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Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone

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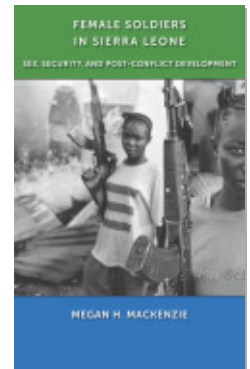
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Conclusion

Displacing War Mythology and Developmental Logic

This book began with reference to an image of a young male holding an AK-47. The young man was discussed as symbolic of oversimplified characterizations of chaotic, irrational, and male-driven civil wars in Africa. Perhaps it is fitting now to think about what—if any—iconic images of African women exist. A quick online image search using any combination of “Africa,” “war,” and “women” will inevitably produce a barrage of pictures of female victims or peacemakers. It is apparent that images of women are primarily used to represent the aftermath of civil war or the devastating effect of war on civilian populations. Two photos are particularly prominent. The first, which shows a half-naked young Sierra Leonean woman sitting propped up on one arm with her legs stretched out and her breasts exposed, was used as part of a campaign to raise awareness about sexual violence across the globe by Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), a service of the UN for the coordination of humanitarian affairs. The IRIN campaign, entitled “Broken Bodies Broken Dreams,” featured images from victims of sexual violence that were published and shown in exhibitions in New York, Geneva, and Nairobi.¹ A second image used frequently to represent the civil war in Sierra Leone is of a young woman with either one or both of her limbs amputated. There are multiple versions of this picture used by a variety of actors, from online journals,² to university research centers,³ to foreign policy blogs.⁴

Both of these representations of women have typically been employed to raise awareness about the ways that civilians were impacted and victimized by the civil war. Furthermore, they signal that women’s bodies are stained with the legacies of the conflict. The reproduction of these images is one of the political choices that serve to reconstruct women in a distinct ways post-conflict. Instead of images of women participating in the conflict, or of former female soldiers graduating from skills training programs or returning to school, or representations of the multiple ways women managed to work and survive in the post-conflict environment, these two images of victimized females dominate.

Certainly, sexual violence and amputation are two phenomena of war that deserve attention and research; however, the manner in which women are used to draw attention to these issues seems contradictory. For example, it is perplexing that campaigners chose an image of a bare-breasted young woman to draw attention to sexual violence, exploitation, and abuse. Furthermore, representations of female amputees evoke shock and sympathy on cue; they also perpetuate a generalized understanding of females as being impacted by war rather than participating in it. In this sense the amputation images are particularly ironic considering that Adama Cut-Hand, a high-ranking female RUF rebel, is largely believed to have initiated and fueled the use of amputations as a weapon of war.

One of the aims of this book is to encourage readers to look beyond not only these iconic images but also other sources of dominant war narratives and myths. These representations were countered with a critical examination of sex, power, and the ways that female soldiers are (re)constructed as gendered subjects through post-conflict policies. Each chapter problematized how we understand both conflict and “post-conflict” by looking at the various types of “conflicts,” including sexual violence, gendered ordering, stigmatization, and stereotyping that continue in the so-called post-conflict moment. This analysis uncovered the gendered nature of terms such as post-conflict, rehabilitation, violence, reintegration, and development. It also showed how the emphasis on universalism, objective humanitarianism, and liberal economic development overshadows oppressive and restrictive disciplinary measures that take place in the name of achieving these objectives.

Several broad conclusions can be drawn from the preceding chapters. The first is the conviction that analyses of war that are attentive to individual women’s and girls’ experiences produce a more complicated understanding of women (who can be both victims and aggressors/agents), of conflict (as consuming of the entire society and extending beyond the official time lines of war), and of the post-conflict period (as a nonspecific time that is potentially as violent or repressive as war). Understanding how women experienced war cannot be determined solely by examining the ways in which they have been victimized. 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. This requires in-depth interviews with women and analyses of their war experiences, as well as concerted and ongoing efforts to allow women to share control and participate in decision making. I have argued that individual experiences

and stories should not be categorized as either confirming warfare mythologies and expectations or constituting irrelevant exceptions. War impacts individuals in complex and variable ways. Listening to these multifaceted experiences helps to disrupt dominant—and often oversimplified—narratives of warfare.

Furthermore, listening to individual stories assists in dispelling the representation of warfare as an “event” and the postwar period as a staged process. Often war is depicted as if it is a black box of time and space characterized by chaos, violence, unpredictability, and exceptionality, while—in contrast—the postwar moment is seen as a sterile and phased process that can be predictably managed. Post-conflict has almost become understood as a sort of formula: peace accord + disarmament + transitional justice = healing, forgiveness, and harmony. What is missing from this equation are individual experiences. A young woman from Makeni raising a baby born as a result of rape will presumably experience “post-conflict” differently than an orphaned child in Freetown or an HIV-positive teenager from Bo. Recovery, healing, acceptance, and reintegration are personal experiences that cannot be systematized.

