Review

Reviewed Work(s): Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: Women’s Lives through War and Peace in Sierra Leone by Coulter

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Descriptions of war can sometimes appear as a list of numerical computations: civilian casualties minus military casualties, sexual violence plus wartime rape, internal displacements compared with refugee flows. These long lists of numbers tend to define the intensity of a war and are used to illustrate war as a period of exceptionality, in which so-called normal laws, behaviors, rules, and norms are displaced by chaos. What is lost in this emphasis on statistics and exception are the multiple ways that war and violence affect the everyday lives of individuals. The study of warfare seems to be the antithesis of the study of everyday life, or the social.

In her book Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: Women’s Lives through War and Peace in Sierra Leone Chris Coulter turns this dichotomy of war versus the everyday on its head. This book, drawn from research gathered in the course of living in Sierra Leone for over a year, examines war and its aftermath from the perspective of women in northern Sierra Leone. Most of the informants were women who had been abducted by rebel forces. Throughout the book we see that these women carried out a variety of roles during the war, including soldiering, looting, domestic work, sex slavery, pseudo–foster parenting, and mediation.

What is perhaps most unique about Coulter’s analysis is that she makes clear from the beginning that existing depictions of women either as victims of sexual abuse, abduction, and forced labor or as rebel fighters with agency and power are oversimplified and unhelpful. By following the lives of her informants, readers are shown the complex trajectories of women associated with the rebels. The pride some informants showed in becoming female soldiers (as one woman recounted, “All the girls I met, all of them knew how to fire. All the girls are raw” [135]) is contrasted to the undeniable evidence that most of these women were held against their will and raped (Coulter states that in some areas one could say with confidence that almost all women and girls were raped).

Most books on Sierra Leone tend to focus either on the civil war or on the postwar period; the majority emphasize the activity of male armed forces, rebels, and peacekeepers. In contrast, Coulter’s account of women’s war and postwar experiences provides an invaluable contribution because she focuses on the perspectives of women. Furthermore, her lengthy study
goes beyond a concern with women as victims to explore how war affected women’s lives and relationships.

One of the central messages reiterated throughout the book is that the everyday, or the mundane, is significant to an understanding of war and its aftermath. Early on, Coulter poses the questions that drive the book concerning “what types of strategies young women used in their everyday lives to cope in war and postwar society and how those strategies were informed by the cultural space in which they occurred” (5). Rather than seeing war as a state of exception or a period of chaos that can be contrasted with politics as usual, Coulter sets out to show how the social relationships that drive war—including forms of hierarchy and patriarchy—are deeply connected to prewar and postwar social order. Coulter offers the foundational assumption underlying her analysis: “War is not exempt from the social but creates its own social orders” (9).

The book begins with a comprehensive description of marriage laws and social relations during peacetime in Sierra Leone before moving on to an in-depth account of the social order that defined and sustained the civil war. From a discussion of “mamy queens” (36) to accounts of the social hierarchies among rebel wives to an analysis of the division of labor, readers receive a comprehensive picture of the social networks that sustain a rebel organization, as well as the types of private or reproductive labor that are required to fuel a civil war.1

For example, looking beyond the rebels’ and armed forces’ public activities, we see that without the contribution of labor such as cleaning, doing laundry, child rearing, and cooking (activities typically done by women during war and peace), the warfare machine would come to a halt. As Coulter puts it, “even during the war, the chores of everyday life had to be performed” (116).

Moving beyond the trap of the victim/agency debate (which Coulter rightly argues has taken on “absurd proportions” [150]), Coulter’s examination of wartime rape and women’s reproductive labor is incredibly nuanced. She argues that rape has been more than a crime of war used against innocent victims; rather, it was part of everyday life within rebel groups, a tool used to unify and reward troops, to define and reinforce masculinity, and to threaten and discipline women within the ranks.

