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Values in khaki

Baldy Center conference explores intersection of military culture and gender

The proliferation of military culture in American life, and how it affects the lives of women, was the topic for a groundbreaking two-day conference in mid-September at UB's Center for the Arts.

Sponsored by the Law School's Baldy Center for Law and Social Policy, the conference brought together internationally known scholars and advocates in military studies, gender relations and human rights. It was organized by UB Law professors Isabel Marcus and Lucinda Finley, with associate professor of sociology Brenda Moore.

The intersection of gender and military culture is "an all-too-timely topic these days in the world," Finley said in introducing the conference's keynote speaker on Sept. 15. She cited such high-profile situations as the capture of American POW Jessica Lynch by Iraqi forces; horrific ethnic cleansing in the Darfur region of Sudan, in which rape has been used as a weapon of war; and, closer to home, the publicity surrounding military mother Cindy Sheehan as she attempted to confront President Bush over her son's death in Iraq.

The keynote speaker was Dr. Cynthia Enloe, a leading feminist scholar of international relations. Enloe teaches international development and women's studies at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. Her books include *Does Khaki Become You?: The Militarization of Women's Lives* and *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*.

Enloe gave a brief history of how her academic specialty developed, saying it was a tough sell in the early 1980s to attract people to conferences on



Professor Isabel Marcus

women and the military. One advantage of the Baldy conference, she said, was that "discussion of women in militaries is very rarely linked to discussion of militarization in the wider culture. This is really a very special thinking

moment, to have these two discussions going on together."

She defined militarization as "the step-by-step process by which anyone or anything or any institution or any whole society becomes more and more dependent on militarized values." Anything, she said, can become militarized "from popular culture to education to law."

"Many people," Enloe said, "believe that more aspects of American society are more deeply militarized than has ever been true before in this country. By that I mean, they depend for their value on serving military goals."

Where this gets especially sticky, she said, is when the goals of the military are used to justify even beneficial developments. Some aspects of women's advancement in U.S. society, for example, have been promoted as beneficial to America's national security interests. "Women are promised that serving in the military is one of the most empowering things that women can do," Enloe said.

Similarly, movements against sexual harassment in the military academies and the armed forces have been justified, she said, by the argument that allowing harassment to continue would threaten national security and military readiness. And the armed forces took action on the issue of domestic violence in military families, she said, at least in part because "in dysfunctional families you do not have ready soldiers."

The problem with using military ends to justify such salutary moves, Enloe said, is that "militarization means you only have to pay attention to something – you only have to take it seriously – insofar as it affects the thing that really matters: military readiness, a

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– Professor Cynthia Enloe, Clark University



strong military, a military notion of what is national security.” As a result, she said, “Women’s lives do not matter in themselves. That attitude is enormously dangerous. It is very dangerous to tie women’s rights to some other goal that is not about women’s rights.”

Activities on the conference’s second day included a panel presentation on “Women in Active Duty.” The presenters were Elizabeth Hillman, associate professor of law at Rutgers University; Carole Burke, associate professor of English at the University of California-Irvine; Katia Sorin of the Laboratoire Georges Friedmann in France; and Laura Miller, a social scientist at the Rand Foundation.

A second panel presentation, on “Women Military Veterans,” featured Christine Hansen, executive director of the Miles Foundation; Rani Desai, associate professor of psychiatry, epidemiology and public health at Yale University; Bevanne Bean-Mayberry, associate professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh; UB’s Brenda Moore; and Ron Armstead, executive director of the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust.

A roundtable on “Armed Conflict and the Human Rights of Women” featured presenters from Serbia, Montreal, Florida International University and the City University of New York School of Law.

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