lesson calls on us to take seriously an arena of masculinized decision-making that we have routinely ignored. But according that arena new seriousness still means interviewing mostly men, since it is men who hold the majority of posts in most of the ministries and agencies making decisions shaping security, trade and diplomatic policy. Following this second lesson, however, would require us to take seriously women as political actors. Not just German Chancellor Angela Merkle or British Prime Minister Theresa May or Swedish Foreign Affairs Minister Margot Wallstrom or IMF Director Christine Lagarde. We would need to take seriously women as political actors in far less prominent positions: women as civil society activists, women as secretaries, women as migrant workers, women as wives of militia fighters, women as refugees, women as voters, women as local police officers, women in prostitution, women as journalists, or women as assembly line employees in globalized electronics factories and call centers.

Why might taking women seriously as potential subjects of political investigation prove difficult, even risky? In any patriarchal society or patriarchal profession – that is, in most of the societies and most of the professions where we are making our lives today – a person who is associated with women in any but a dominant position is likely to be seen by others (colleagues, superiors, even friends) as somehow a less serious person doing less prestigious work than a person associated chiefly with men.

That is the formula for sustaining patriarchy: make women and girls seem less analytically interesting, less likely to provide the stuff of intellectually admired thinking. This bias does not shape the actions only of male researchers. The pervasiveness of this patriarchal presumption can make many women social scientists eschew explicitly focusing on women as political research subjects for fear it may damage their careers.

However, what I have learned over the years is that by not taking women seriously, I have under-estimated what it has taken to win elections, sustain social movements (progressive and authoritarian), conduct wars, sustain post-conflict peace and build stable states. By not making women interviewees, by not paying close attention to where women are in any political setting, by not

tracking diverse women's sung and unsung actions over time, I have been caught analytically flat-footed.

Three brief examples: If one had not taken seriously Nicaraguan women as political actors, actors who had become increasingly disillusioned with the sexist attitudes of the Sandinista movement's male leadership, one might very well have been caught by surprise when in the 1980s the Sandinista movement split apart shortly after it had successfully driven the authoritarian Somosa regime from power.

A second example: If one had not been closely monitoring the changes in ideas about citizenship among the thousands of South Korean women sneaker factory workers in the 1980s, who, motivated by their new political consciousness, came out in droves to support the anti-military, pro-democracy movement of the mid-1980s, one might have been puzzled when Nike and so many other multi-national sneaker companies moved their factories from South Korea to Indonesia in the early 1990s.

A third example: If one had been tracking Egypt's authoritarian Mubarak regime but dismissed the burgeoning 1990s-2000s women's civil society organizing as not worth one's attention, one might have had a hard time explaining why, in 2011 such a high proportion of anti-Mubarak protestors who filled Tahrir Square protest were women.

The third lesson I have learned takes the form of a caveat: it is not enough to take seriously "women" as some generalizable, undifferentiated category of actors. Women are, as are men, diverse. One needs to refine one's analytical tools so that one crafts one's research questions to make visible any potential differences in attitudes, beliefs or actions by ethnicity, race, class, region, religiosity, ideology or familial role. To take into account the possibility that any one of these variables matters does not mean, however, that there are not instances in which gender trumps almost all other factors. For instance, in investigating the international politics of sexual assault "women" is likely (not inevitably; one must stay curious) to be a broadly salient category – as is, for quite different reasons, "men." So too are women and men likely to be germane categories in investigations of international politics of population control, the international politics of reproductive rights and the international politics of sex trafficking.

Thus, one asks: which women were most likely to have gone to the Tahrir Square protests in 2011? Likewise, one inquires: did the working class women sneaker (and electronics) factory workers who joined the 1980s pro-democracy movement in South Korea find it hard to ally with middle class university

students women South Korea? And what about the Sandinista women who broke off from the party to form an autonomous women's movement? Motivated by their progressive ideological beliefs, did these former Sandinista women activists take conscious steps not to let their move bolster Nicaraguan conservatives?

Among those who have thought "Gender and International Relations" was not for them, there has floated about a misunderstanding that "gender" is merely a code word for "women." Breaking through this misunderstanding takes the form of the fourth lesson I have gradually absorbed: Take seriously in investigations all the workings of ideas about masculinity and about femininity.

Gender encompasses all the meanings assigned to being male or being female - or being not quite either. Yet meanings and biology are not coterminous. Thus a particular man - or an entire category of men - can be portrayed by some commentators as being not merely unmanly, but as being feminine. Similarly, a particular woman - or an entire category of women - can be portrayed as not merely unfeminine, but as being "mannish."

