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## Book Review: War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina

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## **War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Ebru Demir<sup>2</sup>

Wars create irreparable damage. In wars, people lose their loved ones and go through unimaginable physical and psychological suffering. The destructive effects of wars are incontestable. However, times of war can also be periods when windows for considerable legal, political and socio-economic changes are opened. A momentum for an intervention in social, political and economic structures occurs in these periods. In *War, Women, and Power: From Violence to Mobilization in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina*, Marie E. Berry argues that these points of momentum offer the opportunity for women to mobilize in novel and eclectic ways (p.153). Berry's book contains concise arguments and is written in very clear language. The organization of the chapters and the use of figures, which summarize the arguments and discussions, make this book an easy-to-follow read.

The arguments in the book are not, however, where its originality and its contribution lie. The ways in which wars mobilize women and give them agency are not unfamiliar to anyone who is already working in the field of gender and peacebuilding. Similarly, it is a widely known and established argument that violence against women continues in varied forms and to different extents after wars have ended. This 'continuum of violence' is a well-researched and empirically supported concept in the literature and it enables us to see the continuities of violence in post-war societies. Scholars such as Cynthia Cockburn, Cynthia Enloe, Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman have long challenged the 'peace' and 'war' dichotomy, explored the continuums of violence against women, and questioned the meaning of peace for women. Berry's main arguments in the book are therefore not novel or authentically original for scholars who are working in the field.

Selecting Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina as case studies and comparing these historically and socio-politically very different countries might surprise readers initially. However, similarities between these countries exist: Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina both went through mass violence in the same time period, and both have been initial experimental fields of the international community in its responses to mass atrocities. Moreover, both countries "featured the mass killing of non-combatants, ethnic antagonisms, widespread sexualized violence, and massive population displacement" (p.17). Berry reports that the more she delved further into the cases, the more similarities regarding women's political engagement and mobilization in many areas became clear (p.17).

As a consequence of gendered violence, men constituted most of the dead in both wars. This demographic change had a huge impact on both societies. Women, as a practical necessity, continued their daily activities without any intervention from male members of their families (p.69). Participation in the social, economic and sometimes political life was therefore not an

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewed Book Citation: Marie E. Berry; 2018. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. 294 pages; contains 10 b/w illus. 4 maps, 3 tables, index. \$37.76 (Hardcover) \$34.99 (Paperback). Available as e-book.

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option but a necessity for survival. Many local women's organizations emerged in both countries. As Berry stresses, these organizations did

not explicitly aim to challenge traditional patriarchal society or dismantle the gendered status quo; instead, they often essentialize women's roles as nurturers or as peacemakers because they are rooted in the understanding that women's primary responsibility is to preserve life (p.88).

Even though women undertook essentialized roles, such organizations opened a space for them to come together, share each other's stories and at least begin to heal their wounds. At the end of the wars, it did not take these women too long to realize that they could apply to projects sponsored by governmental or non-governmental aid organizations and receive funding for their local self-help organizations. After giving a deep historical background to both countries' war experiences (Chapter 2 Rwanda; Chapter 5 Bosnia-Herzegovina) and to the demographic, economic and cultural shifts (Chapter 3 Rwanda; Chapter 6 Bosnia-Herzegovina), Berry rigorously investigates women's mobilization in these local self-help organizations (Chapter 4 Rwanda; Chapter 7 Bosnia-Herzegovina).

Chapter 8 is a particularly interesting and engaging chapter in which Berry identifies three principal obstacles preventing women's mobilization from being long-term. First, Berry shows that political settlements in both countries have been major impediments. After the atrocities in both Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the political elites of the countries created ethnic antagonisms by privileging one ethnic group over the other as "most victimized" by the violence (p.179). The problematic contribution of international criminal law in the hierarchy of victimhood is undeniable. By prosecuting only the rapes which were used as a 'weapon of war' and as an 'instrument of genocide', one particular form of victimization is prioritized by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). The political elite's use of a hierarchy of victimhood perpetuated ethnic divides both between and within ethnic groups and fractured women's (especially inter-ethnic) mobilization.

Second, the findings set out in the book demonstrate that the involvement of the international community has been detrimental to the women's mobilization in the long run. The responses of the international community to the atrocities in both countries remained top-down, technocratic and short-term (pp.192-201). Berry clearly presents her interviewees' resentment of these shortsighted international efforts (p.201). Third, according to Berry the revitalization of patriarchy in the aftermath of both wars has been an obstacle to women's mobilization. In both Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, women's legal, political and economic gains have been pushed back as a result of the patriarchal backlash (p.201).

Overall, the book provides an in-depth understanding of women's mobilization in both post-war countries. My only criticism is the lack of any conceptual and theoretical discussion of the concept of 'power', which is in the title of the book. The only reason I can think of for this is that Berry might be considering mobilization as power. If Berry equates mobilization with power, it is very problematic since this approach ignores the dynamics which enabled women to mobilize in the first place and therefore oversimplifies the concept of power.

The novelty and originality of the book come from the data which Berry gathered through interviews. In addition to conducting 152 interviews with women in Rwanda and 109 interviews with women in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Berry meticulously engages with relevant reports of

governments and international organizations on these two countries. Such in-depth research is the greatest strength of the book. Looking at two cases specifically and comparatively is what makes this book an essential read for scholars who are working in the fields of gender and peacebuilding.