

War, women and post-conflict empowerment: lessons from Sierra Leone, Josephine Beoku-Betts & Fredline M’Cormack-Hale (eds), London, Zed Books, 2022, 304 pp., \$35.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781786996930

On 19 January 2023, Sierra Leone’s President Julius Maada Bio signed the Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (GEWE) Act into law. The Act envisions 30% quotas for women in the workforce and in government positions, amongst other provisions. *War, Women and Post-Conflict Empowerment: Lessons from Sierra Leone*, brings together a stellar line up of scholars with long-term experience of research and activism in Sierra Leone who, through a rich array of case studies and perspectives, provides an excellent overview of current debates in gender justice from all sectors of society—from health and education to the role of female traditional authority and women’s involvement in party politics. The collection shows us both that achievements such as the approval of the GEWE Act must be seen as a result of the tireless work of women activists and that there is a long road ahead to ensure that legislation signed in State House has a tangible impact on the everyday lives of women across the country.

Over twenty years since the end of the country’s civil war, we may wonder whether the ‘post-conflict’ label remains relevant for Sierra Leone. Should the war remain a central reference point? The collection’s editors, Beoku Betts and M’Cormack Hale, make a compelling argument for its continuing analytical value in this context. First, because of the expectation that countries emerging from conflict have a unique opportunity, in the process of remodelling social and political structures in the post-war period, to inscribe gender justice in new institutions and arrangements. Taking a long-term view makes it possible to ‘problematize the concept of success and failure’, and to contextualise setbacks and collective struggles. In formal terms, at least until this year, the editors argue that Sierra Leone had failed to institutionalise gender equality, for example, in terms of women’s participation in politics. Despite significant achievements such as the ‘gender laws’ of 2007 on domestic violence and customary marriage, they point to a host of internal and external factors, including patriarchal and patronage systems, legacies of colonialism, neoliberal development, and recurrent crisis, that have militated against transformative change in practice. On the other hand, keeping the war in view also allows the authors to highlight how eleven years of violent conflict generated a powerful women’s movement mobilising for peace. This experience remains important in contemporary efforts at collective action.

Beyond its significance for the Sierra Leonean context, this edited volume offers important lessons for scholars of post-conflict societies, inviting them to explore the deep and far reaching consequences of violence on gender inequality and women’s organising. It also offers important considerations for scholars of decolonial feminism. The book’s authors collectively challenge the ‘problematic dominance of Western neoliberal conceptual frameworks’ that permeated post-war reconstruction and the development industry’s framing of gender empowerment. They propose instead centring localised understanding of gender justice, giving space to distinctively Sierra Leonean conceptions to emerge in the book’s diverse chapters. As such, the edited collection evocatively foregrounds the voices of women whose lives are traced within it.

Day, for example, offers a rare insight into the perspectives of female chiefs and their understanding of female authority rooted in the ‘symbolic force of motherhood’. This challenges Western juxtapositions between tradition and progress, offering a concrete example of how indigenous knowledge and practices might lead to different notions of justice. A similar insight emerges from McCough’s chapter on Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs), which shows that despite the health sector’s approach to curtail their practice in the post-war period, rebuilding confidence in health services required listening to women and identifying who they trust, ultimately recognising the TBAs’ important role.

However, what is striking reading each chapter's effort to define these localised conceptions is that it may in fact not be very easy to define a singular local feminism or a unitary perspective on women's empowerment. Indeed, one of the book's greatest strengths is its ability to highlight complexity and even contradictions without undermining aspirations for achieving change through home-grown activism. Taking the chapters together, we see the layers of ideological and organisational fractures along the lines of class, geography, political party, and religious belief. This comes out especially strongly in Fofana Ibrahim's meticulous analysis of the tensions, discord, and the politics of religion in the Abortion Bill and constitutional review debates. Having traced the fault lines and challenges for dialogue, she proposes concrete steps to build coalitions that 'diffuse the "us versus them" stance', without expecting that religious and ideological difference will be entirely overcome.

Similarly provocative are some of the chapters' questioning of long-held assumptions underpinning socio-economic policies and initiatives, contrasting them with the lived experience of women and girls. Shepler's study of barriers to girls' education in rural Kambia District challenges received wisdom that girls' education automatically translates into empowerment, reflecting on how post-war policies focusing on access have stopped short of being truly transformative in providing quality education. Such critiques of the limits of development initiatives, or of legal reform, as outlined in Dumbuya's chapter, put in even sharper relief the inspiration that is instead to be drawn from the lives and struggles of women activists. The book is unique in the range of writing styles and disciplines it draws on, and several chapters include biographies of female leaders such as Denzer's portrait of Zainab Hawa Bangura. Abdullah's chapter on violence against women historicises the oft-neglected gender dimensions of electoral violence and gives an evocative account of the intimidation wrought on female aspirants even in their own parties. Some of the authors' personal involvement in, and research of, campaigns for gender justice in recent years offer the reader a front-row seat to women's mobilising. A primary example of this is in Smyth's blow by blow account of efforts to include gendered considerations in the United Nation's resolution on the Ebola crisis or in M'Cormack Hale insightful account of organising (and its limitations) around the revision of the Sexual Offences Act.

The authors do not provide resolutions. While it may have been productive to directly confront the differences of opinion that are evident even amongst the authors, being left to make up our own mind allows us to experience the complex political and conceptual challenges at stake in Sierra Leone's post-war trajectory to redefine gender justice. We are not, for example, told how to reconcile a desire for local conceptualisations, on the one hand, and disagreements over what those might be, on the other. These tensions are especially notable in relation to thorny issues such as what the role of customary authority and practices should be and who gets to decide. Sitting with these tensions we see the possibilities for different feminisms to emerge and through these fractures we glimpse a great hope for a Sierra Leonean-led debate to confront these questions and to imagine a more transformative path to change than that envisioned by Western neoliberal prescriptions.

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