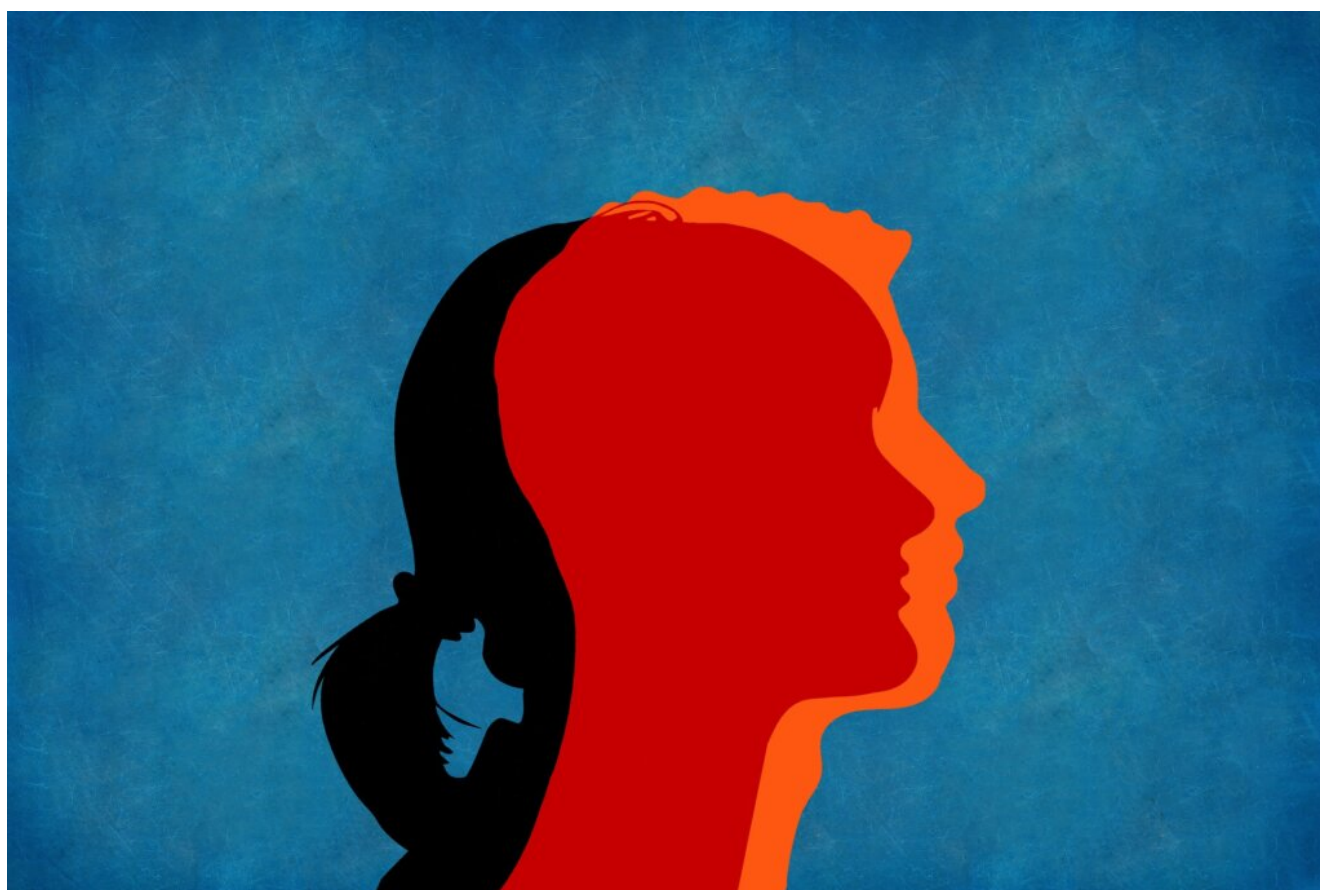


**Panorama Soruyor / Asks**

**Revisiting Feminist IR Theory:  
How Do the Dual Challenges of  
Populism and the Pandemic Affect  
Gender? A Conversation with Prof.  
Cynthia Enloe**



