

**Cynthia Enloe, *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War* (University of California Press, 2023).****Nasima Puya Habibi\***

*Twelve Feminist Lessons of War* by Cynthia Enloe (2023) is based on women's untold wartime stories in countries from Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua, to Fiji, Israel, Northern Ireland, and Turkey. The combination of theory and real-life stories in the book delivers a clear picture of women's experiences and convinces us to take women's voices seriously in pre-war, war, and post-war existence. The book was published at a time of ongoing war in different countries. It calls for every individual to think about women in war differently. It argues that "women's war starts before the war of men", referring to the social and political factors that shape the reality of war, in which women pay a higher price.

Cynthia Enloe is a world-renowned feminist scholar and activist, known for her commitment to feminism in international relations. Her most known works relate to gender, militarism, war, globalization and international relations (e.g. 1983, 2000, 2004, 2014, 2016, 2018). This review summarises the main themes and strengths of *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War*. The book is based on Enloe's reflections on her many years of feminist research, as situated in the wider research context.

*Twelve Feminist Lessons of War* is 215 pages, divided into 12 lessons-learned chapters. Each chapter is based on the real-life stories of women from across the world. Each story speaks for the women who experienced war without being heard or cared for. Therefore, it is not only rich feminist literature but also a treasure for the reader to learn several lessons from each woman's story.

---

\* MA in Sociology candidate, American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; Exchange Student, MA in Peace and Conflict Studies, Otto von Guericke University, Magdeburg, Germany. Email: [Habibi\\_n@auca.kg](mailto:Habibi_n@auca.kg).

---

In the first lesson, **‘Women’s wars are not men’s wars’**, Enloe exposes that due to different social structures and expectations, women’s wars start before the commencement of any military operations. This is evident in issues such as the gender pay gap, where women are paid less in formal work and not paid at all for informal work like farming, housework, and caregiving. Indeed, in claiming that “[a] woman’s war starts when her peacetime government passes a law setting a female’s age of lawful marriage at thirteen” (15), Enloe prompts lawmakers, and indeed all of us, to question law’s role in assigning or withholding women’s rights both during and outside of war-time. She also encourages us to understand that during wartime, women’s rights over marriage, abortion, children, and property are also challenged by social norms and structures. Relatedly, the social structures that constitutively shape women’s lives as caregivers outside of wartime, similarly shape gendered expectations of care – for the wounded – during wartime.

Lesson two, **‘Every war is fought in gendered history’** delivers a sense of the reality of women’s struggles throughout history for their educational, social, and political rights. This means that the war was there without an official war, and women paid huge costs for it in the form of high illiteracy rates, basic rights violations, and domestic and sexual violence. These patriarchal struggles set the scene for women to experience e.g. systemic wartime rapes and forced marriages. Enloe also draws our attention to how systemic violence takes place in seemingly lawful ways. Furthermore, these experiences of women remain silent, not only because of the supposed ‘sensitivity’ and ‘safety’ of women but also because women’s access to education and literacy is limited. Women were often not aware of how to raise their voices. Moreover, “money is historically gendered” (21), meaning that because women’s right to earn money is limited in contrast to men, men have more capacity to make decisions, including for women. All this means that collective action matters. For example, women’s activities in Afghanistan delivered awareness through radio broadcasts, to literate and illiterate women alike. These initiatives by women and feminists toward ending systemic violence will remain needed.

Lesson three, **‘Getting men to fight isn’t so easy’** sees Enloe expose men who received several rewards for fighting in wars. In doing so, she shows how militarized masculinity’s identity is

---

powerful. In wartime, fighters can exchange food for sex with local women; rape is a weapon of war and can prove manliness. To be encouraged to fight, men have been given private or even unstated guarantees of accessing local women for sex and/or prostitution facilities around military bases. In wartime, those with violent backgrounds can be attractive hires to help win the military action. Enloe analyses how no matter what type of violence they may have committed, and what cost women paid during war, men are still seen as being entitled to receive support and awards. She concludes by drawing attention to how women's activist work in Somalia, Southern Sudan, Bosnia, south-east Turkey, Northern Ireland, and Ukraine are good examples of how women initiate support for each other in highly patriarchal and gendered contexts and calls for the support of the law to further protect women and their rights.

Lesson four, **'Women as soldiers is not liberation'** addresses women's role and recruitment into the military and the challenges women soldiers face during their duties. Enloe explains that gendered recruitment in the military has been practised throughout history. Women were traditionally hired for the support team but not recruited for jobs like fighter pilots, tank drivers, and commanders. Moreover, some of the gendered minorities like gay men and lesbians were excluded from military recruitment, with the military environment remaining unsafe for women. It is important to say that we know little about the lives of female soldiers, the level of sexual abuse they face, or the level of severe pain they experience. Most importantly, women who experienced sexual violence, rape, or any other form of violence are not respected among the community members so they prefer to remain silent. However, the following three questions raised by feminists may not only support women in raising their voices but also force the military systems to take women soldiers seriously:

First, are sexually abusive military men using violence to signal to women that they do not belong in a privileged masculinized space?, Second, what is behind the systematic refusal by so many senior male officers – and their civilian superiors – to take violence against women inside their militaries seriously? And how should feminists go about listening to

---

these women – of all ranks, of different sexual and racial identities – in order to devise the most effective and fair strategies of response? (60)

Lesson five, **‘Women as armed insurgents offer feminist caveats’**, presents the visible role that women have had in the wars in some countries, like the Vietnam War and the Battle of Algiers. They were fighting with their infants tied to their backs and shoulders against oppression, but they never got rewarded. Meanwhile, due to injuries, many female fighters never got married. Enloe also explains that the social and political structures not only failed to inquire about women’s security but also did not consider and support their role, so that in time the number decreased to a minimum. In more recent wars, women's roles are mainly low-paid or unpaid work.

