

# *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*

Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and  
Meredith Turshen eds.,  
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This is an important book that takes up the questions left by a generation of studies that celebrated gains made by women during national liberation or revolutionary struggles. This generation of feminist scholars found reasons for optimism in the visibility of women in these struggles, and in the progressive gender ideologies and practices of many Third World leaders. With Algeria as a paradigm of the frustration of such hopes, the editors of *The Aftermath* begin from the basic question: Why is it that the gains made by some women during conflict are very seldom sustained after conflict ends? Where the first generation of “women and war” scholars privileged national leadership ideology as the primary causal factor in women’s emancipation (or its absence), the editors of *The Aftermath* bring into their analysis a wider range of contributory factors: international donor pressures; national and local economies; the state, its policies and relations with civil society; structures of class, race, ethnicity, and sect; women’s organizations, networks and consciousness; social constructions of male and female identities; and the way these factors interact and change through historical transitions. At the same time, their concern with a theory of causes has an undertow of practical urgency, as violence against women increases, and as conflict spreads throughout the South/Third World.

The book issues from workshops held in Africa between 1998 and 1999, and the body of empirical studies that feeds its theorization is mainly – though not entirely – African. Papers presented at the Johannesburg conference (1999) “confirmed that violence against women has reached unprecedented heights globally” (Pillay: 35). Pillay asks: What underlies violence against women? Why does it increase in “transitional” periods? She argues that violence against women is rooted in gender hierarchy and power inequality, giving it a widespread social acceptance, silencing women and subjecting them to blame, especially when the setting is domestic. There is a need for a gender analysis that goes beyond individual acts of violence to less visible forms of economic, cultural, and political violence. Indeed, a focus on the violence perpetrated against women during war may deflect attention from “normal” gender inequality and “invisible violence” in time of peace.

The ambivalence of the effects of conflict for women is expressed in the editors’ introduction as well as in the case studies that follow. The observation that some women in some liberation struggles have made collective gains during war is set against another reality that can be stated as “there is no aftermath for women;” or in other words,

that violence against women precedes wars, and continues during and after them, even if from different sources and in different forms. Thus, though the editors agree that there are different gender outcomes from different types of conflict (anti-colonial/national, inter-ethnic, class), yet even where leaderships advocate and practice gender equality in war zones (as in the case of Eritrea), the overall outcome of war's aftermath for women is usually the restoration of the gender status quo ante.

Theoretical explanations of male violence proposed here include both the psychological and the structural: "In socializing men to repress all that is feminine within them, society also requires men to repress and oppress all that is feminine outside of them" (Pillay: 43). Masculinity constructed in this way is raised to a peak by wartime conditions. Sideris also discusses the effects of war on male identities: "the institutions of war constitute exclusive male clubs, which are defined by hierarchy, authoritarian control, aggression and violence" (151). A deeper structural explanation is that in the most patriarchal societies, women are regarded as property whose value lies in their productive and reproductive labor. These vital bases of male dominance are controlled through controlling women's sexuality. A psycho-structural analysis suggests that male violence against women will not lessen until men have found a positive identity alternative to the aggressive model. The introduction of gender identities offers a way of connecting the levels of ideology and material conditions, retrieving a failed Marxist prediction of gender equality following women's entry into employment.

The paradox raised here in relation to gender and violence is that women are sources of value (e.g. material goods, offspring), yet their centrality to social survival and reproduction brings them neither power nor status. There is a similar paradox in relation to rape, that while communities and families consider it a heinous crime, it has only recently begun to be recognized as such by national and international law, and still finds little redress or personal compensation. These apparent paradoxes become understandable through "the recognition that patriarchal societies regard women as property," therefore necessitating control. One form through which societies and men assert rights to women's productive and reproductive value is through control of their sexuality. Any post-war challenge to men's control is likely to arouse male violence in proportion to their expectations of a restoration of the domestic status quo, i.e. the subjection and silencing of women. Not only men's expectations of peace are at stake, but their gender identity. War is a masculine business, and the aggressive elements of "maleness" are brought out through the practice of destruction. Turshen's comment that war erodes many "traditional" community

values but not sexist beliefs deserves our attention: Why is this so? (83)

The type of war itself also influences the degree of violence against women, whether during or after. War in general emphasizes collective identity, with women allocated special roles in its conservation, hence likely to be subjected to a "re-traditionalization" promoted whether by the weakness of the new state, international agency pressure, or the re-emergence of local custom (Turshen: 80). But as the wars of national liberation that marked the post-World War 2 period give way to wars of ethnic nationalism, identity becomes even more heavily involved and takes on an even greater potential for generating violence, as clearly manifested in the cases of Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Congo, Mozambique, and Kashmir.