**Revisiting Feminist International Relations**

# Theory: How Do the Dual Challenges of Populism and the Pandemic Affect Gender? A Conversation with Prof. Cynthia Enloe

The end of the Cold War did not result in ‘the end of history’ as Francis Fukuyama had foreseen in his academic work. It did not lead to the final victory of democratic systems over the authoritarian regimes. *Freedom House* recently reported that global freedom on average has been declining in the world for the last 14 consecutive years. It is not only countries in transition that have been witnessing a deterioration of democratic norms and practices, but consolidated democracies have also been getting worse in democratization indexes as well. According to the [Freedom House report](#) of 4 March 2020, 25 out of 41 established democracies have been worsening on the democratization front.



**Prof. Dr. Birgöl Demirtaş**, *Turkish-German University*



**Prof. Dr. Zuhale Yeşilyurt Gündüz**, *TED University*

Rising economic inequalities within and among countries, coupled with the upsurge of identity-religious politics have contributed to the rise of populist politics worldwide, from the US to India, from Hungary to Brazil and the UK. As the incumbent political elites first imagined, and then created, the “we” versus “others” polarization, democratic regimes started to decline. Populist politicians, assuming they represent “the people” versus “the establishment”, have been damaging democratic institutions one by one with their choices, actions and rhetoric, starting from the judiciary and media, and extending to civil society and academia.

It is no surprise that the discourses and policies of populist politicians are overloaded with masculinity from the very beginning of their reign. Populist leaders, all of them males so far, perceive themselves to be the right actor to grab as much power as possible. As such, masculinity is interwoven with power politics, to which in some cases militarization is included as well. As an example, in the case of Hungary, the fact that the government led by Mr. Victor Orbán has abolished gender studies at the graduate level of education is an important indicator of how populism, or at least one example of it, prefers to deal with gender issues. As Orbán’s chief of staff, Gergely Gulyás, [stated](#), the Hungarian government “is of the view that people are born either men or women. They lead their lives the way they think best, but beyond this, the Hungarian state does not wish to spend public funds on education in this area.”

Similarly, it is not surprising to see that many populist governments with different

ideological, political, and religious leanings are all using very similar arguments to undermine, and if possible nullify the premises of the Council of Europe's *Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* - i.e., 'Istanbul Convention'.

This populist *Zeitgeist* ('the spirit of the time') has been accompanied by the Covid-19 pandemic since December 2019. Finding 'a new enemy' in the coronavirus and comfort in acquiescence of their populations for harsher restrictions of their daily lives, populist leaders across the world have utilized this opportunity to grab more power for themselves and to create a 'rally around the flag' effect for their domestic and foreign policies. Even in this situation, it was the women who have been most affected by these extraordinary measures. There are surveys and other scientific research already showing that women have been suffering more than men in this challenging time.

First of all, the unemployment rate of female workforce has been rising rapidly during the corona crisis. As the percentage of women working in insecure jobs is higher, they are more easily dismissed as a result of economic crisis. Second, the division of labor at home is not equal during lockdowns, inevitably employed by many countries in an attempt to limit the spreading of the virus among the wider population. Many surveys have already shown that women take on more of the household work, including childcare, cleaning, and cooking than men even though both women and men are homebound and work from [their homes](#). In addition, women's access to paid-help is getting minimized, meaning that all kinds of housework are now taken over mainly by women.

Women's predicaments do not remain limited to just more housework. All over the world, reports state that domestic violence has increased during the lockdown. The [UN Women Report](#) of May 2020 states that there is an "unprecedented increase" in the number of domestic violence incidents all over the world, dubbing it as the "shadow pandemic". It is clear that the male-dominated populist politics and decrease of democratic credentials accompanied by the lockdowns during the pandemic lead to more violence against women.

Moreover, it must also be noted that 70 percent of the health workers (i.e., doctors, nurses and care workers) globally are [women](#). This simply means that the number of infected females among the healthcare staff working at hospitals and other health centers is therefore higher than that of males.

