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Book Review: Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security and Post Conflict Development

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MacKenzie, M. H. (2012). *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, security and Post Conflict Development*, New York: New York University Press. ISBN: 978-08147-6137-3; 2012; 174 pages; New York University Press; New York

Reviewed by Nompilo Mjwara¹, Nokuthula Ngubane², and Philani Hlengwa³

In "*Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security and Post Conflict Development*" Megan Mackenzie affirms a feminist curiosity of gender sensitivity and equity in policy circles about post-conflict and development studies, which she asserts has been overlooked. In a very effective manner, the book represents a feminist perspective on post-conflict reconstruction in the case of Sierra Leone's (SL) war. Based on empirical data qualitative interviews conducted with more than 77 female soldiers across SL, the book makes several observations about African wars: (a) wars are initiated by idle young men who commit random violence and contribute to generalized chaos and; (b) women and girls are impacted by, or protected from, war but rarely contribute to or impact war themselves. The aims of the book are to show post-conflict reconstruction as a highly gendered process defined and imposed largely from the outside of so called war-torn communities. Post-conflict reconstruction as a period after a war is characterized by increased peace and social order.

Mackenzie divides the book into eight chapters which overall addresses an emphasis on the conjugal order. Chapter 1 introduces the book which the author defines conjugal order as "an analytical tool to examine the laws, regulations in a particular region and associate by relationships in understanding linkages between sexuality, development and security". Furthermore, it reveals the post-conflict policies on how they are gender-based. International NGOs and institutions (outside actors) impose to the definition of conjugal order in SL. The primary questions to the book are a) Why, if women participated as soldiers, were they largely ignored in mainstream accounts of the conflict and overlooked in the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process? b) What gendered stereotypes might influence post-conflict policy-making? and c) Is post-conflict a good time to address gender inequality? The central argument Mackenzie addresses is that highly gendered post conflict war show post conflict reconstruction as a highly gendered process. There is no or limited gender equality associated with war, hence the perceptions of wars and conflict are often associated with men being warriors and violent, whilst women (young and old) are victims and are peaceful. The book also demonstrates that the failure to address gender as a factor in post-conflict programming on the effectiveness of the DDR process.

The introduction of Chapter 1 illustrates the image of a young boy holding an AK-47 gun who has been part of the war and his childhood been 'ripped' of him. Further views on wars are characterized by being 'non-woman'. Which is why female soldiers are most underrepresented categories of war affected citizens; and the media omits broadcasting the participation of female soldiers. Experiences of women and girls, after conflict wars are largely ignored and the focus is largely on men's violence. Various questions emerged as to, if they were so many women and

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girl soldiers, why were/are ignored in mainstreams of conflicts and about their experiences? Why is the boy carrying Ak-47 a representative image of African wars if women [girls] were also involved in the SL's war conflict? Moreover, stories of war and peace are gendered if they ignore, silence, or exclude women and girls.

Rape, sexual violence and sexual slavery were primary tactics of warfare in SL. About 800 women and girls, who had been raped, represent a small portion of the total estimated number of victims of sexual violence. More than 200 000 women (including girls) may have been victims of rape during war in SL. Study conducted by Physicians Human Rights found that out of 991 women interviewed 94 per cent of respondents were found to have experienced some exposure to war related violence; and 13 per cent experienced war related assault. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the SL's history on the context of socio-political of gender ordering and sexual regulation. The downsides about publicity surrounding sexual violence and SL conflict is that it helped to create a general picture of women and girls exclusively victims of the conflict; few victims and does not make reference to female soldiers. British colonizers influenced the sexual regulation on SL's conflict.

Women participate in activities of high politics; they are affectivity shuffled out of the public political sphere and into domestic realm through post conflict development policies. Interviews in Chapter 3 with a group of former female soldiers in SL help to shed light on the multiple roles and activities of women during the eleven-year civil conflict. Every woman responded positively to the question, "Would you define yourself as a former soldier?" Women were quick to point out which armed group they were a part of, what rank they held, and what roles they carried out. One woman identified herself as a commander with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF); another woman specified that she was a soldier "because she was given one week training on how to fire a gun and subsequently became active". Another woman identified as a soldier because she took part in most of the horrible activities of the evil conflict in SL and several women admitted that they voluntarily joined a particular faction. Women even reported going to places like Burkina Faso for military training. Women were submitted to sexual violence, slavery, and forced labour by the RUF.

