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Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone

Megan H. MacKenzie

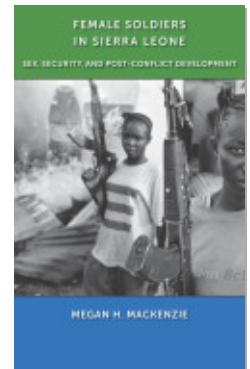
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FOREWORD

The New Feminist International Relations

CHRISTINE SYLVESTER

At last, students of feminist international relations (IR) have become interested in the women hiding in plain view: the women of war and conflict, which is to say the women who become agents of collective violence and, when possible, of post-conflict strategies. The violent woman of international relations is not only more “OK” to study than she once was; she is apt to be visited in situ by academics from a field that used to associate fieldwork with comparative politics, anthropology, and area studies. True IR scholars once seemed to theorize from their university offices and to produce high abstractions as a result. Everyday people were either invisible in international relations, because they were beside the point, or slotted into a few categories of relevance—soldiers, civilians, deaths. Now, along with exposing the many locations once blotted out by a Great Powers focus, analysts of feminist international relations are increasingly going to ground and endeavoring to study up rather than do IR theory at the top. Many are talking to people who have experienced war and conflict and also know personally and politically about post-conflict programs pursued by local and international communities.

Megan MacKenzie is a headliner in this new approach to studying and doing IR. Her book dashes prominent assumptions that war is about states, weapons, and strategies or is, at base, a set of activities that men plan and execute and women mostly suffer and protest. Unless we know women's experiences with one of the most persistent social institutions known to humans—war—all the studies in the world will not be able to overcome fundamental shortcomings around what war is, who and what it involves, and what its consequences are for people and societies. Pressing questions need to be addressed, as they are here, concerning gender-based violence in war and postwar, what “normal” security for women means in different places (e.g., is it conjugal security?), and how the interested researcher can talk to women combatants, hear them, and interpret experiences that are bound to be very distant from her personal and political frames of reference. MacKenzie addresses these and other key issues in the context of a war that took her to Sierra Leone.

She also addresses the much-vaunted concept of post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. Exactly who and which norms and institutions are reconstructed in what directions? Does peace after war entail reassigning women to domestic spaces and limited forms of agency? Who reconciles with whom? What is the range of politics that women and girls experience and seek to achieve in situations of war and postwar? And, is their politics acknowledged and facilitated by academicians and by practitioners of development and guardians of human rights on the ground, or is it bypassed in scripts that define security and development from the top rather than up from people's wishes to agencies with resources?

It is a privilege to know some of the leading “new generation” scholars of feminist IR across the world and to hear their war and postwar stories, their new theorizing, and their research anxieties, firsthand and via Skype. When exhausting and trying fieldwork joins up with theory as well as it does in this book by Megan MacKenzie, I know that feminist IR is alive, well, and dwelling everywhere now, not just in some gendered places.