When I visited Sierra Leone at the end of 2005, I was certainly given the impression that the international donor community had decided that “the postwar” period was over for Sierra Leone. The reintegration phase of the DDR had long since been finalized for adults, with the children’s process ending in December 2005. These programs were ending not because local organizations had declared the reintegration process complete and a success but because donor funding had effectively dried up. In fact, several social workers and community members expressed their concern to me about the abrupt end to the reintegration process. Some told stories of young soldiers whose school fees would cease to be covered; others mentioned the numerous soldiers who had not been included in DDR processes and were unemployed and desperate.

Of the few centers that were offering skills training for female soldiers, the majority were either in the process of ending their programs or struggling to raise money to continue their efforts. On a sweltering day in December I attended a graduation for a class of former female soldiers who had been trained as tailors. In previous years each graduate would receive a sewing machine and a start-up kit with some fabrics, needles, and scissors; however, this year, due to a lack of funding, only the top student received a used machine. Amid expressions of joy and celebration at the ceremony, students and parents expressed concern that the graduates

would not be able to generate enough business with their skills to earn a living.

Another program nearing the end of its funded mandate was the National Commission for War Affected Children (NACWAC). The remaining staff at NACWAC indicated that their missions to repatriate refugee children and assist former child soldiers in rehabilitating and reintegrating into their communities were far from complete. Despite the needs within the community for its services, NACWAC had lost the majority of its funding and was no longer considered an essential branch of the Sierra Leone government. Similarly, one UNICEF staff member admitted that even though that organization was still working to reintegrate child soldiers, it had to rename most of its initiatives. Under pressure to move away from war and postwar policies and references, it was now focusing primarily on street children—even if many of those street children happened to be child soldiers.

There were also generalized concerns about the security vacuum that would be created when the majority of the remaining UNAMSIL peacekeepers withdrew in December 2005. Many expressed fear that the local police did not have the competency or resources to sustain social order after a withdrawal. The economic impacts of UNAMSIL's withdrawal were perhaps of even greater concern to many Sierra Leoneans I spoke with. For years UNAMSIL had been one of the largest employers in the country; furthermore, UN staff injected American dollars into the economy. By the end of 2005, several restaurants, clubs, and beaches that were once full of UN and INGO staff—as well as other internationals—were markedly quieter. Witnessing the declared end of the post-conflict phase in Sierra Leone was an eye-opening experience that raised many questions for me about development and post-conflict as an industry. International organizations and the UN not only were concluding programs in Sierra Leone but also were gearing up for work in other war-torn areas. In fact, many of the UN staff that I met in Freetown moved directly from Sierra Leone to Sudan to join a growing mission there, focused on order and reconstruction.

When asked about the impact of war on civilians, Foday Sankoh, a former RUF commander, responded that when two elephants are fighting it is the grass that suffers. This is one viewpoint I share with Sankoh. I believe that if you want to see the impact of war on people—children, women, or men—you cannot only examine the “official” and public conflict and the warring parties. Rather, you must also consider the impact on civilians and communities not only during the war but years later. Mere written descriptions or statistics accounting for deaths and destruction in war tell only one

story about conflict; they cannot convey the breadth and depth of various extended impacts of trauma, displacement, horror, and violence on a population. I have argued that a more nuanced and textured analysis comes from speaking and listening to girls and women whose lives are impacted by the conflict, and taking into account their voices and experiences, as well as their views of what needs to be done in order to move forward after war.

A second foundational message this book conveys is that sex, marriage, childbirth, and the body are not private matters to be separated from international politics. From the outset—including a historical analysis in chapter 2 that focused on colonial and postcolonial sexual regulation and its legacies—the concept of conjugal order has been utilized to demonstrate that political policy and power structures depend on and reinforce a particular gendered order. An understanding of conjugal order is also helpful in illustrating the significance of victim characterization for women in post-conflict Sierra Leone. I argue that most iterations of conjugal order assume weak and passive female subjects. This presumption requires and justifies the existence of the male head of household, the male aggressor and protector, and reinforces stereotypes about women as caretakers and natural parents. As shown in chapter 3, powerful and violent women who act and make choices during war disrupt conjugal order because they weaken the imaginary of the damsel in distress and delegitimize the construction of warriors, soldiers, and rebels as exclusively male subjects.

