

“A Conversation with Prof. Dr. Cynthia Enloe: Feminist Foreign Policy in the Post-COVID 19 World”

By Zuhale Yeşilyurt Gündüz

2020 revealed that we simply cannot continue life, politics, international relations, and business as usual. While living within COVID-19 times, we have the honor to have a conversation with highly distinguished feminist theorist and writer Prof. Dr. Cynthia Enloe, one of the most important founders of Feminist International Relations Theory and respected for her work on gender and militarism.

Zuhale Yeşilyurt Gündüz: Instead of the realistic, limited and limiting image of “chess board” for foreign policy, you prefer to use the metaphor of a “*complicated crowded dance floor*” where some dance hip hop and others waltzes while bands play various music. Then there are those “*who aren’t allowed to dance, who are supposed to be grateful that they’re even allowed in to watch the dancers.*” And finally, there are those “*who cleaned the ballroom before and after the dance but who are left outside in the cold or in the sweltering heat.*”¹ This metaphor indeed catches the world as it is and foreign policy in a much more profound and thoughtful way.

Cynthia Enloe: Zuhale, you’re right. I do think that many mainstream analysts who identify themselves as “Realists” are actually pretty *unrealistic*. They portray so simplistically the myriad interactions, relationships, aspirations, confusions, worries and multiple decision-makers that comprise the world of “foreign policy.” It’s as if these conventional “Realists” can’t cope with messiness. (...) they tell us that “Russia” does this, “Turkey” aspires to that, the “US” is afraid of this, and “Germany” is wary of that. Alternatively, they explain to us - we who, presumably, cannot digest complexity - that “Modi’s” goal is this, “Xi” resists that, “Macron’s” aim is something else.

One of the consequences of this unrealistic over-simplification is a deepening of both these commentators’ and their listeners’ (our!) presumptions about the patriarchal character of governments’ interactions with each other. (...) They offer us a portrayal of a world in which a sort of narrowly constrained rational self-interest is the driving force.

Generations of feminist thinkers have challenged the political privileging of the iconic Rational Man. Today many of us are learning anew about the histories of women’s suffrage campaigns in dozens of countries, and we can see that the presumed masculinization of the rational actor and the accompanying rationalization of statist masculinity were twinned myths that our suffragist predecessors had to dismantle. But the patriarchal double fantasy – that the state is the embodiment of men’s rationality, and that, in its own detached sphere, the home is the embodiment of women’s emotionality – keeps getting updated. The “Realists” among our academic and journalistic foreign policy commentators, I’m afraid, are doing their part to prop up these pillars of patriarchy. It’s one of the reasons that so many women today are calling out the arrogance of the “mansplainer.”

¹ <https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/interviews/2018/3/8/cynthia-enloe>

By questioning their frequent reliance on presumed masculinized state rational self-interest, I'm *not* saying that feminists see no rational actors on the crowded foreign policy dance floor. *Nor* am I saying that information, clear-sightedness and careful calculations play no part in foreign policy-making. Rather, I'm suggesting, first, that virtually no state on the planet today is a cohesively monolithic actor. "Russia" does not do anything! "Turkey" does not do anything! Usually insider men (and those persevering women who've squeezed through the statist cracks) claim to speak and act on behalf of all Russian women and men or all Turkish women and men – whether they have been fairly elected to act as their representatives or not - in their attempts to wield Russian and Turkish state resources for purposes they devise.

Second, together with other feminist investigators, I'm suggesting that, along with rigorously assessed information and finely tuned calculations of common interest, there are anxieties, sentiments, pride, false analogies, prejudices, idealism, fears, desires and racially infected misogyny also at work in any state's foreign policy process. How many of these and in what forms they may be at work in the devising of any particular state's nuclear policies, trade strategies, territorial annexations, alliance-building, weapons sales and imports or humanitarian assistance are questions worthy of gender-aware investigation.

What we've learned from scores of biographies, memoirs, archival digs and international tribunal testimonies is that among those dynamics are many elite actors' worries about appearing insufficiently "manly," together with their efforts to diminish other men by "feminizing" them. In any patriarchal system, feminization is weaponized.

ZYG: And it is exactly this patriarchy, this "manliness", this "masculinity" that has brought one violent conflict, tragedy, and war after the other. How do you define "feminist foreign policy"?