Chapter 4 and 5 highlights on how "*Women Empowerment*" was contradicted by institutions, organisation and external actors. Organizations such as World Bank, Multi Donor Trust Fund, National Committee for Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration, UNICEF, UNAMSIL and SL Government. SL government largely treated the reintegration of women and girls as a social process, returning to normal- meaning talking to communities and families about the need to take women and girls back. The traumatic experiences that the women and children survived were 'expected', during the post conflict, to return to their families and back to their normal lives. A question raised is how does a 11 year conflict that caused psychological trauma to (more especially women and children) expect its victims to return to their 'normal' lives. The chapter goes on to show the little extent to which empowerment programs indeed exhibit a shift towards more representative, inclusive and localised development approach. This idea or notion is by the view that development initiations are often western-led development. A programme such as the DDR was initiated to help former soldiers transition from soldiers to citizens. Many women did not participate in the DDR process due to that they were excluded, and training for women were highly limited; and those that stated that they received no help from the program had no economic independence. Forty-four women left their armed group of the 50 that were interviewed. They returned to their families and did not want any contact with the DDR and one reported that she was not with the rebels any longer.

Victims left behind and neglected by the local and international community. Presumably those who left voluntarily and did not want to part of the DDR which was created to target young girls; and women who were either still living with their captors or who had been abducted (before the age of 18) and had been released or escaped as a short term low numbers of women in the DDR process. Women and girls were part of wars and conflict.

Chapter 6 relates to Chapter 2 on the rape and conflict of SL, it focuses on how sexual violence disrupting conjugal order, men with power, rights and access to the labour of women. Even for the few women and girls who were recognized as playing an active role in SL's conflict, a variety of titles were constructed to avoid calling them soldiers including 'camp followers', 'sex slaves', 'domestic slaves', or 'women and girls' associated with the fighting forces'. During the time of peace, sex in marriages was associated with violate patriarchal norms, which women and children were a subject to sex, rape and violence.

We found Chapter 7 to be intriguing and sensitive as the name labelling of innocent children of rape; children born as a result of rape. A destruction to the liberal family as a norm due to the stigma and discrimination of children born because of rape in SL. They were labelled as war children, abandoned children and street children. 'They challenge the traditional liberal model of the family because they reveal that all children are considered natural extensions of the family unit'.

Chapter 8 concludes that to transform the post-conflict period into a time of possibilities, empowerment and progress for everyone; women must be included in the policy making and implementation process. Real attention to women's and girls' experiences would produce a more complicated understanding of women and of conflict. Such complicated notions of women and conflict would bring new solutions and new questions to policy analysis in post-conflict reconstruction. This chapter also emphasise the importance of family unit and reconsidering individual experiences for future policy making.

We found the book intriguing to read and on how post conflict programs should be gender neutral; a need to rethink the meaning of post-conflict so it should benefit the targeted group. The overall book contributes to literature from a feminist approach; good on expressing feminist perspective voice on how wars are associated with women. It also emphasises on sexual violence and women being removed from policy making processes in the case of SL war regime. Its reveals that sexual violence rates are extremely high amongst female soldiers and misinterpreted. Additionally, women were primarily abductees, camp followers, domestic workers, and sex slaves. Securitized subjects, such as male soldiers, receive significantly more attention and funding from post-conflict policy makers, rather desecuritized women. The book lacks theoretical foundation and the interviews conducted were biased, as most women were interviewed however men who were part of the war were excluded. Additionally, low numbers of women participating in the DDR because the argument that women and girls are not 'real soldiers'. The Copenhagen School of thought and critical security studies generally has not systematically included gender as a category of analysis. This research-based book also omits that out of the 75 000 soldiers, the author did not elaborate if the number included survivors from war or those who defined themselves as soldiers.

The book titled *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, security and Post Conflict Development* was intriguing, exciting and stimulating to read. It fulfilled its purpose and attracted audiences from different disciplines. The feminist approach that the author drew from was not to pose against men and favour women. However it reveal what has been ignored regarding post-conflict program implementation processes and the notion of gender as to men

being associated with 'war and violence' and women with 'victims and subjects to war'. The book could have included men being sexually violated, human rights, trauma, murder of their wives and children and how it impacts their lives.