Meanings are political. They - and their crafters and their wielders - accord value; they thus generate implications. The international conscientious objectors movement, for instance, has had to contend with gender politics precisely because so many of their militarized opponents have tried to discredit the supporters of this mainly-male anti-conscription movement by painting them as feminine. In a patriarchal society, any man or group of men who is successfully portrayed as feminine will lose public status and credibility. In international political rivalries, it is not uncommon for one state's male elite to attempt to portray their opponents as unmanly, thus presumably weak and cowardly. In today's world, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump are only the most blatant players of this political gender game. Others play the gender game with far more subtlety.

The politics of masculinization are the politics of turning some role, some occupation, some post, into one that is imagined to be effectively performed only by people who have unquestioned masculine credentials: rational citizens; state-recognized heads of households; civilian military strategists; intelligence agency directors; low ranking state infantry soldiers; armed insurgency leaders; ministers of defense; international bankers; finance ministers; senior prosecutors; UN Secretaries General.

The transnational suffragist movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries won in so many countries precisely by challenging the widely held belief that only men were equipped with the suitable rationality to cast votes in

public elections. Likewise, it took a transnational feminist campaign in the 1990s to persuade the masculinized officials of the World Bank to stop assuming that a farmer was automatically male (as in “farmers and their wives”). Today, however, French president Emmanuel Macron’s appointment of a second woman as his Minister of Defense was notable, but has not made a lasting dent in that French post’s entrenched masculinization: she resigned after less than a month in office. It is not clear yet whether Christine Lagarde’s tenure as IMF Director is actually rolling back the masculinization of that influential post.

Feminization as a tool of male-on-male political rivalry only works in a political culture where things and people who are feminine are widely disparaged. *Feminization can be successfully weaponized only where patriarchy prevails.* Consequently, a researcher who finds that feminization of one political contestant by another contestant has indeed lessened the target’s political influence is revealing a significant level of patriarchy extant in that local, national or international setting.

Anything can be masculinized. Anything can be feminized. Both are political processes. Thus both have to be watched over time. Evidence of either process may be uncovered in formal criteria, public statements and legal judgments. Nevertheless, both masculinizing and feminizing processes often occur with lasting effects in off-the-record, informal interactions. No one includes in a committee’s minutes who rolled their eyes when a woman made a comment. No one inserts into the historical record who took whom to a strip club as an exercise in agency employee bonding.

Thus to research the political workings of masculinization and feminization one not only has to exercise patience and stay attentive over time; one also has to look for evidence in the harder to observe nooks and crannies of political life.

Finally, there is a fifth lesson I have had to learn in order to conduct useful gender-curious research into international politics: if I ignore women as political actors and I overlook all the complex workings of both femininities and masculinities, I will certainly *underestimate the varieties of and amounts of power wielded in any political arena.*

In many ways, this lesson is a culmination of the first four lessons. By taking seriously and thus investigating the lives and ideas of women (including their relations with men and with the state) and paying close attention to who crafts and who wields ideas about manliness and womanhood, I am much more likely to generate analyses that shed light on all the sorts of power that are at work in international trade, international security, and international

negotiations. I will begin to have a clearer sense of who is made anxious by what and by whom. I will have a fuller understanding of who tries to control the lives of whom – and how and for what ends.

Why does current globalized neo-liberal trade depend on making so many women's labor "cheap"? When do any particular national security elites decide that recruiting certain women into their armed forces enhances state security? Why have so many government policy-makers invested so much currency in trying to control the international politics of marriage? Under what conditions do male officials (at many levels) deliberately craft their words and actions so that rival male decision makers will think they are "manly"?

The questions go on. Each is a launch pad for gender-curious research. Each is researchable. The approaches and the tools one will need to conduct gender-aware research are not necessarily those methods commonly taught in International Relations and Political Science graduate programs. To get up to speed, therefore, one will need to read carefully the methodology sections of feminist studies, not only in Gender and Politics and in Gender and International Relations, but also in works by feminist anthropologists, economists, historians, and sociologists.

We have so much more to learn about the myriad gender dynamics to make us all smarter about what shapes international politics. There are so many ways to contribute. It is not too late to get on board.

## NOTES

### **Among my own early, *non*-gender-curious works:**

Enloe, Cynthia (1973), *Ethnic Politics and Political Development* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company).

\_\_\_\_\_(1980), *Ethnic Soldiers* (London: Penguin Books).

### **Among my recent gender-curious works (each with extensive bibliographies):**

Enloe, Cynthia (2013), *Seriously: Investigating Crises and Crashes as If Women Mattered* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

\_\_\_\_\_(2014), *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Up-dated 2nd ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press).

\_\_\_\_\_(2016), *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Updated new ed.) (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield).

\_\_\_\_\_(2018, October), *The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging the Persistence of Patriarchy* (Forthcoming) (London: Myriad Editions; Berkeley: University of California Press).