

Women Without Arms: Gendered Fighter Constructions in Eritrea and Southern Sudan

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Women Without Arms: Gendered Fighter Constructions in Eritrea and Southern Sudan

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An analysis of gendered fighter constructions in the liberation movements in Eritrea and southern Sudan (EPLF and SPLA/M), examining the question of female access to the sphere of masculine fighter constructs and the relevance of this for influence in peacetime affairs. Empirical research in both countries, in particular interviews with participants, reveals that what keeps women out of the sphere of legitimized violence is not some “inherent peacefulness,” but the exclusivist construct of the masculine fighter, which is supported by society. This makes it hard for women to participate in war, and especially to gain full fighter status. An intrinsic link is found between fighter status and access to power in post-conflict state-building from which women, being unable to gain full fighter status, are largely excluded.

“There are no men or women in the field, they are all comrades. And I tell you this, we never allowed them to put us down as women.” (Rozina, former EPLF fighter, Asmara, Eritrea, March 1997)¹

The conflicts in Sudan and Eritrea share two distinctive features: they were the two longest conflicts on the African continent and both resulted in the transformation of a guerilla army into the government of a new state. The Eritrean People’s Liberation Movement (EPLF) started in the late 1960s and won independence by a shared military victory over the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia in 1991;² the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) signed a comprehensive peace agreement with Khartoum in 2005 and South Sudan gained independence through a referendum in 2011.³ Although operating in close geographical proximity, in the same era, and with a similar Marxist liberation rhetoric, their political understanding and social objectives were quite distinct. While the EPLF pursued an openly revolutionary strategy of political and social transformation, the SPLA was principally a

fighting body whose political change agenda was restricted to overcoming the repression of the central regime in Khartoum (Akol 2009, 268). This decisive difference makes a comparative analysis of the nexus between fighter and citizen constructs particularly interesting. Other factors, such as style of leadership, international connections, and donor dependency, also influence the development of citizenship in post-conflict situations.

Whilst the majority of media and human rights reports on women in conflict depict women as victims of violence by armed groups (Human Rights Watch 2009; APPG and SFHR 2008) and policy papers count on women as actors for peace (Interpeace 2008), the focus of this paper is the construction of fighter images, in particular of women protagonists. My assumption is that armed group and society alike construct gendered fighter images.

1. Review of Literature and Central Positions

There is a distinct desideratum of academic research in the field of female fighters and gendered fighter images in the

¹ Interviewees are anonymized for their protection.

² Mengistu, whose regime (1974–1991) originated in and followed the Derg (Red Terror) (1974–1987),

was ousted by an alliance of guerilla movements, including the EPLF, the TPLF, and other groups that constitute the EPRDF government in Ethiopia.

³ Southern Sudan designates the southern territory of Sudan before the referendum while South Sudan refers to the new state.

Horn of Africa. The history of the EPLF is documented by the movement itself,⁴ and has been studied academically by often partisan researchers (Cliffe 1988; Connell 1993; Pate-man 1998; Wilson, 1991). The history of the war in south-ern Sudan is still understudied (Garang and Khalid 1992; Johnson 2003) despite a growing body of literature about the SPLM/A (Young 2005; Metelits 2004, 2010; Mompilly 2011; Rands 2010; Rolandsen 2005, 2007). Since the sig-ning of the CPA, various SPLA/M members and fighters have published autobiographies and talked in detail about military operations (Akol 2009; Arop 2006; Igga 2008), but there has been limited reflection on the political objectives and strategies of the movement (Nyaba 1997).⁵ Hardly any study reflects beyond the bounds of the movement or takes the gender and social aspects of the war into consideration (Allan and Schomerus 2010; James 2010).

