

Demilitarizing cultures after 9/11: a feminist perspective

by Cynthia Enloe

Chair, Political Science Department and the Women's Studies Program, Clark University, USA

I'd like to spend my few minutes here talking about a puzzle about how feminists can in fact take action against militarization. I'd like to look at 3 efforts recently that have really taught me about how feminists think about peace activism or anti-militarism activism in a way that is true to feminist practice. Because one of the dilemmas that many of us have confronted and are thinking about is how even movements that call themselves peace movements or organizations that call themselves anti-war organizations can in fact replicate and deepen patriarchal forms of militarized masculinity in their very efforts in the name of peace and militarism. So, it takes a lot of feminist creativity and feminist thinking to actually have a demilitarized form of anti-militarist activism.

The first that I have learned is in Turkey. I was very lucky to be invited there by Ayse Gul Altinay who has a wonderful book called "Myth of the Military Nation," a look at the militarization of Turkish political life and culture. She has kept me informed by email of the kind of activism that feminist led groups have been doing in Istanbul and Ankara and other sites to have a feminist informed, even if it includes men, kind of anti-militarist activism. Here's the project they had earlier this year. They declared a day of "mili-tourism." And what they did--this takes research ahead of time as does most good activism--they wanted to make visible all the sites where militarization were occurring in Istanbul. And so they went throughout the city, not just the Turkish military bases--there are US military bases in Turkey, but they're not in Istanbul areas—but the places where the Turkish military is most visible. They also wanted to look at the places where textbooks are published. They also wanted to look at schools where those textbooks that celebrate a militarized notion of national security and Turkish nationalist history are used. They also wanted to look at recruiting stations. So what they did is that if you wanted to be a mili-tourist for the day, you met at one point and then they had a series of vans and cars, and you went on a mili-tourist excursion around Istanbul. I thought that was inspired because it made visible what is oftentimes invisible in the forms that militarism takes in every day life. In the process, they actually educated themselves about where should we say that militarism is occurring in the everyday life of people living in Istanbul. Wherever you live, you might think about creating a mili-tourism day and have an excursion. There are all kinds of tourism these days. Why not a mili-tourism day?

The second activist effort that I've been really affected by has been in Okinawa. We have many Japanese and Okinawan delegates here today, and they can talk to you in greater detail about the really creative ways of Okinawan women and especially women in the group that named themselves "The Okinawa Women Act against Military Violence." This is a group that now is at least 15 years in existence, and they've done several things. First of all, the group has done activist research on all Tokyo supported US military incidents of violence against women in Okinawa where two-thirds of all the bases in Japan are located. Two-thirds of all the US bases in Japan are in fact located in one part of Japan, in Okinawa. The second thing that The Okinawa Women Act against Military Violence group has done is they have called to account their colleagues in the larger peace movement, both men and women, to make connections between violence against women perpetrated by ordinary Okinawan men and the anti-bases movement. You can imagine how much positive support they got when they raised this issue. They raised it when the peace movement was meeting, and they were treated as being digressional, making a detour, being irrelevant, and all the things that feminists are used to being called. But they have been trying in other words to change the notion of what it means to be an Okinawan feminist peace activist and what kinds of connections you have to make in order to really to get at the root of all forms of violence not just the forms of violence that fit most neatly into a masculinized national agenda.

Thirdly, and most recently, for the first time in my life, I spoke at a fashion show. Nobody has ever accused me of being a fashion plate. This is all the doing of Christine Ahn, who is the director of a wonderful new small but very smart project of the Women of Color Resource Center based in Oakland, CA. It's a San Francisco bay area-wide group but located in Oakland. And Christine, whom I didn't know before, is an Asian American feminist activist. She called me up last winter and said that she had just been appointed to this very exciting post and she had many years of experience as a local organizer, but had really not tried to organize around militarism before. She said, "Could we just start talking on the phone about how you talk about militarism to people who in fact don't think it has all to do with foreign policy or knowing the level of defense budget?" So we chatted a bit. Then she called me back a couple of weeks later, and she said, "We've done it." I said, "Oh my god, Christine, what have you done?" "We are going to have an anti-militarism fashion show."

You know, feminists are so smart, because here's what she and her colleagues-- Latina and African American and Asian American colleagues--in the Center began talking about. They began looking around them, and they began looking in their own closets. What they noticed was camo. That means camouflage. They took that as the handle to try and talk about how do you become militarized. Do you become militarized by thinking that soldiers' war-making attire--after all, you wear camouflage so that you can shoot someone without them seeing you--do you become militarized by thinking that wearing camo is hip? Is that the militarization of hip for both men and women? And they put on a fashion show for a packed audience in downtown Oakland, mostly people under 25, mostly people of color. They brought in hip-hop designers; they brought in rap poets; they brought in a dj. I have never given a talk with a disco beat behind me. The dj asked ahead of time, "Would that be alright?" I said, "Go for it!" But what Christine Ahn and her colleagues did is they got the room packed with people who could think anew and not be didactically told "don't wear camo" but rather think, "What does it mean to wear camo?" Is it possible to wear military-inspired clothes and not make militarism normal? Is it possible to wear military-inspired clothes and not make militarism invisible? And what she did with her colleagues was actually get a conversation going. That, I thought, was inspired.

So, these three groups of activists have taught me the following. The first is that one should always use a feminist curiosity to figure out whether any peace activist is in fact perpetuating patriarchy. Secondly is to do serious feminist inspired research to inform one's activism. Thirdly is to keep the activist event open and welcoming. And finally, don't leave your sense of humor behind.