

## Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics

By Cynthia Enloe

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Some scholars claim that the field of international relations is still remaining as a male-dominated field. As a result, there is little attention given to women's roles in creating international politics. In Cynthia Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (1989), the author, a professor at Clark University, asks crucial questions: "where are the women?"<sup>1</sup> and how international politics shapes and manipulates ideas about femininity? There are two main reasons that explain how Enloe arrived at where she got to thinking about international relations. Firstly, her students have an impact on her, as they bring both assumptions and puzzles that are new to her and she learns from their own investigations.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, Hannah Arendt inspired her. Enloe said, in one of her interviews, that listening to Arendt was "intellectually exciting."<sup>3</sup> Hence, through a feminist perspective, Enloe uncovers both masculinity as well as femininity dichotomies that are concealed by mainstream international relations. The author argues that woman's political and socioeconomic lives, knowledge and experiences of trade, travel, war, diplomacy, and factory work shape international politics. In this paper, I will focus on how women play a crucial role in shaping international politics in the economic, tourism and diplomacy sectors. I will also shed light on how gender and politics go hand in hand.

To begin with, in Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, she uses primary sources such as interviews, biographical and autobiographical literature, and secondary sources such as news media, government and historical documents. She also relies on a diverse variety of examples and evidence in order to support her arguments. The analyses of her arguments are developed via a series of chapters on sex and tourism, Carmen Miranda, a Brazilian singer, women textile workers, women on military base, banana plantations, diplomatic wives, migrant domestic workers, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and international bankers.

The title of her book makes the reader question, how are bananas, beaches and bases related, especially to international politics? One may argue that although, banana is a fruit and the beach is a place, both can be interconnected in a complex way and lead to the same consequence. In the same vein, Enloe explains how class, gender and ethnicity are interrelated in women's lives and particularly in international politics. Therefore, this makes us view the world in a different way. Enloe contributes to the field of international politics through the linkage of these aspects in both a provoking and innovative interpretation of contemporary construction of gender. She offers a critical departure from top-down approach, government and international organizations, and conventional international relations academic articles and books that discuss rivalry between the superpowers, economic and political tensions between the developed and the underdeveloped countries and the nuclear arms race. One should bear in mind that it is not that "we abandon our curiosity about arms dealers, presidents' men and

<sup>1</sup> Enloe, Cynthia H. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Berkeley: U of California, p. xii.1989. Print.

<sup>2</sup> "Theory Talks.": *Theory Talk #48: Cynthia Enloe*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

concepts such as ‘covert operations.’<sup>4</sup> This means that without the incorporation of women’s experiences, it will not be sufficient to deeply grasp how the international system came into being and how it really works.

Through a feminist lens, Enloe sheds light on the importance of the everyday political as well as socioeconomic lives of women in various countries that are shaped by class, ethnicity and gender. Suggesting that the “ world is something that has been made, therefore, it can be remade”,<sup>5</sup> Enloe highlights the areas that are being affected by international feminist organizing such as population politics, military alliances, prostitution and development assistance.<sup>6</sup> The author argues that the main actors who grease the wheels of world politics are U.S military wives<sup>7</sup>, Sri-Lankan domestic workers,<sup>8</sup> the woman tourist,<sup>9</sup> the Jamaican chambermaid,<sup>10</sup> and British, Canadian and Swedish diplomatic wives.<sup>11</sup> However, these international political actors are neither visible nor heard. For instance, one may claim that a diplomat’s wife is an ambiguous figure since her diplomatic works are expected, however, not respected. For example, both, the fate of a nation and a diplomat’s possession of power depend on the diplomat’s wife voluntary skills. She is the one who carries on relations with her husband’s diplomat counterparts and maintains trust between them in the contemporary antagonistic world. Hence, it is woman’s responsibility to create stable military as well as diplomatic communities. Unfortunately, she is only seen as the wife of a diplomat. In fact, there is still much more work to be done in the field of international relations in order to highlight the role of women in international politics. Woman’s anonymous life goes unpaid, unheard and unrewarded. This example clearly shows that the field of

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<sup>4</sup> Enloe, Cynthia H. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Berkeley: U of California, p.11.1989. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.17

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.18

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.65

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.185

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 2

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.98

international relations relies heavily on a structure of gendered relations.

The author creatively and convincingly builds on the ideas that the personal is political and enlarges on the feminist axiom by demonstrating that the international is political. The author challenges the assumptions that the international relations field is exclusively a “man’s club” by stating that “international politics as a whole has required women to behave in certain ways.”<sup>12</sup> This means that state interactions, global economic forces, conduct of both foreign affairs and international commerce play a role in shaping the behavior daily lives of women and our understanding of international relationships. Thus, gender and politics are related in numerous ways. For instance, the prosperity of international sex and tourist trade could not have been possible without the use of women as flight attendants and chambermaids. She illustrates her argument by using the case study of the development of the international market for bananas. A banana has a gendered history and politics of gender. The United Fruit executives use the images of Carmen Miranda as a logo for the importation of their banana.<sup>13</sup> These executives were American men who want to construct a better relationship between the multinational plantation company and American housewives. The logo of the beautiful Miranda on the banana gave American wives a sense of confidence in the product. One may argue that Miranda’s fruited headgear and insinuating eyes are interconnected with not only the promotion of banana sales but also American influence and new imperialism in terms of reshaping international relations, particularly between the US and Latin America. Nevertheless, women’s work is only visible in prostitution or packing rather than the banana economy.