1.1. Women as Victims – Men as Perpetrators

While there is a vast body of literature on women in war (Bennett, Bexel, and Warnack 1995; Cooke and Woollacott 1993; Lorentzen and Turpin 1998; Turshen and Twagira-mariya 1998; Matthews 2003) the feminist discourse on gendered fighter images is often restricted to Western ar-mies and the hyper-masculinity of the male soldier (D’Amico 1996; Enloe 1983; Goldstein 2001; Stiehm 1996).⁶ There is a focus on gender in international relations (Enloe 1990; Sylvester 2010; Tickner 1992) and in violence against women in conflict (Alison 2007; Moser and Clark 2001; Nordstrom 1997; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Ni-coli’c-Ristanovi’c 1996; Turshen 1998). The supposed di-chotomy of violent masculinity and peaceful femininity is prominently highlighted (Elshtain and Tobias 1990). Where women are described as violent warriors the refer-ence is mainly historical (Alpern 1998; Ehrenreich 1997; Hacker 1997) or the existence of violent women is dis-cussed as rule-bending, a case study of an extreme ex-

ception (Mackenzie 2011; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007).

Women who reject the feminine stereotype of life-giving and caring to encroach into the male sphere of life-taking are considered wrong, unnatural, or deviant (Coulter, Pers-son, and Utas 2008, 10).

1.2. Citizenship and Gendered States

The warrior-citizen nexus is a foundational theorem in ancient Greek citizenship ideals (Plato’s Republic). It was taken up again in feminist international relations studies, with a focus on hegemonic masculinity as the marker for power in international relations (Sylvester 2010; Tickner 1992). Post colonial studies and “third world feminists” (Gilroy 1993; Hall 1995; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991; Okpewho, Boyce, and Mazrui 1999) have established a foundation of literature on the exclusiveness of identity constructs in societies with a hegemonic dominant subject that is relevant to understanding mechanisms of exclusion and relevant to the present study. Although the main aspect of these discourses is citizenship built on exclusion as an essential moment creating dichotomized “us/them” groups in nation-building processes, there is a growing body of academic literature on the masculinity of the state and the exclusion of women (Hooper 2001; Joseph, 2000). Yet the trope of the fighter as highly gendered construction of per-formative images of masculinity, accessible to men but with restrictions for women and the idealized fighter as the imagined core identity blueprint for post-conflict citizen-ship are still lacking in academic and policy discourse.

There is also an increasing body of literature on the role of women in state-building, intervention, and DDR (demo-bilization, demilitarization, and reintegration) (Brethfeld 2010). Yet again the lack of correspondence to feminist studies and research on gender in International Relations and state-building is quite apparent.

4 EPLF publications such as the EPLF journal *The Eritrean Struggle* and grey material collected in As-mara 1997 and archived by the author.

5 Two SPLM publications discuss aspects of the movement’s political agenda of the SPLM: *A major Watershed: SPLM/A First National Convention Resol-utions, Appointments and Protocol* (12 April 1994) and John Garang de Mabior, *This Convention is Sov-ereign: Opening and closing speeches by Dr. John Gar-*

ang de Mabior to the First National Covention, 2 April 1994 (SPLM secretariat of Information and Culture).

6 This constitutes the dilemma of “western theories on African realities.” Using a broad range of liter-ature, from local fighters’ autobiographies to West-ern and non-Western feminist theory, post-colonial theory, and a substantial body of work on women in war, I therefore approach the question from various

angles and multiple disciplines. The intention is not to write an authentic analysis of women in liber-ation movements from an insider perspective. Posi-tioning myself as an author influenced by “Western theory” and deconstructing grand narratives by questioning them through analysis and empirical findings thereby creates a non-linear interpretation of the issue.

2. Background and Methodology

The construction of fighters, warriors, and comrades plays an important role in every aspect of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration efforts, security sector reform, and, beyond that, state-building and nation-founding myths (Coulter, Persson, and Utas 2008, 7). Yet the construct of a strong and heroic persona bound by a code of honor and possessing virtues of protection relies on an invisible and silent other: the civilian. Without civilian acceptance and resonance a fighter construct cannot prevail. In order to understand how fighter constructs work – for fighters and for civilians – we need to examine the legitimizing forces: the civilians, and society and culture at large, that applaud and encourage the heroic fighter image. On the basis of my own empirical research in southern Sudan and Eritrea I would argue that there is an intrinsic link between the fighter image and access to power in post-conflict state-building.

