

## Review

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Funmi Olonisakin and Awino Okech (eds), 2011. *Women's Security Governance in Africa*. Dakar, Nairobi: Pambazuka Press

Given an increasing focus on post armed conflict reconstruction processes on the continent, as well as increased international attention on the prosecution of war crimes and security sector reform processes, this book offers a much needed feminist analysis of “security” as used by governments and international agencies. Eight authors discuss a range of African contexts. Each author engages with a central thesis – the extent to which women’s agendas are visible in security governance systems and practices in Africa. A central thesis of the book is the assumption that a people-centred and inclusive “security” would necessarily require engaging with “women’s agendas”. Part I titled *Conceptual Approaches* includes three papers that offer a critical glance at security discourse prominent amongst people who work with state systems. Funmi Olonisakin’s paper, for example, makes the argument that African states and their security infrastructure is an off-shoot of colonial governance systems that were a fundamental part of the colonising project. She places current security systems as an unfortunate continuation of these structures, only slightly adjusted to suite the lives of Africa’s elites – almost all gendered as men.

Whereas this is indeed a valuable argument (one that I myself have made in *Feminist Africa* 10)1, I find that she uses the word and concept of “security” without examining what kinds of masculine identities and lived experiences shape notions of state security. It would have been useful to focus on certain colonial patriarchal traits of security that have evolved in African contexts, especially those that have been reinforced during Africa’s myriad liberation struggles and contemporary armed conflicts. Furthermore, a more nuanced gendered analysis of security discourse could have gone beyond the idea that “women”- people have been left out of state security systems and structures. As a framing paper for the book, Olonisakin’s chapter could have examined

militarised (and perhaps elitist in some cases) masculinities *and* femininities that foreground Africa's evolving state security discourse and practice.

Awino Okech's chapter on "Alternative discourses: a feminist approach to re-thinking security" offers a much more nuanced feminist analysis that pushes beyond hegemonic masculine connotations of security within state discourse. She points out that the distinction between the public – or state space – and other spaces is in fact a false one. There is no separation between insecurity in our daily lives and that which is named as "state security". She also alludes to the existence of militarised femininities that occur in 'war' situations – pointing to the need to recognise and transform violent masculinities AND femininities. Okech draws on feminist work on Gender Based Violence (GBV) and its relevance to making links between security and gendered bodies of women. Here I find that her article struggles to make clear links between "security", bodies, and sexualities. This is a conceptual gap that feminists (who work with "security" discourse) are yet to close, or perhaps, transform.<sup>2</sup> The chapter points to the importance of drawing on years of activism and research on violence against women (VAW) and gender based violence (GBV) that is yet to be taken seriously by "security" analysts.

Comfort Ero's article on "Security sector reform: re-imagining its transformative potential" uses elements of Awino Okech's and Funmi Olonikasin's approach and applies it to transitional justice processes. Basing her work on Hamber (2006), she discusses the possibilities of transitional justice processes broadening their conceptual understanding of violence so as to embrace women's experiences of violence in a way that can 'subvert the militarised view of what constitutes safety'. She argues for transitional processes to embrace other ways of reshaping people's lives that go beyond technical legal options. She argues that transitional justice process offer an opportunity for state structures to shift meanings of "security" in a way that ensures that state systems respond to the social and economic aspects of the consequences of violence against women.

Part 2 of the book includes three country case studies: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique. Each author provides useful contextual information on women's involvement or experiences in responding to situations of violence and "insecurity" – either in direct engagement with state systems or less formally recognised efforts. I found that a limitation of each chapter was a comfortable use of the word "women" without an effort to unpack *which* women were being discussed, along the lines of class, ethnicity or even location. This could

be construed as a simplistic 'WID'-like analysis of gender and security that assumes that all that is required is the inclusion of "women"- people in existing security systems. Each article does not offer a detailed analysis of women's diverse identities and how these shape and were shaped by situations of security and insecurity. An exception to this is Helen Scanlon and Benilde Ndhlelo's paper titled "Many truths were not revealed': the case of Mozambique" that draws on narratives of specific women's experiences of violence during Mozambique's 27-year long civil war. This chapter provides insights on the various roles women played in the war and the ways in which marriage and patrilineal inheritance systems framed women's options for reconciliation.

Eka Ikpe and Tim Murithi's articles in Part 3 provide a useful summary of commitments to gender equality and security made by the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States. Both chapters discuss various layers of government bureaucracies that have been put in place and the extent to which "women" are represented.

Overall, the book is a good presentation of conversations that are already underway in women's rights organisations across the continent. The book also reveals a need to boldly engage with long standing feminist perspectives on gender and violence so as to push notions of "security" beyond that of state structures and processes.

## Endnotes

1. See Clarke, Y. 2008. "Security Sector Reform in Africa: an opportunity to deconstruct militarised masculinities?", *Feminist Africa* 10, 49-66.
2. See Bennett, J. 2010. "'Circles and Circles'": Notes on African feminist debates around gender and violence in the c21", *Feminist Africa* 14, 21-48.
3. WID stands for Women in Development. This is an early feminist analysis of development that became popular in the 1970's. Its main thesis is that "women" have been left out of developmental processes.

## References

- Bennett, J. 2010. "'Circles and Circles'": Notes on African feminist debates around gender and violence in the c21", *Feminist Africa* 14.
- Clarke, Y. 2008. "Security Sector Reform in Africa: an opportunity to deconstruct militarised masculinities?", *Feminist Africa* 10.
- Hamber, B., Hillyard, P., Maguire, A., McWilliams, M. Robinson, G., Russell D. And Ward, M. 2006. "Discourses in transition: re-imagining women's security", *International Relations*, vol. 20, no. 4.