

Book review

War, Women and Post-conflict Empowerment: Lessons from Sierra Leone

Edited by Josephine Beoku-Betts and
Fredline A. M'Cormack-Hale, 2022

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*Reviewed by Zikho Dana**

War, Women and Post-conflict Empowerment: Lessons from Sierra Leone, edited by Josephine Beoku-Betts and Fredline A. M'Cormack-Hale uses an African Feminist theory to explicate how issues such as class, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, and heteronormativity intersect and are shaped by women in the African context, specifically in the war and post war contexts. The book offers conceptual frameworks embedded in “African centred gendered analysis” which privileges African lived realities and localised understandings of empowerment and development over dominant Western neoliberal conceptual frameworks. It does this by showcasing various womanhood and motherhood strategies used by women in Sierra Leone to end the 11-year Civil War (1991–2002). Equally so, the book divulges various ways women’s mass mobilisation has contributed to post-war Sierra Leone which saw the passage of landmark laws that protect women from patriarchal violations that predate the

* Zikho Dana is an nGAP Lecturer at Rhodes University in the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL).

11-year Civil War. This book is authored in collaboration with various contributors ranging from scholars to activists, researchers, and historians. It is grounded in progressive intersectional discourses systematically anchored in women's lived experiences in pursuit of securing substantial social, legal, and political gains for women in Sierra Leone. It offers invaluable context-oriented lessons that women the world over can learn from.

Wars by nature are devastating but women and men experience wars differently; men may bear the brunt of the war, but it is women who are adversely affected because these wars are also fought on women's bodies. With that in mind, women in Sierra Leone saw the aftermath of the 11-year Civil War as an opportunity to advocate women's empowerment. It is against this backdrop that the editors and contributors submit *War, Women and Post-conflict Empowerment: Lessons from Sierra Leone* after years of research as "a result of a labour of love". It is a love letter to the people of Sierra Leone which boasts an innovative conglomerate of diverse contributors whose genesis was in the Special Panel sponsored by the African Studies Association Women's Caucus at its 2014 annual meeting. The title of the panel was "The Politics of Women's Empowerment in Post-war Sierra Leone." Papers presented in this conference were later published in a special issue of *African and Asian Studies* in 2015. The book was published in 2022 by Zed Books (Bloomsbury Publishing, London).

By methodically diving deep into the historiography of Sierra Leone part one of the book sets the tone for the trajectory it takes the readers through: the significance of storytelling in the post-war period and how it is intrinsic to reconciliation and paving a path towards reconstructing the social and moral fabric of a war-torn country. Part two takes us through the voyage into the early political career of Zainab Hawa Bangura (1994–2005), followed by the linguistic vitriol, bastardisation, intimidation, and violence against women who dare to "transgress" into politics-men's "turf". The centring of women chiefs as conduits to their societies bridges the gap between traditional and modern spaces, thus highlighting the vital role of these women. Even with their declining numbers, their impact in their communities did not go unnoticed. Part three draws on women's legal, social, and political intersectionality which has shaped and continues to shape their activism. Lastly, part four takes us through various insightful approaches that Sierra Leonean women have

used to make strides in their collective activism and the numerous issues that they must work through to consolidate this.

Women in Sierra Leone have relied on various women and motherly attributes to assert themselves in ending the war, managing post-war and curbing the Ebola epidemic and Covid-19 outbreak. This book illuminates women's resourcefulness and collective mobilisation in ending the war, and their fight for their recognition and protection as peacebuilders and agents of change in their respective capacities in the aftermath of the war. The passage of the three gender laws in 2007 namely the Domestic Violence Act, the Devolution of Estates Act and the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act, have significantly elevated the status of women in their families and communities. The 2012 Sexual Offences Act (which criminalises marital rape) has also been a triumphant law which has safeguarded women's rights within their homes and, thus, has accentuated the importance of women's bodily autonomy.

