

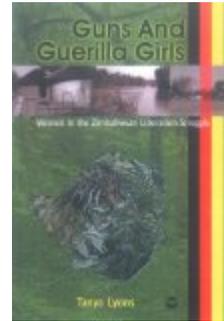
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tanya Lyons. *Guns and Guerilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004. xxiii + 338 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59221-167-8; \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59221-166-1.

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A Woman's Place is in the Struggle?

This fascinating book is an extremely welcome addition to the small but growing literature on female combatants in armed ethno-national struggle. The purpose of Lyons's work is to investigate the multiple roles and contradictory experiences of women involved in the Zimbabwean nationalist guerrilla armies who fought the anti-colonial liberation war, 1964-1980. Lyons challenges the simplistic and glorified "gun and baby" heroic image of black Zimbabwean female combatants, which she maintains forms the predominant representation of and rhetoric about these women, by presenting the women's own versions of their story. Through this, she aims to explore "some feminist issues of women's equality with men based on women's participation in a traditionally male domain-war;" to provide "an analysis of the activities preceding the disappointment felt in some feminist circles in Zimbabwe and internationally [about the failure to consolidate alleged wartime gains made by women in the postwar independence period]"; and to foreground women's roles and experiences of the war in order to make visible "a women's history of the struggle which has to a large extent been silenced in popular discourse of the war" (pp. xix-xx). Coming from a post-colonial studies perspective, Lyons does not claim that her work reveals an ultimate "truth" thus far hidden, but argues instead that it is "essential to get the history of the war told from as many perspectives as possible" (p. xxiii). As well as primarily focusing on women in the guerrilla armies, she addresses the experiences of the "mothers of the revolution"—women who remained inside Zimbabwe

(then Rhodesia) and did not join the guerrillas. She also very briefly addresses the roles, expectations and experiences of white Rhodesian women during the war.

Guns and Guerilla Girls will be of great interest to scholars working on female combatants, gender and nationalism, anti-colonial struggles, post-colonialism, Zimbabwean history, and African studies. Given its accessible writing style it will also be useful for students at all level, and of interest to the general public. Lyons spent a year researching in Zimbabwe and balances her interview material with numerous other sources, drawing on fictional literature and films as well as more traditionally "academic" material. The result is a rich, highly readable and consistently interesting piece of work.

There is such a shortage of good quality work on female combatants that draws primary on field research and privileges the voices of combatants/ex-combatants themselves that Lyons's volume stands out as a positive example of what those of us working in this field should be trying to do. Lyons is to be commended on her thorough research, interesting and productive interviews, attention to detail, sensitivity, and her balanced discussion. Both the empirical results themselves and her own contextualizing of the women's experiences within the contested issue of the relationship between Zimbabwean nationalism and feminism provide us with another piece of the puzzle that is the wider debate over feminism and nationalism and gender and nationalism. Her contention

that we must approach with skepticism both overly glorified representations of combatant women and representations that view them merely as victims, and instead focus on the voices of the women themselves (bearing in mind, as she explicitly does in chapter 1, the methodological challenges inherent in this), is strongly supported by this reader.

Lyons notes that although there are unique aspects of the Zimbabwean war, the women's experiences also have some commonalities with women in other liberation wars in southern Africa. As someone who has researched female combatants in Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland, I would suggest that there are also much wider commonalities. I was struck, for example, by the similarities between the Zimbabwean nationalist rhetoric in regard to women's emancipation and that of the Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), around fifteen years later. Lyons explains that the Zimbabwean nationalist argument was that women's emancipation would result from national independence and, thus, women must contribute to the fight for independence. She provides the following 1979 extract from a nationalist magazine:

"In their active participation in the liberation of Zimbabwe the women have always been very clear about the objectives of the struggle. As they see it, they are fighting for national independence and sexual equality. To them the two things are inseparable. The achievement of independence to them is the best guarantee for changing the situation they are in and for guaranteeing the establishment of equal rights for all. The priority is independence and not 'women's rights'" (p. 46).

Further: "The emancipation of women is a must and not an act of charity. Their struggle is part of society's struggle for progress. No progress can be reached without the effective participation of women. Only through conscious participation in the revolutionary struggle will Zimbabwean women gain the confidence of their men" (pp. 45-46).

Similarly, although the LTTE (where women make up around a third of the fighting force) has an expressed commitment to women's emancipation, the in-

dependence struggle frames the struggle for women's rights. Prabhakaran, leader of the LTTE, maintains that the women's liberation movement is an integral part of the greater Tamil struggle[1] but also, significantly, implies that only women who are involved with the nationalist struggle can achieve liberation for women: "It is only the women with a revolutionary consciousness who could become a revolutionary force. Only such a revolutionary force can destroy the shackles of [women's] oppression." [2] Therefore, "The Tamil Eelam revolutionary woman has transformed herself as a Tiger for the Liberation of our land and liberation of women. She, like a fire that burns injustices, has taken up arms. Our movement paved the way for this historical change." [3] In both cases, problematically, women's rights are essentially to be "earned" through women's military participation and sacrifice. I also noticed related similarities between the way that Zimbabwean female ex-combatants often spoke (positively) of being treated just the same as male soldiers, conceptualizing this as equality, and the way that Tamil and Irish Republican ex-combatant women have spoken to me.

Although the whole work is excellent, I personally found the interview extracts in *Guns and Guerilla Girls* to be the most gripping. The voices of the women Lyons spoke to are still ringing in my head, in the same way that the voices of ex-combatant women I myself have interviewed still echo. This book is a must-read for H-Minerva subscribers.

Notes

[1]. V. Pirapaharan, "Tamil National Leader Hon. V. Pirapaharan's Women's International Day Message," EelamWeb, 8 March 1996, available from <http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1996/>.

[2]. V. Pirapaharan, "Tamil National Leader Hon. V. Pirapaharan's Women's International Day Message," EelamWeb, 8 March 1992, available from <http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1992/>.

[3]. V. Pirapaharan, "Tamil National Leader Hon. V. Pirapaharan's Women's International Day Message," EelamWeb, 8 March 1993, available from <http://www.eelamweb.com/leader/messages/women/1993/>.

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