Important questions thus become: If women's gender identity makes them "internalize" the role of the victim, what can be done to modify this aspect? What conditions encourage women to stop silencing themselves, and to report violence? Since in many instances (e.g. Sudan) violence against women during and after war seems to be linked to institutional violence before war begins, what can be done to raise awareness of these less visible forms? Women must struggle for economic equality, since it is economic marginalization and poverty that most subject them to violence. But since the basis of violence against women is ideological as much as material, to focus on building up women economically (e.g. through micro-credit schemes) is insufficient, and may even be provocative. Comparing women's experiences of rape and sexual violence in Mozambique and South Africa, Sideris proposes a broad band of solutions: enforcing constitutional and legal rights; transforming local justice systems; increasing the presence and profile of women in political decision-making structures; ensuring the economic empowerment of women and men; supporting women's grassroots networks as well as their national, regional and international ones; and addressing social constructions of masculinity (61). Other contributors concur that "women must inhabit all sites of struggle."

Though national liberation, civil wars, identity conflicts may have different effects for women, the aftermath of all types of war seem to lead to a loss of gains made by women during them. Codou Bop weighs social, economic and political gains and losses, and tries to explain "the fragility of women's gains compared with the acuteness of their losses" (33). Though context may make a difference – e.g. ethnic or factional conflicts offer fewer gains to women than wars of national independence – the key factor Bop proposes lies in the "absence of a political perspective for transforming relations between the sexes"

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(33). The most extreme and long-lasting of losses has been in the domain of politics, and this is as true for Europe after World War 2 as in the contemporary South. One important reason is that women themselves have accepted that women's interests are subordinate to collective national interests. Especially in national and revolutionary struggles in the South, the Maoist concept of principle and secondary contradictions has been deeply influential. Women's organizations formed during anti-colonialist struggles have had "satellite status;" in turn "their lack of autonomy has contributed to the absence of a political and ideological vision... to transform gender relations" (31). In the negotiations that end wars, "gender issues are virtually ignored." This suggests that an essential condition for long-term change is a "strong women's movement... that bears a plan to transform gender relations" (34).

The editors propose a theory of the "critical moment" as key explanation of why women fail to maintain gains made during war: "We came to the conclusion that the reconstruction phase is too late for women to assert themselves" (Meintjes, Pillay, Turshen: 10). Gender issues must be raised at the cusp between war and peace. The acceptance by women's organization leaders of a subordinate status during conflict inevitably means their marginalization in the aftermath. Because conflict reinforces the non-transparency of (male) leadership, women tend to be more excluded from decision-making during war – even if they are combatants and leaders of combatants – and from the negotiations that follow. This exclusion may be decisive in negating their wartime gains.

Though a strong, unified women's movement appears to be a necessary condition for sustaining gains, as in the case of South Africa, it may not be sufficient. As the Eritrean case suggests, a women's organization formed in a liberation war does not necessarily represent women's interests in the aftermath. Women leaders may be rewarded by positions in the state apparatus, but to others – especially women from rural areas – peace may bring a punitive re-imposition of "gender normality." Women's unconsciousness of their war time gains and the need to defend them may be another cause of loss; also the breaking-up of women's "communities" formed during war; and the difficulty of translating women's grassroots activism to the national political level.

Since the "crucial moment" is likely to be lost by all women's organizations except those matured by long struggle (as was the case in South Africa), it is necessary to look at cases that appear to be exceptions to this rule. Why in Haiti and among the Ogoni of Nigeria were women's organizations able to grow and develop under regime oppression, without any clear transitional

moment? Why were rural women in Namibia able to demonstrate for their inheritance rights without the backing of a strong women's movement? Perhaps we should ask whether observation of women's movements that win victories in adverse conditions may offer useful models to others in terms of structure and modes of operation? A second objection we might raise is that possibly no change in gender relations, whenever it is achieved or whatever form it takes, can be final and permanent. Current conflicts and their aftermaths do not offer a sufficient time span to judge this question. The contributors to this volume rightly remind us of the tenacity of sexist beliefs, and of women's collusion in reproducing them. Even in cases where women have made real legal and political power gains, as in South Africa, violence against women has increased. In other cases such as the Ogoni, the end of conflict merely meant a shift in perpetrators of violence from forces of the state to members of the community. Yet whether or not it is validated by time, the theory of the "critical moment" has value as a warning to women's organizations to resist "secondarization" and formulate their demands without delay.

Women's networks formed during war may also be a source of empowerment, for example in refugee camps or, as in Kashmir, in communities under siege. The post-war break-up of these associations as women return to home and domesticity is seen by the editors as "at the heart of the failure to consolidate wartime gains" (Meintjes, Pillay, Turshen: 10). Though national women's unions generally survive the end of conflict, they easily become hierarchized, and lose their wartime capacity to mobilize women at all social levels.