The impacts of dual challenges of ‘populism’ and ‘pandemic’ on gender are the main topic of this conversation with distinguished scholar of Feminist IR Theory, Prof. Cynthia Enloe. As one of the founders of the feminist theory in the discipline, Professor Enloe has contributed to IR theory in a very innovative way throughout the years. We have the opportunity and honor to ask her our questions with regard to the impact of populist politics and Covid-19 on women and gender issues.

**Birgül Demirtaş (BD) & Zuhale Yeşilyurt Gündüz (ZG):** An ever-growing increase in populist policies and the rise of radical right have been witnessed globally since the end of the Cold War and especially in the last decade. The world has also been facing one of the largest pandemics since December 2019, costing the health and lives of ever more people - especially among the more precarious people globally. In this context, how do populism and Covid-19 affect gender? What is your current vision for the post-Covid-19 world?

**Cynthia Enloe (CE):** What a good -and urgent- question! Feminists have been among the leading thinkers -and activists- critically exploring populist politics precisely because so many power-seeking populists (mostly men, but some women too) deliberately have promoted their cause by manipulating ideas about women. Populists *need* patriarchy. Control of “their” women -in the name of protecting them- is the touchstone of their defense of ‘national sovereignty.’ The classic populist ploy is to claim that a demonized “THEY” are after “OUR” nationally/ethnicized women -to seduce them, corrupt them, lure them away from hallowed ‘traditional values.’ This has made “they” and “our” central to any populist worldview.

Today, we are witnessing with alarm the mobilization of populist rhetoric, populist

campaigns and populist policies in countries as seemingly unlike as Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, India, Russia and the US. In every country where populism has found fertile ground -not only where they control the levers of government, but where they have gained any electoral or legislative leverage-one has to ask two questions and then keep on asking these questions over time. First, how exactly do populists (their leaders and their supporters) imagine the 'natural' and favored relationship between men and manliness, on the one hand, and women and femininity on the other? Populists think a lot, we've learned, about this four-sided dynamic.

Second, I think, one has to (we have to!) ask, how do diverse women in any society or in any ethnic community actually respond to populist framings of what is 'natural' and what is desirable for women? That is, I think it's crucial that we should not slide into imagining that the populist appeal is always and everywhere enticing to all sorts of women. It has not been and it is not today. Just this morning, I was looking at the photos of the thousands of Polish women on the streets of Warsaw protesting the current Polish government's populist, misogynist, homophobic policies.

Furthermore, in asking this second question, we underscore the feminist understanding of women as thinking beings. Women may often have minimal power, but they still *think*. If any woman finds the populist "they" and "our" narrative appealing, we need to know why. If any woman takes steps to challenge the populists' agenda for her, we need to know how and why she takes that action.

What is distinctive about this era of Covid-19 are the high levels of uncertainty, regional interconnectedness, combined with individual isolation. Populists thrive on gendered fear and, paradoxically, on gendered neglect. Thus, for instance, masculinized populists today in Hungary, Poland and Turkey are trying to claim that they are defending 'their women' by guarding national sovereignty in ways that hollow out structures for cooperation, while, simultaneously, they are neglecting women's security by pulling out of the Istanbul Convention, a treaty designed to strengthen public protections of women against men's violence. Then,

outside the countries with populist governments, there are the enablers. In the name of gaining a 27-state consensus to prioritize an EU-wide pandemic aid package that requires a higher collective debt burden, officials from those governments that claim they support the Istanbul Convention are willing to dilute its enforcement, thus enabling the patriarchal populists within the EU to get away with abandoning the Istanbul Convention.

Sorry, that last sentence is really analytically super-complicated. I would never try to teach students using such a long, loaded sentence. That single sentence could take up three class sessions! But, when you read it slowly, you can see how highly skilled all of us as feminist analysts of international politics need to be. We know that states aren't coherent actors. We know that intimate politics are dynamically connected to inter-state politics. We refuse to present international politics as a simplistic cartoon, right?

