

## **COVID-19, GENDER AND MILITARISM:**

### **AN INTERVIEW WITH CYNTHIA ENLOE**

*Interviewed by Zeynep Kutluata*

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Although there were certain differences in terms of policies followed by various countries during the pandemic, this process is commonly defined as “war” against the coronavirus. The changes that are created by the pandemic on daily life and how these changes influence gender relations have been discussed and analyzed in various contexts. The influence of militarized discourses on gender relations and gender-based power relations also became one of the discussion topics. In this interview, we focus on how “war” discourse came to function in the pandemic and how it affects current gender politics with Cynthia Enloe, a prominent feminist scholar known for her studies on the feminist analysis of militarized processes.

#### **Covid-19, Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Militarizm Üzerine Cynthia Enloe ile Söyleşi**

Pandemi sürecinde virüsün yayılmasını önlemek amacıyla alınan önlemler ülkeden ülkeye farklılık göstermekle birlikte bu süreç genel olarak koronavirüse karşı yürütülen bir “savaş” olarak tanımlanıyor. Pandeminin gündelik hayatta yarattığı değişikliklerin cinsiyet ilişkileri üzerindeki etkisi çeşitli bağlamlarda gündeme geldi, analiz edildi. Bunun yanı sıra, militer söylemlerin cinsiyet ilişkilerine, cinsiyete dayalı iktidar ağlarına dönük etkisi de pandemi sürecinde yeniden tartışılmaya başlandı. Bu söyleşide militer süreçlerin feminist analizine odaklanan çalışmalarına alanın önde gelen isimlerinden feminist akademisyen Cynthia Enloe ile “savaş” söyleminin pandemi döneminde nasıl bir işlev gördüğünü ve bu söylemin günümüz cinsiyet politikalarına etkisini ele alıyoruz.

**Measures against COVID-19 varied by country worldwide; however, most of the Global North applied lock-down policies at various levels between March and May. This initial period was described widely as a “war against coronavirus.” In some cases, leaders appeared in public with the military officials, and in some instances, health workers themselves were represented as soldiers fighting in the front. Recently, Russia declared that it succeeded in developing a vaccine for Covid-19. This declaration was made not by a scientific institution, not by the Ministry of Health, but by the Ministry of Defense. In your writings and interviews, you highlight how this discourse of war serves to manipulate facts by asking people to**

**unite against “a common enemy.” Could you please elaborate more on this current war discourse? What is the function of war discourse as a governmental tool during a pandemic crisis? How does this discourse of war against a virus is similar to/or different from the “usual” war discourses with which we are familiar?**

Zeynep, you're so right. Government officials and other people attracted to militaristic values are prone to frame every societal challenge as a “war.” They seem to imagine that their citizens will be galvanized by the war analogy more than they will be by, say, a public wellbeing analogy. Even in those countries that have had mainly horrific experiences of war, the war analogy can have appeal. The common militarized assumption is that citizens are willing to work together and to put common goals ahead of personal goals if they can be convinced of two things – that they are facing a common human enemy and that this enemy poses a dire threat to their own security.

A public health threat, however, is not posed by a human enemy. It is posed by a complex natural phenomenon: poisoned air, unclean water, tainted food. Today that threat is the new, not yet fully understood, coronavirus. It is a virus that is unusually infectious, a virus that has shown the capacity to spread rapidly across continents and oceans.

Resorting to a war analogy is deeply flawed, therefore, for several reasons. First, it fosters nationalist and racist divisions at a time when what is needed is close cooperation across both state and cultural boundaries. Second, the war analogy presumes that in violent weaponry lies the solution, when, in fact, protection from the coronavirus calls for investing in prolonged, careful scientific study and for developing multi-faceted public trust. Third, imagining that insuring sustainable public health is like going to war privileges a narrow version of masculinity at the very moment when commonly feminized sectors of society – nursing, elder care, child care, service jobs – need to be materially and politically recognized and rewarded.

I think that the continued appeal of the war analogy reflects the militarization of our imaginations. We can use this pandemic era to *de*-militarize our minds. We can learn to find public health professions more exciting than soldiering. We can become emotionally engaged in the dramas of compassionate care. We can craft new gender-curious investigatory skills that will better reveal the interconnections between healthy societies and social justice. War stories can lose their allure.

**Although countries like Germany, France, Spain or Italy adopted lock-down policies during the first three months of the corona period, there were also countries like the USA, Russia, Turkey which adopted quite limited lock-down policies. Especially in the USA, there are also those both among the public and among the state officials who oppose lock-down policies, arguing that these lock-down measures (even**

**wearing masks) are against people's freedom. In a way, from their perspective, these measures could be considered as militarist measures. How would you elaborate on this? Is there any dilemma in demanding measures against the spread of coronavirus and being against militarist policies?**

All sorts of governments make rules to which their citizens must abide. Genuinely democratic, elected and accountable government officials craft rules and regulations which are designed with in-input from representatives of a cross-section of the citizenry and which have as their goal the furtherance of the ordinary people's best interests (that is, not just the furtherance of the interests of the state elite and not just the interests of some self-interested privileged group: oil executives, real estate developers or husbands).