Similarly, attention to conjugal order results in a unique perspective on sexual violence and its legacies. In chapter 6 I argue that rape is an effective tool of war because of established patriarchal order. The act of rape disrupts very particular relationships and norms associated with conjugal order, including the presumption that sex within marriage is sacred; the belief that wives are the property of their husbands and are the containers of family honor; and the conviction that ethnicity, national identity, and community membership are passed on only through the father. Without these norms wartime rape would still be an act of violence, and victims of this violence would be deeply impacted; however, these norms elevate rape from a single act of violence against another individual to one that shames entire communities, negatively brands the victims and any offspring born as a result, and generally wreaks havoc on families and communities.

In turn, conjugal order can be used as a tool to systematically examine how particular understandings of sex, marriage, and the family inform and influence international politics. For decades feminists have been calling for attention to the private sphere; however, this term can obscure the

concrete social norms and hierarchies it aims to represent. When anything deemed “below” domestic politics or anything associated with the home, sex, or the family becomes universally obscured and blanketed by this vague notion of “the private,” it becomes nearly impossible not only to examine the particulars of these relationships but also to understand their significance to international politics. More precisely, for this book the concept of conjugal order was useful in illustrating the linkages between development and security policies and the ways both rely on, and enforce, a particular form of conjugal order. I have argued that policies directed at enhancing security or development tend to require and institute specific—often Western-liberal—forms of conjugal order.

I have also argued that one should not accept at face value the benevolent, progressive, and universalistic messages perpetuated by development policies. Development actors are not apolitical but have significant powers in shaping and constraining politics, identity, and power structures. Development projects within Sierra Leone reflect trends within the policy and academic field in their presumption of legitimate subjects, behaviors, and values. Through my analysis of post-conflict development programs such as disarmament, empowerment, and reintegration programs I conclude the development project is not about facilitating any forms of so-called indigenous growth, progress, or recovery; instead, these policies presume, promote, institute, and enforce a very particular Western, liberal, capitalist, and patriarchal order. Moreover, development policies do not necessarily replace traditional, corrupt, chaotic, or violent arrangements with peaceful and progressive ones.

In war-torn areas of Africa in particular, international development programs are often depicted as rescue missions for regions that are too devastated and chaotic to initiate their own recovery. It took only a few interviews to determine that this approach to development is naive and condescending. I thought it would be fitting to highlight the recommendations of a couple of people who have worked in the area of development in Sierra Leone for more than twenty years. The first, Hamidu Jalloh, is a Sierra Leonean living in Freetown who has been working in the area of development for most of his career. He expressed his frustration with the disarmament process in Sierra Leone and offered these suggestions:

This is the way I would have looked at the DDR [disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration] program, if I had my say I would have loved the DDR to be heavily rural biased because most of the people came from

there. We need a heavy investment in infrastructure. There is also a need to work the land resources—the land is lying there, there is wastage nobody knows how to process. We need to offer useful and practical skills training such as farm husbandry. People get frustrated because they can't get jobs with their skills training so they end up going to the diamond mines. Most of the former combatants are in Kono in the mining areas.⁵

Jalloh's suggestions show the need for truly "bottom-up" ideas of development. For him, impractical development initiatives take funding and energy away from programs that could more optimally benefit local areas. Edward Anague, the founder of a small development organization in Freetown that focuses on amputees and victims of sexual assault, offers a second perspective:

We need something that creates employment. If you train for only six months and you can't even fix a button what can you call that person—not a seamstress. Education refocuses. There is a need to give ex-combatants something meaningful so that the person can see it as a legitimate option. This should be a long-term process. It is not a crash course. It is not about giving \$100 to ex-combatants. If you want results it has to be more than a six-month program—NGOs are pressured to produce "results" but in the end the projects don't amount to anything.⁶

Anague reiterates the frustration expressed by Jalloh with short-term inappropriate development initiatives. Similarly, one of the female soldiers I interviewed summed up many of the conclusions of this book in the following short comment. When asked about the DDR and its limitations, she responded:

They disarmed most of the boys and the ladies remained. So when they disarmed boys and men . . . they went back to their different places and they left the women here. . . . The men have gone back to their lives without taking the women with them or the children. They don't say "come with me to start a new life," they just go. . . . So [the organizers of the DDR] need to do something for the women too.⁷

All three responses demonstrate that Sierra Leone does not need projects, models, and plans for development invented from outside its borders; rather, people who live and work in Sierra Leone, who have been impacted by war,

who are committed to the country, and who understand the sociopolitical context already possess ideas and plans for progress and change.

