

Review – Female Ex-Combatants, Empowerment, and Reintegration

Written by Rebecca Turkington

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/09/01/review-female-ex-combatants-empowerment-and-reintegration/>

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Female Ex-Combatants, Empowerment, and Reintegration
By Michanne Steenbergen
Routledge, 2022

Literature on women and war does not provide easy answers about the relationship between post-conflict transitions and women's empowerment. Conflict opens new economic and political opportunities for women (Webster et al. 2019), but can reinscribe harmful norms in its wake (Pankhurst 2012). Peace settlements could usher in new rights and protections for women, but few do so holistically and all face implementation challenges (Bell & McNicholl 2019). Post-war countries tend to see more women in elected office (Hughes & Tripp 2015), but often women combatants are excluded (Henshaw 2019; Gilmartin 2019). Michanne Steenbergen's research does not resolve these tensions, but her book *Female Ex-Combatants, Empowerment, and Reintegration* joins the conversation with an eminently useful framework for untangling the ambiguities of women, war, and post-conflict reconstruction through the perspective of disarmament, disengagement and reintegration (DDR) processes. Understanding how women's empowerment is affected by DDR programs is crucial because the stakes are high. Ignoring the grievances of female ex-combatants—or even diminishing their standing in a post-conflict era—risks a return to violence. It also squanders the immense transformative potential of post-conflict transitions, returning instead to a status quo in which women remain excluded and subject to the harmful practices that pushed some of them to take up arms in the first place.

Based on interviews with female ex-combatants and staff and officials of UN-led DDR processes, the book explores how participating in these reintegration programs in Liberia and Nepal affected women's empowerment, and ultimately prospects for emancipatory peace. The Liberian Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation Programme (LDDRR) was the first to have a specific mandate for female ex-combatants, about 24% of the total participants. Nepal's United Nations Interagency Rehabilitation Programme (UNRIP) also adopted a gender-sensitive approach, though with a more limited scope of participation as the Maoist party rejected the DDR process. Both these programs claimed to "empower" female combatants, but in practice "stripped female ex-combatants of their agency and have reproduced gendered inequalities." (p.3) Steenbergen draws on feminist critical peacebuilding scholarship assessing the weaknesses in the 'liberal peacebuilding' approach endorsed by most international actors: its focus on economic liberalization, its reproduction of Western models, and its limited aims that stop short of transforming inequalities. This model generally assumes women ex-combatants are 'apolitical,' that economic reintegration automatically leads to social reintegration, and that there is a static environment for women to return to (p.58-67). Rather than accepting liberal peacebuilding's buzzword "empowerment" as a synonym for female ex-combatants' market participation, Steenbergen offers a more nuanced understanding of what empowerment means and how it acts in the lives of women before, during, and after war (p.101). Her definition focuses on empowerment as a process, affected by temporality and context, and adapts Rowlands' conceptualization of the four types of power—power *over*, power *to*, power *within*, and power *with* (Rowlands 1997).

Steenbergen grounds these different concepts of power in the experiences of her interviewees, mapping them onto an individual's journey from combat to reintegration. 'Power to,' for instance, can translate to the skills women learn through participation in armed groups, from weaponry to medical care to leadership. But conflict also precludes other

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forms of 'power to,' such as an uninterrupted education (p.130). While DDR processes profess to offer this same kind of power to women through job trainings, structural or explicit gendered exclusion from certain kinds of skills can undermine 'power to' gained during conflict. To take the example of medical care—which ex-combatants in Liberia and Nepal expressed interest in professionalizing—the LDDRR offered no opportunity to build on midwifery skills female combatants gained during conflict, and the UNIRP required a school leaving certificate to access health training, something few women had as they'd been recruited as children (p.158). 'Power within,' on the other hand can manifest in the types of self-confidence and increased esteem that some interviewees reported came from their participation in an armed group, as well as greater political awareness. However, this form of power can cause problems for female ex-combatants who then reintegrate into a society with restrictive gender norms. The self-confidence or awareness that pushed women to transgress gender roles during conflict can mark women as outsiders in post-conflict settings and cause friction in previous relationships. Many chose instead not to disclose their backgrounds, to "forget about the war" so communities "will accept us back." (p.66) Social reintegration comes at the expense of 'power within.' Others chose to resettle away from their families, or in communities with other female ex-combatants to avoid the disconnect between their own self-realization and an unchanged home life. The book discusses the four forms of power at length, as well as exploring how they change over time and space. This framework for analysis sheds light on the complex workings of gender and power in transitions from conflict to peace. By separating each form of power, it illustrates the interconnectedness and contradictions between them: where women have agency and where choices are constrained, when women are victims, perpetrators, or both simultaneously, and when DDR interventions support or undermine their reintegration. Ultimately, Steenbergen concludes that "for the vast majority of female ex-combatants, the empowerment gained as combatant has been lost through reintegration." (p.174)

Steenbergen's work adds another powerful critique to a body of scholarship pointing out the gendered failings of UN processes that goes back more than two decades (Mazurana et al. 2002). Steenbergen places her own work in this tradition of feminist critical peacebuilding studies, but her findings have much to offer literature on women and political violence as well. Recent work on female combatants has emphasized their agency and diversity, pushing back against deeply-held gender stereotypes (Gowrinathan 2021; Loken & Matfess 2022; Alexander & Turkington 2018; Giri 2020). *Female Ex-Combatants, Empowerment, and Reintegration* bolsters this work, showing how such gendered tropes can undermine both individual women's reintegration and the possibility of emancipatory peace, questions that should be of serious concern whether in the context of transitions out of civil war, or in demobilizing women associated with terrorist groups. Assessing interviews with female ex-combatants alongside officials of UN-led DDR processes throws into sharp focus the disjuncture between the experiences and needs of women who fought with the narratives that shape the opportunities and support they can access through DDR. DDR officials routinely reproduced narratives of female ex-combatants as either victims, threats, wives, mothers, daughters, or peacebuilders—each one-dimensional portrayal with its own attendant consequences for the forms of support women received (p.179). For this reason, the research has important implications for policymakers and practitioners. The highly theoretical framing of the book makes it unlikely to end up in the hands of the practitioners who could implement these changes, but the tools it offers should. The framework Steenbergen introduces demands a gender analysis that is attentive to different experiences and manifestations of power—the sort of analysis that could ensure future programming builds on, rather than diminishes, the forms of empowerment women gain through combat.

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