Women and girls were forcefully engaged in the Civil War either as military combatants, or as, - "wives", spies, cooks in rebel camps or, child soldiers. They were victims of sexual abuse, gang rapes, killings, amputations, abductions, and displacement. With the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) leading the cases of documented reports of rapes at 67.1%, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) following suit, along with the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) and the civil defence forces (CDF), it is evident, that rape and various forms of sexual abuse were used as weapons of war. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone found that the RUF used the rape of women and girls to publicly humiliate and intimidate their male relatives or to compel women into forced marriages with the male combatants. It is worth noting that the government failed to prioritise key issues which were the root cause of the war. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone described as "years of bad governance, epidemic corruption and denial of basic human rights which created the deplorable conditions that made conflict inevitable" (p xvi).

By demystifying the fears and anxieties parents have about educating their girl children, this book strategically models creative ways that can inspire parents to invest in the education of their daughters because it has far-reaching benefits for their families and communities. Instead of focusing solely on the education of girls through government sponsored scholarships, the book suggests a turn towards "gender justice" instead of

the neoliberal idea of “gender equality”. The former serves as a redress method while the latter erodes differences between genders and thus leads to an inverse bifurcation of genders. Put simply, for the Sierra Leone people investing simultaneously in the education of the girl child and boy child optimises their society’s chances of survival and economic prosperity. This is contrary to the education system espousing British patriarchal ideas which were imposed and later adopted by Sierra Leoneans and which intended to enforce hegemonic heteronormative binaries of masculinity and femininity.

Motherhood occupied a central role in how mothers used their maternal intuition as a form of diffusing the war and bringing the warring factions to the negotiation table. This subsequently led to the end of the war and mobilised former rebel group leaders and child soldiers to a path of peacebuilding and demobilisation. Amid the debilitating effects of war Sierra Leone’s women’s reliance on motherhood reminded the warring factions of the significance of listening to their mothers (motherhood is more social than simply biological) and the ramifications of ignoring their mothers’ cautioning words.

The inability of the women of Sierra Leone to rally around reproductive health issues, such as abortion rights due to religious differences, prohibits them from countering patriarchal expedient laws and continues to erode women’s abilities to make informed decisions about their bodies. It is in their diversity that we see them rallying behind women’s universal issues, such as protection from sexual violence (sweeping rape cases under the rug, especially those committed by family members or, - influential men within the community, instead of reporting them to the relevant authorities), and patriarchal inheritance laws (prohibiting women from inheriting their late husbands’ estates and being “inherited” by their brothers-in-law as wives). Rallying behind a woman presidential candidate and women’s reproductive rights, such as the right to terminate a pregnancy, are yet to be seen. Women in Sierra Leone are accustomed to placing their support for political candidates within the confines of their political parties. Men are usually the preferred political candidates as they are socially and economically palatable to the country’s political landscape. This limits women’s political engagement to merely being men’s auxiliaries. These fragmentations have also served as a reminder of

how women can internalise patriarchal norms – as many of them can act as patriarchy’s foot soldiers, – thus maintaining patriarchal privilege.

According to the book, the country has been unable to pass into law through parliament the 30% gender quota in the public and private life (Gender Equality Bill). It has failed to create a conducive environment to increase women’s political participation and eliminate political violence against women during elections. The authors recommend that “post-war rebuilding programs should avoid one size fits all policies and, instead, deploy flexible and responsive strategies that account for women’s unique educational, socio-political, economic, and cultural circumstances and experiences” (p 41). Furthermore, the book clearly states that there must be a radical shift against dominant attitudes embraced by men about women; – put simply, men and women must work together to change and challenge widespread gendered societal norms which confine women to the margins of society.

The book seamlessly traces, – and details complex and multi-layered roles portrayed by women in Sierra Leone in pre-war, war and post-war periods as they collectively mobilised themselves into a force to be reckoned with. It further exhibits how gender transformation and change do not occur on their own, transformation and change happen because of collective work done by different generations of women over time, along with their male allies who are committed to gender justice. Through this book one can see that the dominant portrayal of women as passive victims of war with men as the overarching protectors has been successfully contested and skilfully debunked. This book is a crucial and timely contribution to expanding literature on women, war, and post conflict reconstruction as it meticulously accentuates copious applications in which women’s agency in Sierra Leone has been deployed to secure their hard-won gains.