CE: Sweden's Margot Wallstrom most famously called her objective as foreign minister to craft a "feminist foreign policy." Wallstrom defined a feminist foreign policy as one in which a state in its international relationships – not only with other states, but with the full range of international and local actors – 1) prioritizes support for women's rights, 2) acts according to internationally recognized human rights principles, 3) pursues genuine human security (as versus merely militarized state security), and 4) devotes its state overseas resources deployed to develop gender-equitable political economies.

(...)

Feminist foreign policy is an expansive concept and objective. Anyone who imagines that feminist goals are merely crafted to pursue the interests of only certain sorts of women should pause here and reread that list of objectives and criteria. (...)

The second thing to underscore is that laying out these broad goals and criteria for crafting and implementing any state's feminist foreign policy does not end discussion, reflection, and intense debate. It's for that very reason, that so many young scholars and public policy practitioners today are deeply engaged in figuring out what creating, operationalizing and

monitoring – all three - a feminist foreign policy would actually entail. What skills and data collecting methods, for example, should universities now be teaching so that there are future researchers, field workers and public officials in the pipeline who will be equipped to enact and assess feminist foreign policy efforts?

To shape and enact a feminist foreign policy there are questions to be tussled with regarding what sorts of awareness and capacities civil society group activists, members of parliament, Environment Ministry scientists, overseas development agencies, military planners, career foreign service officers and, of course, economists in the Finance Ministry each now should be acquiring. Many women and men in many organizations that shape foreign policy today are woefully under-skilled in gender analysis.

Even at this current early stage in developing our ideas about the contours and implications of a feminist foreign policy, we know that it can't just – as so often happens when feminist mandates are tokenized by patriarchy's slick enablers – be passed off to the government's underfunded, under-staffed Ministry of Women's Affairs.

Feminist foreign policy (...) is an ambitiously complex political goal. It is grounded in knowledge gained from taking seriously the complex lives of diverse women, knowledge acquired by shoving aside lazy stereotypes and, instead, doing the hard work of observing and listening to diverse women, especially to those women whose experiences and ideas rarely make it into the "Realists" featured commentaries – Turkish feminists joining with feminists in Poland, Hungary and twelve other countries to prevent right-wing governments from pulling out of the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention; Filipina women migrating to work as domestic workers organizing transnationally to demand that the ILO recognize their labor rights; women pushing back against the chronic harassment by male supervisors as they stitch blue jeans in Lesotho's export factories; Libyan peace activist women negotiating with local male militia fighters in order to dismantle check points.

ZYG: What are your expectations for the possibility of a feminist foreign policy in the United States of America in the new era of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris?

Well, first, maybe we should put the new Biden/Harris administration in gender context. The Obama/Clinton foreign policy (2008-2012) was not a feminist foreign policy, but it did sow some seeds for it. It supported women's reproductive rights by lifting the so-called "global gag rule" which was first enacted by the Reagan administration. This rule prohibited US foreign aid being given to health clinics in any country which even indirectly supported women's full control over their own reproductive choices. Furthermore, Hillary Clinton made a condition of her taking on the Secretary of State job in the Obama administration that the Defense Department's domination of US foreign policy making be rolled back, a domination which had occurred during the George W. Bush Administration. The Defense Department (along with perhaps the Treasury Department) is the most masculinized federal cabinet-level department. Clinton's explicit push back against the Pentagon's expansive foreign policy influence is, I think, one of the unsung

achievements of her tenure as Secretary of State. Clinton also made feminist commitments integral to the operations of the US State Department, creating a formal office for monitoring and supporting women's rights globally. On her extensive international travels, Clinton made a point of meeting with local women's groups, not for mere photo ops, but in order to become better informed about local conditions (...).

The Trump administration, being electorally indebted to anti-abortion evangelical conservative voters, quickly re-imposed the "global gag rule." Thus for four years it deprived scores of women's health clinics in poor countries of desperately needed aid. It also withdrew the US from UNESCO, the UN agency that has done so much to foster girls' education, and from the WHO, which conducts valuable assessments of, and offers guidance to governments for promoting women's health. In its determination to pull out American troops from Afghanistan as quickly as possible, the Trump administration orchestrated closed-door peace negotiations with the Taliban that included no advocates for Afghan women on either side of the table. Furthermore, it prioritized the US government's relationships with some of today's most patriarchal regimes – those of Hungary, Turkey, Russia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Of course, the list of this administration's sexist and misogynist foreign policies is much longer. So I'll be eager to read the findings of graduate students who right now are using their feminist analytical skills to investigate the Trump administration's foreign policies.

