
A Conversation with Cynthia Enloe on Curiosity, Confidence, and Feminist Questions

CYNTHIA ENLOE

FLETCHER FORUM: *As editors, we consciously strive to eradicate the passive voice for editorial purposes. Can you explain your own arguments for eliminating the use of passive voice, particularly in questions?*

CYNTHIA ENLOE: I think my main objection, and I have to work on it myself all the time, is that the passive voice hides the actor. So, when one says that “aid is being withheld from the Syrian opposition because of worries about the growing numbers of jihadist fighters amongst the opposition,” you, the reader, should ask “*who* is withholding that aid for that reason?” Is it particular elected or civil servant officials inside the British government? Is it the Qataris? Which Qataris? Is it the U.S. State Department? Which foreign policy establishment’s worries have won the internal argument about giving more aid to the anti-Assad opposition?

Cynthia Enloe is currently a Research Professor in the International Development, Community, and Environment Department at Clark University. She has published numerous books including *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (updated edition, June 2014), *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives*, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in The New Age of Empire*, and *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link*. In 2010, she published *Nimo’s War, Emma’s War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War*. Her newest book is *Seriously! Investigating Crashing and Crises as if Women Mattered*. She received her B.A. from Connecticut College and holds a M.A. and Ph.D. in political science from the University of California, Berkeley.

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Of course, oftentimes writers or researchers do not know who did what. That is okay; but then we need to use the active voice to admit that “it is not clear who withheld aid; we need to find out.” One should not use the active tense only when you know the answer; one can use the active tense to alert readers that they, the writer/speaker, as well as the readers, need to find out. The passive tense breeds not just incuriosity; the passive tense breeds unaccountability.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Can you describe what it means to ask a feminist question and how feminist questions provide insight beyond issues which disproportionately affect women?*

ENLOE: For me, asking a feminist question starts with taking women’s lives seriously. That means not assuming that if you know how men are experiencing something—for instance, trade policy, war, nationalism—you automatically know how women are experiencing it. It also means that if you make sweeping generalizations about how “the people” are experiencing something, you do not automatically know how women are experiencing it. In a lot of journalism, *even* very good journalism, often it is assumed that if you ask a lot of “men on the street”—for a journalist, this often means people in cafés, who overwhelmingly are men, or taxi drivers, who overwhelmingly are men, or people running shops in the markets, who overwhelmingly (though not entirely) are men—you are getting an accurate picture of how foreign policy, or war, or trade, or an economic crisis is playing out. It is a very common thing for both scholars and policy makers to do, but also for journalists to do, that is, to act as though interviewing men automatically gives you an insight into women’s lives.

If you seek to understand international politics, then it is crucial to

realize that policymakers do think a lot about women's lives—even though they won't admit it. Almost no policymakers, unless they are speaking to UN Women or at United Nations' follow-up conferences on women's rights, are willing to admit that they think a lot about women because they are so worried about their ability to control them. Policymakers are worried that women will not encourage their sons to join the military; they are worried that women will not operate economically either through paid work or unpaid work the way the government needs them to operate; they are worried that women will not encourage other family members to support certain nationalist causes. So government policymakers think about women, but they do not admit that they are thinking about women. And the only way that you can fully understand the way that any government is dependent on controlling women's actions and beliefs is to pay close attention to what officials actually do. So I have never imagined that paying attention to women's lives was simply about women's lives, although that matters a lot; it is also paying close attention to anyone who is trying to control women's lives.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *As you reflect on your career in academia, what have you seen change regarding the patriarchal nature of academic institutions? What still needs to change?*

ENLOE: I think almost all the changes that have come about that have rolled patriarchy back a bit have come about because of women's activism. There is a women's movement in every country, even if it has been banned or suppressed. Those movement's ideas ripple into the halls of universities and think tanks. That is something that is often overlooked by people in academia. We imagine that *we* cause our own change. In fact, we are not that smart, really. And it is thanks to our curiosities being influenced by the new questions posed by feminists outside academia that most of us have been moved to question why so many of the university presidents are men, or why international relations as a sub-field has been so male-dominated, or why our field's journal editors, until recently, have been overwhelmingly male. We have been pushed by social movements outside of academia to be more curious about our own institutions. It is poor analysis to imagine that

all causes originate internally. That means it is poor analysis to imagine that what happens inside of academia is caused by things inside of academia. Being aware of this wider causality has real repercussions; it means that if there has been any progressive change within academia, we have to take seriously local, national, and transnational women's movements, their intellectual influences, and their campaigning. But how many interna-

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tional relations (IR) courses, IR books, IR journal articles, or IR policy briefs, actually delve into how women's movements have had an impact on what the academic writers are writing about?

In fact, social movements are hardly taken seriously within the academic spheres of foreign policy, humanitarian aid, and development policy. Imagine if every course at Fletcher, or at another professional policy school, had at least two weeks

devoted to exploring this question: "How have women's movements in the countries we are considering (including the United States) had an impact on what we are studying?"

