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Megan H. MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development*. New York: NYU Press, 2012. Pp. xii, 175. ISBN 978-0-8147-6137-3.

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In her trenchant foreword (“The New Feminist International Relations”) to *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone*, political scientist Christine Sylvester hails Megan H. MacKenzie (Univ. of Sydney) as “a headliner in [the] new [feminist] approach to studying and doing IR [international relations]. 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” (xii). MacKenzie, admittedly, is indebted in her analysis of female soldiers in Sierra Leone’s 1991–2002 civil conflict to Sylvester and other feminist IR scholars who study “women who become agents of collective violence and, when possible, of post-conflict strategies” (xi). These young women and girls—“hiding in plain view” (xi)—are often presented as “war victims” of rape and sexual slavery (40); they stand in sharp contrast to the boys who are often depicted as “child soldiers” in conflicts in Sierra Leone and Africa generally. Although exact figures are elusive, MacKenzie estimates that 30–50 percent of fighting forces in the Sierra Leone conflict were female.

Against this backdrop, the author describes several related issues in chapters 1, “Conjugal Order and Insecurity Post-Conflict,” and 2, “The History of Sex, Order, and Conflict in Sierra Leone.” The first issue is the representation of the boy soldier—drawn by interested parties outside Sierra Leone—as tattered, disenfranchised, uneducated, and wielding his AK-47, with a face toughened by hard experience. This image is meant to attract donations for war victims. Second is the perception of Africa itself as a land dependent on outside intervention because of civil conflicts, political chaos and corruption, economic underdevelopment, and grinding poverty. Third is the depiction of women and girls as war victims, unrepresented in so-called “official” histories of the conflict or postwar reconstruction programs. These narratives of war and peace are, MacKenzie argues, “gendered myths” that ignore, silence, or exclude females, thereby limiting our understanding of the intricacies of war.

Through personal interviews in 2005 with seventy-five women¹ aged eighteen to thirty-two, MacKenzie reveals that women in fact felt empowered during the war by their various activities—the killing of enemy fighters, weapons training and use, spying, sexual assaults, arson, and commanding their own armed groups. All this provides an alternative narrative of the actions of female fighters in both war and peace in Sierra Leone.

MacKenzie contends that women and girls are often overlooked in discussions of security matters, economic development, and post-conflict reconstruction generally,² owing to western notions of “conjugal order”; this neoliberal conception of the laws and norms regulating sexuality also defined socially acceptable and legitimate relationships more broadly. This goes far to explain why women, despite their considerable impact in the fighting, yet gained no positions of power and authority in postwar communities in Sierra Leone.

In chapters 2 and 6, “Securitizing Sex? Rethinking Wartime Sexual Violence,” MacKenzie traces attitudes about women in society in the history of Sierra Leone: specifically, she shows that the code of conjugal order originated under British colonial rule, while the subsequent policies of donor countries and organizations privileged heterosexual nuclear families as a kind of control mechanism. However, she then contradicts herself by suggesting that most people in the protectorate period were never under the sort of

1. Fifty in a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) center in Makeni, and twenty-five in the eastern suburbs of Freetown.

2. MacKenzie utilizes here Mark Duffield’s concept of “radicalization of development”—*Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (NY: Zed Books, 2001).

direct control or colonial laws the British imposed in the colony of Freetown. The distinction between colony (established in 1808) and protectorate (declared in 1896) lasted until independence in April 1961, when the protectorate was divided into the “provinces.” But, contrary to MacKenzie’s claims, British colonial authorities in fact extended their writ to the protectorate through both laws and administrative mechanisms and personnel. For instance, they divided the protectorate into districts, each governed by a British colonial official. To fund their administration, they imposed the taxes that sparked the Hut Tax War of 1898. Moreover, patriarchal norms subordinating women to their husbands and other male family members were already regularized in laws and customs predating colonial rule.³ In short, the handling here of the origins of conjugal order lacks depth and a basis in published and archival sources on precolonial, colonial, and contemporary Sierra Leone.