(...)

A couple of things I would expect to happen in the early months of the Biden/Harris administration. First, President Biden will sign an executive order to lift the "global gag rule," allowing US aid once again to reach the maximum number of women's health clinics in developing countries. Secondly, the US government will rejoin UNESCO and WHO, both of which depend for their budgets disproportionately on US government donations. Third, the Biden nominee for US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, will draw on her years of experience as a career foreign service officer serving in Nigeria, Liberia and other sub-Saharan posts to rebuild US relationships not only with the UN, but with fellow delegates from the Global South. That, in itself, does not guarantee feminist-informed policies, but it should be helpful.

Perhaps, too, in taking up the US seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield, who has served in warzones and post-war societies, will treat the groundbreaking UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security as the potentially paradigm-shifting commitment it was meant to be. Passed in 2000, "1325" mandated that women's experiences of armed conflict to taken seriously and that authentic women's civil society representatives be "at the table" to have a voice in any peace negotiations. Over the past twenty years, despite determined pressure by alert transnational feminists, "1325" has been steadily shrunken in practice to make it "digestible" to both member states and UN agencies. That shrinkage needs to be reversed.

I also will be watching the Biden administration's foreign policy actions on violence against women more generally. And here I would expect Vice President Kamala Harris to play a key role. As San Francisco District Attorney, as California Attorney General, as well as during her four years as a US Senator (the only Black woman in the Senate; after January, 2021, there will be no Black women among the 100 members of the US Senate), Harris placed preventing and prosecuting violence against women – rape, domestic violence, sex trafficking – high on her agenda.

Thanks to thirty years of organized campaigning by transnational feminists such as Indai Sajor, Lepa Mladjanovic, Rhonda Copelon, Roxanna Carrillo, Charlotte Bunch and Madeleine Rees, all forms of violence against women have become an international political issue. Thus any government's (...) seriousness in pursuing feminist objectives in its foreign policies needs to be judged in part by assessing how effectively that government engages in prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.

Unfortunately, I don't hold out much hope for the Biden/Harris administration ratifying four of the current international treaties campaigned for by transnational feminist activists and designed in part to reduce violence against women and to hold accountable those who perpetrate the misogynist violations: CEDAW, the ICC Rome Statute, the Arms Trade Treaty, and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Under the US Constitution, no international treaty can be ratified (as versus merely signed) without two-thirds of the Senate giving its consent. Given most Republican senators' obsession with US state sovereignty, achieving that support in the next four years seems extremely unlikely.

Of course, during the next four years we all will have to play close attention to the militarization of US foreign policy. Feminists from countries as disparate as Bosnia, South Korea, Japan, Brazil, the US and Algeria have taught us that in any country intensifying militarization virtually always privileges particular forms of masculinity in that country's civic and cultural life. Neither President Biden nor Vice President Harris has shown him/herself to be exceptionally militarized. But the entire American political culture is so steeped in militarized beliefs and values that I think it is unlikely that militarism will dramatically recede during this administration.

What we, however, can realistically hope for – and press for – is more reliance on civilian diplomacy than on fire power in the conduct of US international affairs, less deployment of militarized forces along the US/Mexican border, and, most of all, an expanded understanding of "national security" that prioritizes (in money and official attention) not just militarized security, but environmental protection, public education, economic equality and public health.

Biden's new environment policy team is especially impressive, with several of its members explicitly committed to environmental justice. Keep your eyes on Deb Haaland, the first Native American to head the huge Department of Interior. There has been so much serious research done in recent years on the gendered dynamics driving climate change, that, to be effective, any

US climate change policy coming out of this administration will need to be informed by an intersectional feminist-informed gender analysis.²

² For the only UN-sponsored world-wide feminist-informed analysis of the gendered causes and consequences of environmental degradation, see Joni Seager, et al., *Global Gender and Environment Outlook*, Nairobi, United Nations Environment Program, 2016: <https://www.unenvironment.org/resources/report/global-gender-and-environment-outlook-ggeo>