In the transformative phase from conflict to post-conflict the status of fighters is a telling indicator of post-conflict social development and of acceptance of or resistance to the use of violence as an ordering factor, instrument of power, or general disciplinary mechanism. The absence of women in decision-making positions in South Sudan and the backlash against female fighters in Eritrea both reflect gender fighter images with consequence for post-conflict power.

In southern Sudan women were largely excluded from fighter status in the SPLA, which denied them access to negotiation and decision-making processes. Specifically, their exclusion from the negotiations for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) prevented them from shaping the future of South Sudan. While women in Eritrea were formally acknowledged as active fighters and had access to political positions, the increasingly autocratic leadership of President Isayas Aferwerki restricted political decision-making to his inner circle.

One crucial factor for understanding militarized politics in post-conflict states is the link between access to violence and access to power. In the case of southern Sudan and Eritrea the acknowledged experience is that “entrepreneurs of

violence” gain access to power and decision-making, leaving out a vast body of knowledge of civilian decision-making and conflict transformation.

In terms of methodology, I chose to compare two armed groups operating in the Horn of Africa: the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLM/A 1984–2005) (Arop 2006; Johnson 2003; Nyaba 1997) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF 1978–1991) (Cliffe 1988; Cliffe and Davidson 1999; Lyons 2006). The regional and temporal proximity of these two case studies allows direct comparison of the political and social agendas of the insurgents and their respective construction of fighter images. Distinct ideological differences regarding gender ideals, political objectives, and social transformation make the comparison even more fruitful. Both insurgencies have ended and are now established and establishing governments in their new countries, allowing us to analyse the consequences of gendered fighter images in post-conflict state-building efforts. While both movements shared similar gendered fighter constructs based on a masculinist ideal of warrior and liberation fighter, they had different policies regarding the acceptance of women as fighters. Women in southern Sudan could join the SPLM and support its armed wing, the SPLA, but were largely denied active combat positions, whereas the EPLF numbered about 40 per cent women across its ranks.

Alongside academic literature, the paper is based on my own empirical research in southern Sudan and Eritrea, which focused on the work women do during war, gendered images of fighters, and the role of female fighters in those two regions (Weber 2007).

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews: in Eritrea with active and retired female fighters; in southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains, and the Sudanese diaspora with female activists, women in the SPLM/A, commanders, Commander-in-Chief John Garang de Mabior (now deceased), traditional leaders, local communities, and civil society representatives in the diaspora. The main body of empirical data was collected during an extended research trip to southern Sudan and Eritrea between November 1996 and May 1997. Although in the

conflict was still ongoing in southern Sudan, I was able to cover various regions controlled by the SPLA (Bahr el Ghazal, the Nuba Mountains, Upper Nile and Lakes states, Eastern and Western Equatoria). In Eritrea during the period between independence in 1993 and the re-eruption of war with Ethiopia in 1998 I was able to interview recently demobilized female fighters who were not yet reintegrated into society nor re-mobilized for the new conflict. Follow up research was conducted during various human rights assignments undertaken for Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others.⁷

3. Empirical Results

Image constructions, such as fighters, warriors, or citizens, might be conceptualized as part of a transformative ideal of a guerilla movement.⁸ However, without relational praxis – the day-to-day activity of gender/fighter/citizen – the construct cannot hold.

I subscribe to a constructivist concept assuming that there is no pre-discursive truth. Social roles, such as gender, age, or class, are developed by a dominant discourse of attribution, relational praxis, and performance that maintains and reinforces the role and image. Who dominates the discourse, what performance is encouraged, and what role is positively sanctioned is mainly a question of power in the given society. Roles are not predetermined or unchangeable, but nor are they completely fluid and constantly interchangeable, since hegemonic subjects have an interest in guaranteeing their power. One example for this is the high rate of divorce between male and female fighters in post-war Eritrea, with the men marrying non-fighter women instead.