For example, think about how the crises in Syria and in the Ukraine are being discussed in most IR and political science courses right now. Which professors are encouraging students to seriously consider the politics of masculinization? That is, to analyze the step-by-step process by which any political relationship, concept, institution, or movement becomes dominated by, not just men, but also by ideas of certain kinds of manliness. In the cases of the current uprising in Syria of an anti-Assad opposition, and of the of the various pro-democracy forces in Ukraine, one would track over time—over weeks and months and years—whether women have been pushed aside, whether certain practices of masculinity have become politically ascendant—and, if so, how, and with what political consequences. My guess is that most people who have gone through the main policy schools could not answer any of those questions because they have not been provided with the analytical skills and the research tools to investigate any of those questions. The absence of these analytical skills, and the lack of investigatory tools, should make us all very nervous.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Many have recently pointed to the seeming silence of Western news outlets to the disappearance of more than 200 girls from northern*

Nigeria. What does the disappearance of these girls tell us about the Nigerian state and Boko Haram, and what does the relative silence on their disappearance tell us?

ENLOE: The first thing to consider is the many actors involved. There is the current Nigerian senior (masculinized) political leadership. The Nigerian government has oil wealth. It has a large army. Why have these state officials chosen—for the past five years—to turn their elite backs on the poorest people of the northern region, who have taken the brunt of the Boko Haram militias’ violence? We need also to be feminist in our curiosity about the managers of international media—publishers, producers, and editors. Why have they decided to accord belated coverage to this incident? Are these media decision makers motivated by a particular gendered horror script that they believe will appeal to a widespread audience, assuming that audience themselves to be attracted to a particular gendered script?

Then there are the foreign policy decision makers in London, Paris, New York, and Brussels. Are they only
being pushed to pay attention to the latest in the long series of Boko Haram’s acts of violence because they are being pushed by media and by readers’ and viewers’ outrage? Or are at least some of those foreign policy makers also motivated by the opportunities offered to gain more of a foothold in sub-Saharan Africa? We also need to pay serious attention to the Nigerian women who have become activists in pressuring their irresponsible masculinized political officialdom to act effectively to rescue the kidnapped girls. It was these Nigerian women who first created the Twitter slogan “#BringBackOurGirls.” It has now gone viral, and these Nigerian women have lost control of it. What do those Nigerian activist women think about that?

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We, of course, need to turn our gender-smart lens to the Boko Haram leadership, as well as to its rank-and-file membership. Both seem to be deeply masculinized. Their movement’s name translates roughly as “western education is sin,” and so in the northern states of Nigeria their male fighters have focused their violence on western styled schools, killing both parents of school children, and male and female students over the last five years. Yet, why in this most recent act of violence, did these male Boko Haram fighters decide to take these 276 school girls rather than, as they have done with

other students, kill them on the spot? We know from feminist monitors and researchers investigating other wars that some insurgent armed men sometimes have deliberately kidnapped women and girls and turned them into forced sex slaves. And the reason we even have that language, of “forced sex slaves,” is because of international feminist legal and anti-war activists who in the 1990s created that term so that people would not use the term “comfort women,” or the term “wives,” when they are talking about girls and women who have been turned, against their will, into sex instru-

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ments for male insurgents. So, why did these Boko Haram militiamen kidnap these girls at this juncture in the drawn-out violence in northern Nigeria? Did they initially think that they would use some of the girls for some of the men’s sexual satisfaction, but probably also for cooking, laundering and other labor for the insurgents? Did they think they could sell them, and, if so, to whom are they selling the girls? And what is the sex trafficking networking that is being

used by the insurgents? All of these questions are hard to investigate, but they are worth investigating because they represent how the gendered political economies of armed conflicts are created.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In the April 2014 issue of The Atlantic, authors Kay and Shipman argue that a ‘confidence gap’ exists that holds women back professionally and personally. Others have countered, saying that socialized and institutional factors may outweigh an ingrained female difference in confidence levels. What is your take on this recent ‘confidence gap’ debate?*

ENLOE: Well, sometimes confidence is really misplaced; sometimes confidence is really arrogance and there is a big difference between confidence and arrogance! Some people who come across as confident should not be so confident; if they were less confident, they would be more curious. Confidence is not the be-all and end-all goal. I think it is curiosity, generosity, openness which matter most. It is continuing to build skills; it is continuing to learn from others—that is what effective, valuable organizations need. If organizations institutionalize this notion—that merely being confident is what is needed to make the organization more successful—they are off on the wrong track. They will encourage people—women and men—to be confident when in fact they should not be confident! I don’t

want people to be confident per se, I want people to be interested, curious, engaged, and open! If that is the new definition of confidence, then I am all for it. Alternatively, confidence, when it is self-serving, will, if not destroy, at least stymie, organizations. I do not think confidence alone is necessarily a social good, especially when it is expressed in a misplaced fashion that blocks curiosity, openness, alliance-making, and generosity.