In chapter 3, “Defining Soldiers,” MacKenzie draws on the opinions of her interviewees, who saw themselves not as helpless, passive victims, but as true soldiers who played many and diverse roles in the war: they sometimes suffered brutality and sexual abuse, but often perpetrated such violence themselves. This picture challenges and corrects the prevailing gendered dichotomy of the “securitized” male warrior and “naturalized” female victim. That her interviewees were denied reintegration benefits at war’s end, MacKenzie argues, is attributable, in part, to the authorities’ refusal to classify them as soldiers to begin with. Otherwise, they could (and should) have received the same benefits as their male counterparts.

The neoliberal agenda of many funding organizations helped to depoliticize of women’s and girls’ roles during the conflict, rendering reintegration a purely social process. Even when these agencies spoke of empowering women, they did not solicit input from local communities or potential female beneficiaries. As a result, Mackenzie maintains in chapter 4, “Empowerment Boom or Bust? Assessing Women’s Post-Conflict Empowerment Initiatives,” most female combatants did not participate in DDR programs. Those who did were treated differently from male soldiers, receiving inadequate or limited training in gendered, poorly compensated work skills. In addition, DDR programs were rife with corruption and mismanagement of donated funds.

In chapter 5, “Securitization and Desecuritization: Female Soldiers and the Reconstruction of Women,” MacKenzie points out that DDR eligibility criteria were often confusing and prospective female beneficiaries feared stigmatization by their families and communities; and, in any case, those who could have registered for benefits lacked weapons (taken away from them by their male counterparts or abandoned at war’s end), which were required for registration. However, MacKenzie notes that women sometimes adjusted their wartime stories and experiences to meet the requirements for benefits.

In chapters 7, “Loving Your Enemy: Rape, Sex, Childbirth, and Politics Post-Armed Conflict,” and 8, “Displacing War Mythology and Developmental Logic,” MacKenzie links the marginalization of female soldiers and the children born of rape to policy makers’ views of sex and childbirth as private matters. Her call for feminists to lead in deconstructing and disrupting centuries-old stereotypes of female lives is most welcome. The book builds on the critical discourse of feminist IR scholars in stressing women’s contributions to war instead of their victimization by it. But MacKenzie exaggerates the dearth of scholarship on the roles of women during and after the civil wars in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in Africa; nor is she right to say that such research has concentrated mostly on girls, rather than women, who fought in Sierra Leone. She herself notes that over eight hundred women testified before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Moreover, even before the publication of her book, other scholars had begun to study the activities of female soldiers.⁴

The book could have benefited from careful reflection on the February 2009 judgment of the Special Court for Sierra Leone⁵ that rape, sexual slavery (also held to be a war crime), and forced marriages are

3. See, e.g., Michael Jackson, *The Kuranko: Dimensions of Social Reality in a West African Society* (NY: St. Martin’s, 1977).

4. Among those MacKenzie herself cites are Dyan Mazurana, Khristopher Carlson, Chris Coulter, and Myriam Denov.

5. In the case of Revolutionary United Front defendants Hassan Sesay, Morris Kallon, and Augustine Gbao.

crimes against humanity. Also very germane is the Sierra Leonean Parliament's enactment of legislation⁶ altering the sociocultural and political landscapes that once sustained conjugal order.

Nevertheless, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone* is a major contribution to the growing historiography of its subject, including postwar reconstruction and socioeconomic development. It will interest and reward not only policy makers, but also students and scholars in the fields of gender studies, history, and law.⁷

6. Particularly, the Domestic Violence (2007), Devolution of Estates (2007), and Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce (2009) acts.

7. Misspellings are a minor irritant in the book: e.g., "Kriole" for Creole or Krio; "Shabu" for Sherbro; and "Timne" for Temne. More conspicuously regrettable is the cover photograph of *Liberian* militia women instead of Sierra Leonean female soldiers.