I also contend throughout the book that the very definitions of post-conflict and development require critical reexamination. “Post-conflict,” “reintegration,” “rehabilitation,” and “reconstruction” are not gender-neutral terms. In the collective, universal processes that are implemented after the official end of a war, the development, reconstruction, and rehabilitation processes often exclude women and girls. My analysis of the disarmament process and sexual violence demonstrates that for countless women in Sierra Leone, post-conflict reintegration is defined by silence, concealment, stigma, and fear. For them, this period has not always been a time of positive transformation. Hardly a time of progress and empowerment, for all intents and purposes there is no “post-conflict” for many female soldiers in Sierra Leone. For a large number of the women interviewed, different forms of violence such as forced marriage, sexual exploitation, and isolation continue despite the cessation of formal conflict. In addition, female soldiers’ social and political choices seem as constrained by notions of loyalty, duty, and identity in the “post-conflict” period as they were during the conflict.

Another overarching conclusion has been that the merging of development and security—or the radicalization of development—exacerbated the tendencies of policy makers to ignore or deprioritize gender as an important variable, and women as immediate concerns. The resistance to naming female soldiers as soldiers discussed in chapter 3 and the categorization of sexual violence and “war babies” as private issues demonstrated in chapters 6 and 7 support the argument that matters including or relating to women during and after war are seldom recognized as policy priorities. In the first instance, policy makers refused even to acknowledge female soldiers as legitimate subjects. In spite of ample evidence that women and girls participated as soldiers during the conflict, policy makers consistently reconstructed and recategorized them either as “wives,” “camp followers,” or “sex slaves” or as exceptions. Thus, I have concluded that even when women participate in the activities of “high politics” or sectors traditionally categorized as security priorities such as war, they get recast out of the public political sphere and into the domestic realm through post-conflict development policies.

In terms of sexual violence, I have argued that despite the widespread use of wartime rape and the prevalence of children born of such rape, policy makers continued to view sex and childbirth as private issues. Currently, addressing wartime sexual conduct and its impacts is not readily identified as being integral to the restoration of sustainable peace. The disarmament

process, which was given top priority, should be concerned with managing sexual violence and the lasting impacts of wartime sexual behavior as much as it is concerned with soldiers surrendering any weapons they may have used during the war.

An additional broader conclusion to be drawn from this analysis is that while the academic field of development has expanded—with a surge in critical, postcolonial, and feminist scholars in particular—development policies have not detached themselves from their liberal influences and modernization tendencies. The dominant discourses of development policy, including the prevalence of development models and the focus on “stages,” deliverables, outputs, and capacity, are demonstrative of the liberal bias of development policy as well as continuities with its colonial and imperial roots. Development policy needs its own rehabilitation process. Rather than another reinvention of development policy through discursive incarnations such as participation, empowerment, or capacity building, I argue that radical rethinking of the liberal and imperial roots of development is required. Development organizations cannot continue to reinvent themselves as a sort of humanitarian messiah without taking seriously the multiple failures and limits to current development logic. The gap between scholars who conduct research and provide reflections on issues pertaining to development and the major decision makers in development policy remains far too vast.

In addition, there is a need to revisit the current conceptualization of gender in policy discourses. Equating gender with “women’s issues” allows patriarchy to come in through the back door (to borrow a phrase from Christine Sylvester); rather than development actors critically thinking through gender as an analytical category and considering the ways in which their institutions and approaches might reinforce specific gender norms and stereotypes, gender becomes exclusively linked to “women.” In turn, this conflation of gender and women removes the responsibility of organizations and policy makers to account for their role in the construction of masculinity and femininity. The result is that both gender and women remain at the periphery as a “special” subcategory of development issues.

In terms of future research, I hope this work demonstrates the need to critique dominant notions of conflict and post-conflict and encourages long-term and in-depth analysis of the impacts of war that take gender and the experiences of women seriously. Feminists should be at the forefront of research that serves to deconstruct and disrupt some of the stereotypical binaries that continue to limit international relations, including victim/warrior, violent/peaceful, and aggressive/maternal. Feminists must resist the

temptation to fall into orthodox approaches and understandings of international relations. Specifically, feminist approaches to security should not consist of “women and security,” “women and war,” or “women and guns.” Similarly, feminist approaches to development must move beyond attempts to add women into existing frameworks and programs. Such efforts merely reinforce existing paradigms and discount generations of feminist scholarship that has encouraged a shift in attention away from limited understandings of so-called high politics. Instead, feminist scholars must consistently resist and counter conventional understandings of security and development by paying attention to the ways in which traditional understandings of security and development rely on and enforce explicit forms of gender order.