The other issue here is that this argument blames women for not “getting ahead.” This argument does not say that women should be more like men, but that women should be more like *certain types* of men. And look where the world is following that model of masculinized leadership! What kinds of over-confident masculinities infuse the institutional cultures of the most globally powerful media, foreign policy think tanks, and various arms of so many states? Everyone who reads that *Atlantic* article should see the new documentary about Donald Rumsfeld, “Unknown Known.” Listening to the extended on-film interview with Donald Rumsfeld, one gets the distinct sense that he has not learned a thing. He is very willing to do this long interview, but he is completely confident in all of the choices that he made leading up to and during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Is that what confidence looks like? If that is confidence, it is certainly not a social good, and I do not think it is a personal good either.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *If not confidence, then, what is the conversation we should be having about women in the workplace today?*

ENLOE: It actually needs to be a conversation about *men* in the workplace, a conversation in which both diverse women and diverse men take candid part. That is, why are so many men so narrow in their understandings of what kinds of skills and attributes it will take to make an organization useful in the world? A lot of the problem inside organizations is not with women, it is with those men who do not take seriously women’s skills, women’s understanding, and women’s ways of operating in an organization. In some of the newest organizations this is the most pronounced. If we look not at the World Bank, or even the U.S. Congress, but at an organization like Google, which is new and innovative, one finds that underneath its alleged innovation is patriarchy. They look hip—their midlevel

and senior officers do not wear ties and they play basketball at lunch—but in fact, this organizational culture is a new form of patriarchy. That is why when Google went public last year, its senior officers did not think twice about putting forward an all-male board. They seemed astonished that a lot of women commentators were outraged. They quickly reacted by adding a single woman, as if that would fix their sexist organizational model. There was recently an article in the *New York Times* by Liza Mundy called “The Media has a Woman Problem.” She pointed to the fact that things are getting better, slowly but surely, in print media. But she asked us to not be sanguine. She went on to reveal how in the ‘new’ digital news media, online and entrepreneur-driven, the organizational culture is more male-

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driven than ever. So just as you are making overdue, but still inadequate, progress in the print media you know, the newest media is re-inventing patriarchy. “Hip” does not automatically translate into “feminist.”

So the conversation that needs to happen is one which questions why there about so many—not all!—guys with overconfidence in how organizations should operate. Is it fear of women or perhaps misogyny (contempt for anything deemed feminine) which makes them unable to see the talents, skills and attributes that women could bring to their organization? In the economic meltdown of 2008, for example, it turns out that those stock brokerages and financial institutions that were run by women, proportionately, lost a lot less than those investment firms run by men. Was this because these women-run investment firms were less afflicted with culture that rewarded a hyper-risk taking, masculinized over-confidence? That is a serious feminist question to investigate.

A BBC announcer recently asked Chelsea Clinton if she was a feminist and she replied something along the lines of, “Of course, I’m a feminist—everybody I know is a feminist. Why would you not be a feminist, if you’re a thinking person?” It is the “*of course*” here that is key. To be a feminist means you are committed to justice, that you try to nurture creativity and fairness. That, in turn, means that you cultivate curiosity. Well, who could be against that? Probably anyone who is afraid of losing their privileges. Being a feminist is not being a cartoon figure. I think that if you take feminism seriously, you would say you are *trying* to be feminist. It is not a

bunch of initials you can put after your name like M.A., Ph.D. or M.D. To be a feminist means that every day you are trying to live like a feminist, which means keeping your curiosity and your sense of justice alive. It means staying open to the world, learning more, acting more, making wider alliances. To be a feminist is not just a label, it is a way of thinking, a way of investigating, a way of living.

FLETCHER FORUM: *If popular culture is anything to go by, Beyoncé's recent sampling of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk, which defines feminists as persons who believe in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes, suggests that the label "feminist" is a less-loaded personal epithet than in previous decades. What is your perspective on what it means to label oneself a feminist today versus in previous decades?*

ENLOE: I think you are right; I think it is both more common today for a person to call themselves feminist, and yet still hard for many people to take on that identity. Perhaps they want to keep their parents un-scared. Or perhaps a person—woman or man—hesitates to identify out loud as a feminist because they think it will harm their career chances or, for a few individuals, because they are a celebrity and they worry that they will turn off half their Twitter followers.

But I think you are right that the label is less loaded today, and here we have a lot of people to be grateful to! Our gratitude list is really long! Every morning, if you are an American, you should get out of bed and say, "Thank you, Gloria Steinem." Just think what she put up with for over five decades! We do not even know the half of it. And she has stayed nice, and she has continued to do work all over the world, she listens, and she is generous.

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But just think of how resilient she has had to be to call herself a feminist, and to urge all the rest of us to get with it and call ourselves feminists, for about fifty years! We have so many people to thank; Gloria Steinem would be appalled to think we were singling her out. We should be thankful to Audre Lorde, to Barbara and Beverly Smith, to Pat Schroeder, to the members of the original 'Our Bodies Ourselves' collective, to every woman who campaigned for the vote, to every woman who took the unheard of step to open a shelter for women being beaten by their partners, to every woman who campaigned for women's reproductive rights. Our thank-you list should be long. And every day we are learning that it is longer than we even imagined.

So the fact that a lot of us now do not feel as though we are taking the ultimate risk when we say “Of course, I’m a feminist! How you could not be a feminist?” is not due chiefly to our own courage. It is due to all the women who first charted, and then opened, that path, and took the substantial risks of both ridicule and overt violence, to make “feminist” safer for us today.*f*