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BOOK REVIEW

Shekhawat, Seema (ed). 2015. *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 254 pp., \$100 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-137-51655-8.

Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration, edited by Seema Shekhawat, provides a rich look at the expectations and experiences of women and girls in armed groups in Colombia, El Salvador, India, Kashmir, Nepal, Peru, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Syria, and state forces in Israel. Well-situated within each particular context, the case studies explore the reasons for women's and girls' participation as combatants, their experiences of gender (in)equality and violence inside the armed groups, and how they are situated in the post-conflict context, particularly for the emancipation and futures they had hoped to obtain.

In her opening chapter, Shekhawat challenges the reader to consider what female ex-combatants can offer in constructing a more peaceful and equitable post-conflict society. Several authors, including Shekhawat and Bishnu Pathak, go so far as to say that by virtue of being female ex-combatants, these women have a right to participate in peace processes. This surprised me. While readers are likely familiar with the mounting evidence of the significant benefits of women's meaningful inclusion to peace processes, those women are not usually (almost ever?) ex-combatants. Rather, the women making a real difference in peace and in peace and political processes are often women civil society actors who have used peaceful means to try and address the havoc wreaked by the conflict, as well as national civilian women in positions of political power or leverage. I was, therefore, intrigued by Shekhawat's and her contributors' strong assertions that we should look to ex-combatant women to offer something important to sharpen our understanding of and engagement with post-conflict societies.

They were right, and here is what we can learn. First, while ex-combatant women may have something important to offer, there is little evidence they are in any position to meaningfully contribute to larger processes of conflict resolution, peace processes, and peacemaking. The exception is Priscyll Antil Avoine and Rachel Tillman's eye-opening chapter on women ex-combatants in Colombia, who (and one suspects this is the key to their success) have organized with non-combatant civil society women to enact small-scale but real change in some women's lives in Colombia. Most women ex-combatants (Colombians included) are actively and willfully excluded from any formal processes by the male leadership of the very armed groups for which they fought. So if they do indeed have something important to contribute, the current ways in which peace processes unfold ensure it does not come out. These contributors make clear that none of us should be fooled into thinking that just because an armed opposition group has a substantial proportion of female fighters that the male leadership of the group will take up issues of importance to women in peace processes and in the post-conflict. Shekhawat's chapter on militant women in Kashmir painfully documents the way in which women who were projected as the face of the militancy were actively erased by their leadership from any political discussions and decision making. They were not the only women the male leadership sacrificed on the altar of their cause in the post-conflict period; Kashmir girls and women who leveled charges of rape against Indian troops—an important

tactic used by the leadership to fuel support for the militancy in local communities—were cast aside and left to live lives of stigma and rejection once they were no longer politically useful. Furthermore, Shekhawat and Chayanika Saxena detail how women in the Naxal movement were purposefully excluded by their male leaders from political discussions to resolve the conflict or determine which post-conflict issues would be prioritized. And it's not only the male leadership. Fazeeha Azmi's chapter, which provides a unique analysis of the gendered fallout for women in the defeated Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), recounts how the family members of an LTTE woman ex-combatant actually laughed when she suggested she would like to be politically active in the post-conflict.

Second, perhaps the strongest, cumulative message to come through every case study in the book is that women and girls who join armed opposition groups don't achieve the emancipation or freedom from violence and discrimination that often propelled them to join in the first place. The careful examination of women ex-combatants' lives provided in this book show that women's liberation and emancipation is not gained through armed uprising. If women and girls want freedom and equality, they won't find it inside armed groups, unless that freedom is reduced to freedom to kill, as Avoine and Tillman charge in their chapter on Colombia. Instead, inside armed groups, women encounter the insidiousness of patriarchy (as Cynthia Enloe warns us), shape shifting in many ways that on the surface look emancipatory, but upon digging deeper are new ways for patriarchy to set its claws deep into the movements. An example that several authors explore is the intimate relations women fighters "choose" with male comrades, which are in fact manipulated and used by the male leaders to cement movements (Maoists in Nepal), increase women's ties and supposed "loyalty" to the movement (Naxals in India), and as a means to offer women "protection" from their own comrades (Peru and Colombia). Emanuela C. Del Re's chapter on women in Syria fighting against the Islamic State is a smart analysis of the ways in which Persmerga women fighters are in actuality celebrated for their masculinized and militarized patriotism and nationalism, not for their emancipation or as a symbol for the fight for women's rights. Ayelet Harel-Shalev and Shir Daphna-Tekoah's insightful examination of Israeli women combatants shows a hardening of those women's views and positions against the Palestinians as a result of their military service.

The third important lesson this book teaches us is that in the post-conflict, in every case examined of armed opposition groups, women ex-combatants face substantial discrimination and marginalization. This is in large part due to the breaking of gendered taboos as a result of their participation in armed violence and the supposed sexual deviance that comes with it. In the post-conflict, patriarchy—in both old and new forms within political, economic, religious, social, and cultural spheres—rises up and slaps women ex-combatants down hard, often literally. Numerous women interviewed stated they ended up worse off at the end of the conflict than they were before they joined, pushed brutally back into the violent, racist, sexist, and caste-based communities and relationships they had sought to escape through participation in violent opposition. These lessons come through most pointedly in Azmi's chapter on women in the LTTE, Sofia Axelsson on South Africa, Camille Boutron on Peru, Shekhawat and Saxena on the Naxals, and Shekhawat on the Kashmir militants.

This book makes a meaningful contribution to the growing and vibrant literature that uses feminist critiques to examine gender and war making, armed opposition groups, peace processes, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, and the realities of people's lives in the so-called context post-conflict. The criticisms of

this book are minor and often related to sweeping generalizations that sometimes appear in the chapters. Those are worth dismissing for the rich and compelling insights into women's hopes for their futures, and their harsh lived realities. I recommend this book to scholars and students interested in better understanding non-state armed groups, gender and armed conflict, peace processes, and a range of post-conflict processes.

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