Lesson six, **‘Wounds matter; wounds are gendered’** addresses the naturalization of wounds in wartime. It explains the role of those responsible for wars in this process, as well as the naturalizing of women as care providers (to include for themselves when they are wounded). We are urged to imagine the life of a woman who has been displaced to more than five countries but still does not know where she belongs; and to imagine the sacrifices made by women in Afghanistan toward their educational jounries, and who may struggle to complete a master’s degree as she comes up against the age limit in Afghan universities in her forties. Did she live for forty years or pay the price of war for twenty years? Was it the same for men? If not, then isn’t it time to act against war?

Lesson seven, **‘Make wartime rape visible’** focuses on the horrors of wartime rape, which were not revealed until women entered the media and became trusted to share their experiences of wartime. Concepts like ‘systematic wartime rape’ and ‘rape as a weapon of war’ were developed by feminists and opened up a way to act against this version of war in the militarized, masculinized world.

Lesson eight, **‘Feminists organize while war is raging’** discloses the hard work and struggle of feminist and women's activities toward advocacy for women's rights, peace, and gender equality.

---

It was not easy to confront militarization, raise a voice against violence, and call for inclusive peacebuilding. Moreover, the lesson calls for collective action toward inclusive peacebuilding; building a strong, resilient team against war; and saying no to violence. Enloe gives examples like Belgrade Women's action toward war and rape; Turkish feminist declarations of militarism as a shameful act; Syrian women teaching their sons that fighting is not manly; Afghan women finding their place in parliament and making women visible and Northern Irish women activists in the women's rights movement.

Lesson nine, **“Post-war” can last generations’** highlights that while war ends, the trauma caused by war never ends. Women who were sexually abused, raped, or tortured will live with the trauma, and breaking the silence is not easy given the social structures for women's acceptance in society. War is full of lessons that we need to learn. Therefore, it is recommended that all social structures, norms, policymakers, and human rights activities, consider the post-war period the most important part of the war.

Lesson ten, **‘Militarization starts during peacetime’** stresses how militarization starts with some basic militarized ideas and practices in peacetime. For instance, military fashion in dressing boys and girls, the interest of teenage girls in men with military uniforms, the military uniform as symbolizing heroism, and the interest of academics in researching the weaponry industry are all manifestations of militarization's progress. However, as per feminism, the process can be reviewed with collective action against militarization, which focuses on militarism's *effect* and not its supposed *goal*. For example, people in peacetime may see a man in military uniform and think of him as a hero who is making their country safer; while those who see the same uniform in wartime where violent acts have been committed – rape, sexual abuse, or any other form of violent act – will see him as humanity's enemy – a killer and an abuser. The war effect is violent, and through militarization, we are moving toward violence, not peace.

Lesson eleven, **‘Ukrainian feminists have lessons to teach us about war’** teaches us that literacy for every individual is crucial, especially for women. Women with good literacy in the Ukraine

---

war and good displacement experiences found secure shelter and access to income for survival. Their level of dependency on men was also reduced. Moreover, the gendered pay gap highly affected women-headed households and elderly women in the Ukraine war. Feminists achieved most of their goals in wartime through collective work. For example, Ukrainian Feminists' pre-war goal of reducing violence against women continued during wartime as women were impacted by men's new militarized roles during the war.

Lesson twelve, '**Feminist lessons are for everyone**' teaches that the work of feminists is mostly achieved through solidarity, resilience, and collective work toward exploring, questioning, and challenging structures, norms, inequalities, and injustices. It suggests that it is not enough to be sad, feel the pain of war, and try to put yourself in the shoes of a girl or woman with war experiences. Rather, support means collective action and collective action is only possible when we question, share, and act for justice. To my understanding, when we talk about justice the first thing that comes to mind is the law. Law has the power to set and approve roles, practices, and norms. Therefore, feminist action against injustice needs the support of the law. For example, if wartime rape is considered a crime by law, it may not be practised as a natural wartime act. Finally, feminist work is for humanity; therefore, anyone can join feminist work to act against war, injustice, and violence.

"War is hell" is the most powerful message made in this book. Even if one survives war, war snatches dreams, identity, and peace of mind. War is not natural, and those who plan war are responsible for war and the consequences of war. However, throughout history, women have paid high prices for war without being heard. Indeed, the *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War* opens the door to questioning war, raising women's voices, and, most importantly, calling us to look at wartime for women differently, considering their standpoints and experiences. It is important to know that women, children, and those who witness war and the violence of war remain mentally impacted by war, and war follows them in different forms. This book is an attempt to raise awareness of what happens in war and how women experience war differently from men. It is important to know that the war never ends for women. Therefore, this book not only presents

---

the reality of war but also the pre-war structures, norms, and gendered roles that worsen the situation in war. This book also calls for law practitioners to support women's rights in war and take action against wartime rape, systemic rape, and rape as a weapon of war and forced marriages to soldiers. It is an inspiring book for all individuals, including scholars interested in feminism, women's empowerment, politics, and peacebuilding. I also recommend this book to every individual in society, including law reactionaries, political elites, and war planners.

## References

Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives* (Pandora Press, 1983).

Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (University of California Press, 2000).

Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in the New Age of Empire* (University of California Press, 2004).

Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (University of California Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2014).

Cynthia Enloe, *Globalization, and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2016).

Cynthia Enloe, *The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging the Persistence of Patriarchy* (University of California Press, 2018).