Coulter’s analysis of postwar social relations is equally impressive. Instead of reproducing the imaginary of the postwar period as a time of progress

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1 Mamy queens were influential women, often with other rebels under their command, who tended to be charged with mediating disputes among individuals within the rebel networks.
and development, Coulter demonstrates that for women—particularly those who have acted outside their typical social position—the postconflict period can be a time of silence, repression, and conformity as women are encouraged or forced to return to socially ordained positions and behaviors. Rather than defining women as victims or perpetrators, communities labeled women who had been with the rebels as “a social dilemma” (212). In the aftermath of the war it seemed to matter little whether women were victims or perpetrators; instead, what mattered was their ability to conform, to return to their family structures, and to act according to acceptable social standards: “by completely conforming to social rules and obligations, former bush wives and female ex-combatants could be accepted as full members of their communities” (217–18).

A second message coming through each of the chapters is that it is essential to go beyond the universalistic narrative of “women’s experience” of war. Coulter’s work stands in stark contrast to a large body of war and postwar literature aimed at locating and depicting grand narratives, patterns, commonalities, and trends. In the first chapters of the book Coulter admits that her informants’ stories took the form of a predictable narrative often beginning with a story of abduction followed by an account of wartime rape. Just as she realized she needed to continue to ask questions and listen to her informants in order to move beyond these initial narratives, she asks readers to reconsider or look beyond the public meta-narrative of the war.

One of the few weak points in the book comes from an extension of an otherwise valuable argument. Coulter points out that female combatants should not be analyzed “only in relation to the predominantly Western notion of the ‘peaceful woman’” (142). She goes on to argue, “In Sierra Leonean traditional culture, women are not believed to be inherently peaceful; on the contrary, women are wild and dangerous and therefore they need to be controlled. . . . What life in the bush did, I argue, was to unleash their wild and unpredictable behavior” (142). It is valuable to complicate the caricature of the peaceful woman; however, this line of argument could lead one to replace the stereotype of the peaceful African woman with the stereotype of the wild and unpredictable African woman. It would also be interesting to see Coulter engage more with issues of race in addition to gender. Despite an excellent discussion of methods and ethics, she fails to discuss in detail how her own race affected her informants’ responses until a later chapter, when she describes how her informants’ interactions with white outsiders associated with the Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission may have affected their responses and their trust for her.
Coulter also might have extended her subtle, yet apt, critique of scholarship that fetishizes women’s war narratives and the public spectacles of warfare. Although she regularly references excellent anthropological work on gender and conflict and on women and war, and although she does draw on Cynthia Enloe and Carol Cohn, it would be interesting to see Coulter directly respond to or situate her work within some of the more recent scholarship on violent women, gender and security, or other non-anthropological analyses of female soldiers in Sierra Leone.

This book is clearly driven by passion, dedication, and attention to the ethics of representation. It provides an examination of war that complicates rather than oversimplifies gender relations and disrupts rather than reproduces familiar stories. The focus on the private and the everyday reveals aspects of war seldom discussed in mainstream depictions. In turn, the book makes an important contribution to the existing literature on Sierra Leone’s war, the growing study of gender and social relations more broadly, and critical development and postconflict studies. In addition, Coulter’s excellent overview of the ethics of, challenges to, and rationale for her methodology should be a must-read for anyone considering conducting research in a postwar zone. Coulter’s effort to complicate these public narratives, which tend to stereotype both men and women, not only results in a more complex analysis of Sierra Leone’s civil conflict but also stands as an example of what the study of war could look like if we took women, their lives, and their experiences seriously.


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What is the impact of girl power discourses on the lives of young American women today? Both books under review here consider young women’s embodied negotiations of postfeminist media messages. While Emilie Zaslow focuses on the understandings of and investments in female figures in popular culture by seventy teenage girls from schools and Girl Scout troops in New York City, Alison Piepmeier interviews the makers and readers of feminist self-produced zines such as Evo-
Within this literature, Chris Coulter's Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers stands as a model for how to negotiate these problematic dichotomies. Coulter begins by carefully delineating the scope of her project, an ethnographic study based on multiple periods of fieldwork in northern Sierra Leone between 1998 and 2004. She interviewed about one hundred women and worked closely with ten, most of whom had been abducted as young unmarried girls from rural agricultural communities by rebel groups and attempted to return to their families years later, at the war's end. Common to these women’s