The focus of an earlier generation of feminist scholars on the ideology of national movement leaderships is replaced in *The Aftermath* by attention to relations between the post-war state and civil society. This move has been made necessary by the perception that where the outcome of war for women is concerned there is little to choose between post-war regimes, whether progressive, Marxist, or neo-colonial. Similarly an earlier attention to the expansion of women's roles in wartime, and relations between men and women combatants in the battle zone, has shifted to what awaits women as they return (or are prevented from returning) to "home." Change in gender ideology among a leadership stratum does not necessarily lead to broader societal change. Hence Turshen's essay on the state and civic society begins with the dual regime that regulates women: "At least two legal regimes govern women's lives simultaneously: the statutory regime of the nation-state and the customary regime of their natal household or clan" (78). The second is hardest to change. Whereas new states sometimes feel obliged to enact progressive gender laws, these may be resisted at the local

level, and by customary courts. It is in the aftermath of war that resistance to gender change is strongest among most men and senior women, cropping up even in democratic states such as Zimbabwe. Whatever its ideology or enactments, the state is generally unprotective of women's claims. Indeed Turshen argues that there is a close relationship between women's centrality to productive and reproductive labor on which the state depends, their invisibility in politics, men's control over women's sexuality, and the role of social violence in maintaining this control. Post-colonial states often carry on systems rooted in colonial regimes, for example the way these increased men's economic resources in order to increase productivity, taxes, and capital accumulation. By entrenching gender hierarchy, states are able to lower the cost of reproducing labor.

An earlier generation of feminist scholars observing activist women in anti-colonial struggles viewed them as agents of social change: as transmitting progressive gender ideology from political leaderships to families; as models for younger women; as enacting a new model of woman, actively engaged in the public arena yet respectable; and as forming organizations expected to articulate women's claims in the era of reconstruction. But war conditions may conceal deep reservations that publics may hold about gender change, so that obstacles blocking change in society at large only appear after conflict ends. These aftermath studies reveal many sources of limitation to the influence of activist women and their organizations. They underline: i) the gap in gender ideology and practice between battle zone and hinterland; ii) the absence in most national and revolutionary movements of programs of gender change directed at society at large; iii) post-war decline of ruling party interest in, and support for, women's organizations, with a variety of other consequences. For example, the "women's wing" of the Marxist-inspired EPLF (Eritrea), was loaded with social tasks as well as "women's issues" but at the same time under-funded (Hale in this volume). Demobilized non-elite women militants could not find jobs, nor re-integrate themselves into rural communities; men and senior women demanded that they return to pre-conflict norms of women's domestic labour. Finally, though a few women leaders found jobs in the new state, the marginality of the women's union left women as a collectivity with minimal influence or representation, in spite of their long history of militancy.

The desire for "normalcy" shared by most members of war-torn societies is a powerful factor in weakening wartime campaigns for gender change. Local systems of gender hierarchy are likely to be strengthened by factors such as the poverty of new states, their narrow popular bases, and World Bank policies favouring decentralization.

Ethnic conflicts fought around "identity" are most likely to lead to "re-traditionalization." As a powerful influence in the restoration of "normalcy," religion may emphasize women's centrality as pillars of moral order; in Sudan the NIF government mobilizes women as "markers of Islam," dissolving the boundary between state and civic society. Concepts of "normalcy" differ along gender lines: Men define it as a return to the gender status quo ante; women may want to build on wartime gains, or they may feel that pre-war values that supported them have been irretrievably lost. The local level becomes devalued in peacetime: Women may have been crucial to community survival during war, as household-suppliers, or grassroots activists, and afterwards they may be active as NGO organizers. But the restoration of "normalcy" is likely to mean marginalization of women at both state and local levels.

Restoration of gender "normalcy" is not only harmful for women, it stunts their potential for peace building, an important consideration for the contributors to *The Aftermath*. The presence of women peace activists in the "Aftermath" workshops can be felt in a number of texts, particularly Sideris, "Problems of Identity, Solidarity and Reconciliation." Two kinds of peace potential are signaled out in this chapter: i) in the reconstruction of war-torn societies; and ii) in relations building with other women across hostile national or ethnic boundaries. Yet the general marginalization of women after conflicts' end means that the role usually assigned them in reconstruction is the passive and oppressive one of restoring "normalcy." In spite of many cases where women have acted energetically to prevent or assuage conflicts, whether across national, ethnic or factional boundaries, as in Kashmir, Yugoslavia, and Nagaland, there is more here about frustration than accomplishment of this role. Women's potential for postwar reconstruction lies in their unique relation to domestic institutions. Yet, paradoxically, "the very institutions that play such a crucial role in the continuity of society embody the relations of power that perpetuate the subordination and vulnerability of women" (Sideris: 56). Postwar restoration of normalcy disempowers individual women, while national women's unions have not assumed or been allocated an active role in post-war reconstruction. This in spite of many types of healing activity that women in conflict have undertaken, from forming prayer groups, to appealing to international authorities (Bop: 23).