Other examples are the gendered tourism and economic sectors. Tourism is not about sightseeing, beaches and sun but rather about gender. Women perform sex work in various places such as beaches, hotels and cruise-ships. Therefore, women became as important to tourism

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 198

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.2

sector as oxygen is to men. According to the author, tourism “is not discussed as seriously by conventional political commentators as oil or weaponry may tell us more about the ideological construction of ‘seriousness’ than about the politics of tourism.”<sup>14</sup> There are also some governments that encourage the legalization of their labor forces through promoting the spread of the low paying labor of women as well as sweatshops.<sup>15</sup> The author, using an insightful analysis of the textile industry, reminds us those Philippine women who work abroad as domestic servants send “home between \$60 and \$100 million in foreign exchange each year, outstripping the contributions made by either sugar or minerals.”<sup>16</sup> Enloe gives special attention to women’s labor in globalized factories, how war-waging policies of numerous governments abuse women’s emotional and physical labor. Moreover, she develops some key arguments such as the conditions under which these women work, their pain, and struggles and how they meet their deaths as a result of their owner’s abuses.

Class and ethnicity play a crucial role in shaping women behavior and their comprehension of international relations by either coping with or benefitting from the struggle between states.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, during the colonialism period, upper class, western women played a role in assisting diplomatic efforts and missionary activities. This, perhaps unintentionally, made women researchers from the Global North pay less attention on the interaction between women from developing countries and women from industrialized countries rather than on women from developing countries particularly those who are hostesses or factory workers. This example camouflages “the multiple relationships of women in industrialized countries [...] to international politics.”<sup>18</sup> This includes women in the informal and tourism sector in the developed countries. On the other hand, ethnicity was a tool that is used by transnational corporations in order to separate between workers

on plantations and factories in Central America, Africa, the Caribbean and Asia. They make differences among women based on their nationality, class and ethnicity. Sometimes, one may notice that there are fewer characteristics in common between urban textile works and peasant women from the same country than with textile workers from another country. In addition, women, including maids, wives, sweatshops workers, and prostitutes perform poorly paid labor not only for men but also for international organizations, militaries and multinational corporations.<sup>19</sup> This reveals that both the past, during colonialism, and the present, transnational corporations era, are colored by gendered conflicts.

Relying on examples from the Philippines, South Africa, Mexico, Nicaragua and elsewhere, Enloe manages to show the complexities of nationalist struggles against colonial rule through the use of diverse case studies. Thus, this gives her a great advantage for generalizability. One may claim that a sense of nation is developed with both new forms of indigenous sexism and patriarchal structures intact. Nationalist and armed struggles against colonialism open windows of opportunity for women’s chances for feminist liberalization. The author says, “militarization puts a premium on communal unity in the name of national survival, a priority which can silence women critical of patriarchal practices and attitudes; in so doing, nationalist militarization can privilege men.”<sup>20</sup>

Enloe manages to ask the right questions, however, did not provide us with answers. “Where are the women?” is a question that remains without answers. Her book has numerous strengths. She manages to focus on seven main arenas of gendered politics such as agriculture, textile, and military bases, diplomacy and women labor force in domestic service. Through a survey of both a common and uncommon threads, such as the contributions of diplomatic wives, tourism, class, national identities, race, ethnicity, war, politics, militarized culture and globalized economics, the author has broadened the field of international

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.40

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.188

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pp. 198-199

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.198

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.153

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Pp.198-199

relations by making the experiences of women's lives at the heart of the international politics analysis. Hence, she moves beyond an exclusively masculine focus and shows how this male world order could not survive without its gender structures. She avoids the characterization of women as a homogenous group who share the same positions, interests and desires regardless their background, experiences, race, class and ethnicity. Thus, Enloe does not perceive women as a single-whole and passive victims of a patriarchal international politics. She takes into account race, class and ethnic differences among women. Her documentation is inclusive; she relies on both Western and non-Western sources such as the experiences of women in Southeast Asia, Latin America, Middle East, Europe and North America. In contrast with past theories of the world political and economic system that focused on the lives and activities of men, Enloe shifts to a feminist perspective. She succeeds in raising crucial questions about our understanding of international relations by focusing on feminism and the interplay of gendered politics at both the national and the international levels. The author brought to light the active participation of diverse women in shaping and remaking their own worlds and the world. *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* is a major contribution to the field of international relations since it truly made "feminist sense of international politics."