It is not enough for us as feminists in the midst of this pandemic to declare, "We are all in the same boat." Instead, it is more useful now for us, I think, to picture ourselves -in all our diversities- being tossed about on the same globalized stormy sea. Yet we were trying to stay afloat and reach safety in very unequal sorts of boats. To inoculate ourselves against populist fear-mongering and divisiveness, we need to pay close, caring attention to the unequal boats we occupy -some are yachts, others are dinghies. Then we need to make sure that no one's boat is leaky, that all boats are equipped with sturdy oars and full sails, that no one is allowed to capsize, and that everyone, together, reaches the post-pandemic safety of dry land.

Eyes-wide-open, globally-conscious, feminist-informed solidarity is the opposite of divisive, parochial, patriarchal fear-mongering, the opposite of conspiracy-fueled, toxically masculinized populism. Cultivating a justice-seeking inclusive solidarity is the most effective formula for surviving a public health pandemic. It is not going to be easy.

**BD & ZG:** Notwithstanding decades of feminist resistance, patriarchy has proved

to be astonishingly persistent and sustainable. Following your invitation for 'feminist curiosity', we would like to ask you why and how patriarchy has been able to survive. As it is 'human made', can it be possible to 'unmake' it? What ways of 'undoing' can you offer?

**CE:** You're right. Patriarchy's supporters turn out to be much more creative and flexible than some of us imagined. Coming to this realization is what prompted me to write *The Big Push* (2017). As I did the research for this newest book, I came to understand that patriarchy's enthusiasts and beneficiaries were more facile than perhaps I had realized. That is, they could become web-savvy, they could shed stuffy old-fashioned forms of masculinity, they could don black jeans and black t-shirts and appear 'hip' without surrendering patriarchy's twin-convictions: that men and masculinity are superior to women and femininity, *and* that societies succeed only if women and girls are kept under the control of the 'right kind' of men.

I am not a pessimist, though. I don't think that just because the people wedded to patriarchal ideas and practices are clever they are unstoppable or un-toppleable. It's true that our myriad efforts to delegitimize patriarchy's enforcers and enablers have to go on much longer than many of us imagined. Women struggling to get access to fairly paid work, women gaining the right to sue for divorce, women winning the vote, women becoming brave enough to speak out against harassment and abuse, women occupying at least a few seats at the decision-making table -each of these hard-won victories have made patriarchs nervous, even occasionally wobbly; but, together, they have not yet brought down the final curtain on patriarchy.

So, what our collective challenge to today's persisting, creative patriarchy calls for, I think, is nurturing a feminist trio: *feminist curiosity*, *feminist stamina* and *feminist solidarity*.

That is, we never can afford to stop investigating how masculinities operate in ways that marginalize or undermine women and girls. Because those patriarchal



masculinities operate in particular ways (not all are identical) in virtually every sector of every society, it will take our generation and the next and the next generation of gender researchers to keep honing our investigatory skills so we can shine bright feminist lights on their workings everywhere. We'll also have to stay energized for the long haul. Fueling feminist stamina will require us to find ways to nurture each other, sustain our collective energy, while giving individual women opportunities to reflect and re-charge. And, finally, for the feminist trio to carry us forward, we'll have to keep learning about each other's worries, hopes and material challenges; that learning will keep us positively connected.

**BD & ZG:** In your ground-breaking work *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, you call attention to the gender -and gendered- effects of masculinity and femininity. Your focus on previously non-studied or understudied topics, which had been considered to be 'trivial', 'mundane' or 'too simple', such as domestic service, prostitution, tourism and diplomatic wives, changed international relations forever. Going beyond the significant understanding *that the personal is political*, your work revealed that *the national is international and the domestic is global*. By emphasizing gender and women, you revealed how 'power' sets up international politics. Therefore, international relations and "the international politics of debt, investment, colonization, national security, diplomacy and trade are far more complicated than most experts would have us believe" (1989: 197). Over thirty years have passed since then. What has changed in international politics and in IR theory? Where does Feminist IR Theory stand today? Where do you see it in the future?