The failure of most postwar reparation systems to include women or compensate them for loss is well substantiated here. Women are seldom compensated for losses suffered during war: of home, relatives, or property, or damage through rape. Loss of home is a blow that many women do not recover from. Most truth commissions established so far have not given women either compensation or jus-

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tice, because their “gender neutrality” has not encouraged women to participate or, if they do, to speak of personal loss or damage.

Gender identity, men’s and women’s, recurs as a theme through all the theoretical chapters, indissolubly linked to other major themes – violence against women in war and peace, social reconstruction and peace building, state/civil society relations, gender inequality. Arising from consideration of female identity are questions with implications for gender change activists around women’s potential for agency: most women experience violence done to them as part of their gender identity – is victim hood therefore a constituent element of women’s identity? Can they resist subjection? Does it serve women’s interests if they use specific aspects of their identity, for example motherhood, thereby expanding their social and political role? What contextual factors encourage women to report violence against them or actively claim property rights? What makes one woman choose an identity as peacemaker while another in the same society chooses to be a militant nationalist? A point underlined by all the writers is the need to pay attention to variation in women’s situation produced by local and historical specificity. Yet one senses an implicit question underlying all the others: Is the universality of women’s subordination a sufficient condition for their solidarity across frontiers to prevent violence? Recognition of the power of structure over consciousness prevents even posing this question. Yet the text of *The Aftermath* is seamed with instances of struggles affirming women’s capacity to overcome socially imposed passivity.

In countries of the South, elements of women’s “traditional” identity – especially the maternal component – is often a basis of mobilization, legitimizing women’s action in the public arena. This has been the case in Nagaland, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Kashmir. Speaking about their experience of war, Mozambican women “identified mothering as a fundamental source of resilience” with the result that “their consciousness of themselves shifted to include a sense of strength and capacity” (Sideris: 50). The transition from war to peace may allow women to lead healing movements or resume ritual roles (Turshen: 83). The reservations of some feminists and progressives about this phenomenon are carefully weighed by de Alwis in her paper on Sri Lankan “Ambivalent Maternalisms,” and defended within a perspective of historical contingency.

Consideration of violence inevitably raises the question of male as well as female identity. Male identity as a topic recurs throughout the pages of *The Aftermath*: in relation to colonialism, war, violence, “normalcy,” social hierarchy, property, leadership. Several contributors call for work on alternative, more positive models of masculinity. Sideris

considers alternative effects of war on men’s identity, either erosion of their manhood through inability to protect their families, or an aggrandized masculinity that may find itself frustrated by peace. Either way men are likely to reassert their masculinity and power in the only sphere available to them postwar, that of the home. Cases that follow in the empirical section find strong correlations between male class subordination and domestic violence. Hence emphasis is placed throughout on attention to the creation of economic opportunities for men as well as women.

The editors of *The Aftermath* have targeted it primarily at international agencies, policy-makers, because of their conviction that international and national policies to stem violence against women have failed to tackle its deepest causes. “Our point of departure was dissatisfaction with many of the reconstruction programmes, which are based on one of two approaches... either human needs or human rights” (4). *The Aftermath* is written both for international agencies and against them, in the sense that global rather than national or local actions may create the conditions in which gender inequalities are exacerbated, or in which aid agencies, through faulty analysis, apply failing remedies. The human needs and human rights approaches lead, the editors argue, to advocating legal reform, protecting individual survivors, trying to change individual behaviour, or offering material aid, none of which attack national, local or international frameworks that produce gender inequality. Indeed the policies of powerful actors such as states and international aid agencies, in conjunction with the “globalization effect,” are likely to exacerbate gender hierarchy: “wars and structural adjustment policies do not impact equally on women and men” (Bop: 28). Consideration of the effects of external policies is especially necessary because of increase in conflict and in international interventionism. Meintjes notes how World Bank and IMF policies increase the poverty of many Third World states, diminishing their capacity for re-training or employing demobilized women; World Bank pressures towards decentralization fosters the re-emergence of local customs, including female subordination. As Sideris remarks, international aid agencies need to recognize the social/political/economic causes of violence against women “in the discourse that legitimates male domination and female subordination” (Sideris:153).

*The Aftermath* also speaks to local women activists in the belief that they have much to learn from each other’s experiences, and from an analysis that covers both structural and ideological causes of inequality while including women’s actions and changing consciousness. Feminist activists outside war zones are called on to participate through understanding and solidarity in building new gender relations.