The public health guidelines and mandates most commonly issued during this coronavirus pandemic have been masking, extra cleaning and social distancing. These rules may be new to many people, but they are not militarized. Think of all the government-issued regulations that are designed to protect the general public's safety and wellbeing: the legal mandate for car drivers to wear seat belts; the requirement for residences to be equipped with smoke detectors; the prohibition against spitting in public places. You can probably list a dozen other legally enforced regulations that are intended by representative governments to enhance public safety and health.

It is true, as you suggest, that people in a number of countries have resisted the newest public health requirements, claiming that they are violations of their personal freedom. Maybe masking has been especially hard for some people to accept because it does require such a physically limiting act, covering one's nose and mouth.

A militarized public regulation is one that does several things, I think. First, it enhances the state's capacity to wield violence. Second, it privileges a particular sort of masculinity to the detriment of other forms of gender expression. Third, a militarized regulation deepens widespread hostility toward a certain human enemy, nurturing a public culture of "we versus them."

Governments that have called for citizens to adopt partial facial masking in order to respond to an infectious disease are doing none of these things. The public masking requirement does quite the opposite of all three. One of the fascinating aspects of the current masking debate is some men's (not all men's) apparent resistance to donning a mask out of their fear that by doing so they will jeopardize their own manliness. This is worth a gender investigation.

**As you mention in your previous interviews, once again, we see that in a time of crisis, we depend on those fields of work that would not be described as "masculine" work, the work that is done mostly by women without getting paid. Again, we witness**

**that workers of those less paid jobs (occupied mostly by ethnic and racial minorities), such as laborers, agricultural workers, people working in groceries, in cargo companies, municipality workers, health workers, are indispensable for societies' survival. In fact, pandemic conditions necessitate solidarity and just division of labor among the members of societies. However, we witness an increase in racism, classism, sexism, homophobia globally. Especially in some countries where there were already such inclinations, there are systemic attacks on the rights of women and LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, at the moment, the Turkish government considers withdrawing from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and LGBTQ+ individuals, better known as the Istanbul Convention. Also, as far as we know, in the US, reproductive rights are under attack. How can we analyze this contradiction from a gender perspective?**

Yes, contradictions are always feminists' cup of tea! We like to uncover contradictions and then untangle them in order to shine lights on their causes and their consequences.

Feminist historians have shown us that in previous eras it is has been precisely when women – especially those women pushed to society's margins – have realized their own value, the worth of their ideas and their labor and, fueled by that realization, start to take new collective action, that those with the largest stake in the perpetuation of privileged racialized masculinity move to reinforce patriarchy's structures. We've seen this in the histories of textile and garment workers organizing. We've seen this in the histories of every cross-class women's suffrage campaign. We've watched this happen wherever diverse women have organized to gain reproductive rights and to stand up to domestic violence and sexual harassment.

So when I see the current Turkish regime take steps – in the middle of this pandemic - to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, a treaty designed to roll back violence against women, I'm dismayed; but I'm not really surprised. Likewise, when I see the Orhan regime in Hungary not only move to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, but to ban academic courses in Women's Studies, I'm alarmed; but I'm not surprised. When I see the Modi regime in India direct police violence against the cross-religion alliance of women protesting his restrictive citizenship law, I'm appalled; but I'm not startled.

In 2020, there is more innovative women's political organizing, local, national and transnational, than ever before in human history. The anti-harassment #MeToo movement has become global in ways that are creatively adaptive to very different local conditions. The voices of the thousands of

Polish women who have taken to the streets of Warsaw to defend their reproductive rights are reverberating in Brussels. Women peace activists have woven vibrant networks that connect women in the warzones of the Congo, Sudan, Syria, Mali, Columbia, and Myanmar not only to each other, but to policymakers in the corridors of the United Nations. Brazilian, Sri Lankan, Mexican and Filipina women together have created a new international campaign to demand labor rights for domestic workers.

Now, as feminists, we are never sanguine. We know that these and other women's movements have long struggles ahead of them. Nonetheless, their very existence, their outspokenness and their cross-boundary co-ordination obviously have made the patriarchy nervous. When patriarchy's beneficiaries get nervous, they start talking ever more insistently about "the sanctity of the family," "the treasures of tradition," and the "beauties of femininity."

Those old saws, though, are harder to market today. In the middle of this historic pandemic, women of all political persuasions can see with their own eyes the extra unpaid work that women are doing inside of households, the risks that low-paid women are taking on the job to sustain entire communities, and the dangers so many women face when isolated in their homes with abusive male partners.

Just because patriarchal political officials are reacting out of nervousness does not mean they actually will get the reinforced patriarchy they so desire. Our research has shown repeatedly that even oppressed women are not push-overs. Every day their actions are widening the already existing cracks in patriarchy.

**Yes, exactly, in different periods of history, those cracks widened, and we and our previous generations witnessed this. It is highly probable that the period we are living in is one of those historical moments. Thank you very much for sharing your valuable comments with us.**