**CE:** I confess, when it was first suggested that I take a fresh look at the five international political areas I had investigated in the original *Bananas*, I was really reluctant. But I took a deep breath and plunged in. Now, I'm glad I did. Doing the research and writing for this thoroughly revised edition of *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (2014) taught me so much about what it means today to study and make sense of -and to operate in- international politics. I learned, for instance -and have tried to make visible in the new edition- all the amazingly innovative transnational organizing that women now are doing. Women as migrant domestic workers have created, against the odds, new international networks. Their activism made me look more closely, for instance, at the gender

politics of the ILO. Women living around military bases have learned to share their environmental knowledge about how military bases jeopardize drinking water and wildlife. This helped me to see new gendered connections between militarization and the environment. Women working in the expanding tourism industry have made new political alliances across regions, teaching us about the new international politics of globalized hotel chains and cruise ship companies.

Waking up to these stunning organizing efforts has made me all the more convinced that we cannot study or teach the field called 'International Relations' without taking diverse women's experiences and diverse women's ideas seriously. And we can't do *that* by only listening to and reading the works of women and men in North America and Western Europe. Those perspectives are valuable, but never sufficient. This is why I am so heartened by the new academic organizing that Brazilian IR graduate students and faculty are doing today. This is why I am so excited about all the new research being conducted by and new courses being taught by Turkish gender-curious international politics scholars/teachers.

Returning to your good opening question about current patriarchal populist politics, I like to think of what feminist IR courses and thesis topics might look like if they were designed to explore the causes and consequences of internationalized populist politics. Courses, theses, assigned readings for our students, our own research proposals -these intersecting circles are where IR Theory is produced.

Imagine re-designing an undergraduate 'Intro to IR' course so that it began with three weeks devoted to a case study exploring the gender politics of the Istanbul Convention. Imagine offering a senior IR seminar on the 'International Politics of Domestic Workers'. Imagine committing ourselves to making sure that every IR course we offered -on national security, on international trade, on international organizations, on human rights, on war and peace- had required readings that were authored equally by female and male authors.

Designing courses, readings, theses, projects all requires decisions, decisions that

reflect what we think matters, what we take seriously or what we dismiss as trivial, what we need to deeply explore, what we, by contrast, imagine doesn't demand our attention. The reason I wrote an entire book titled *Seriously!*(2013) was precisely because I had come to see that what we 'take seriously' and who we 'take seriously' -and what and who we choose *notto* 'take seriously'- are political decisions. Together, they are political decisions with wide-ranging implications for how we explain, how we make sense of (or how we fail to make reliable sense of) this world.

In this sense, each of us is creating IR Theory every day. Yes, that is kind of scary, isn't it? But it is also hopeful. It's energizing!

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**Cynthia Enloe**, is *Research Professor of International Development, Politics and Women's Studies* at Clark University. Among her recent books are the revised and updated edition of *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (2014) and *The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging Persistent Patriarchy* (2017). Professor Enloe's feminist teaching and research have explored the interplay of gendered politics in both the national and international arenas, *and* how diverse women have tried to resist these efforts. Racial, class, ethnic and national identity dynamics as well as ideas about femininities and masculinities are common threads throughout her studies. She was awarded the *International Studies Association's Susan Strange Award* in 2007 in recognition of "a person whose singular intellect, assertiveness,

and insight most challenge conventional wisdom and organizational complacency in the international studies community during the previous year.” She was also awarded the *Susan B. Northcutt Award*, presented annually by the Women’s Caucus for International Studies of the International Studies Association, in 2008, the *Peace and Justice Studies Association’s Howard Zinn Life time Achievement Award* in 2010, the *American Council of Learned Societies’ Charles Haskins Award* in 2016, and the *Caucus for New Political Science’s McCoy Award* in 2018. She was selected to be an *Honoree* name on the Gender Justice Legacy Wall in 2017, installed in the International Crimes Court at the Hague.