3.1. Access to Power through Violence

Women were allowed to join both liberation movements, but there were distinct differences in numbers and tasks. Ideologically, both movements had similar influences, yet their political infrastructures were distinctively different.

Eritrea is small in comparison with southern Sudan, and the SPLA lived, trained, and organized attacks from safe refuges in Ethiopia. Direct encounters with villagers and urban infiltration of enemy forces, so successful in the EPLF struggle, were simply impossible for the SPLA. The SPLA was determined to win territory rather than hearts and minds. While women made up approximately 40 percent of the EPLF ranks, the figure for the SPLA was roughly 7 percent. In Eritrea women were allowed into all positions, including combat roles, whereas in Sudan they were mainly restricted to nursing, feeding, sheltering, emotional and social reproduction and caretaking, and communication functions. As a member of the National Executive Committee of the SPLM/A explained, no formal reason was given for the demobilization of active fighters:

I do not know the real percentage of female fighters in the SPLA, but maybe you can say 7 percent. There are not too many women freedom fighters. But there were before. In 1984 there was one women's battalion. But after that they never organized as female fighters. But they are still there in the army. These women got training – not as officers, only a few of them. So we have a number of officers, more than thirty, but they are not active in their role. I don't know why. In this workshop on officer training, they said maybe they forgot to enrol them in the movement. I don't know, the blame comes from different areas. Now there are more women joining the training. In Equatoria, for example, they get military training in the movement. Although they are not really active. I mean they are not passive but not as active as the men. They do not go to the frontline and fight. But also we have some women who have been trained as nurses. Sometimes they go but not many of them. If you compare it to the Eritrean movement, it is nothing, what the women do by way of fighting itself it is nothing. (Sittouna Ahmed, member of SPLM/A NEC, Nairobi, December 6, 1996)

Another woman who identified herself as a fighter in the SPLA made it quite clear: “The rumors that women had been demobilized because they would run away when people were wounded are wrong. It was because the men did not want us to see them when they cry” (Bangwat Amum, civil administrator with the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, the humanitarian wing of SPLM,

7 See reports by Amnesty International on Sudan (*The Human Price of Oil*, 2000, and *Darfur: Rape as a Weapon of War*, 2004) and by Human Rights Watch (*Uganda: Abducted and Abused: Renewed*

Conflict in Northern Uganda, 2003) researched and co-written by the author. Since 1999 I have undertaken annual research visits to north and southern Sudan but no further visits to Eritrea.

8 See EPLF propaganda brochures.

and former SPLA fighter, New Kush, southern Sudan, December 1996).

In the cases of both southern Sudan and Eritrea power – during and after the struggle – is based on (potential) access to violence. Only with the gun (or the status) can a person make demands, either for food, cattle, and shelter, or for political positions. Case studies from both places show that women had an interest in fighting. In many interviews they said explicitly that they wanted to have a gun and fight. “And we really went to places and saw things that even men have not seen before. Even when going to military training. That was in Ethiopia. This was the Koryiom [Locust] Brigade. And all of us trained with rifles, just like the men.” (Adau Deng Dual, SPLA member, Nairobi, 1998). Similarly, an EPLF fighter recalled her initial encounter with the movement:

I was burning with national feelings. I was young and I wanted to do something. I was a member of the youngsters of the EPLF, of the Red Roses, before I was a member of the ELF. That was from '76 to '78 and what we did back then was mainly singing and dancing. Then I was still too young to join the armed forces, they sent me to Zero School for two years and finally in 1984 I joined. I was not happy about going to the school, I cried when they told me to go to school, I wanted a uniform and a gun. (Rozina, EPLF fighter, Asmara, March 19, 1997)

The aspect of violence in the construction of fighter images refers not only to the “situational action” (Wilström and Treiber 2009) of the doing but also to the violence inscribed in the image itself: the inscription of violence into the fighter image and the praxis of violence enacted by the fighter and legitimized by society. It is not only the gun that makes the power imbalance between fighter and citizen potentially violent, but the construction of the fighter as disconnected from society, the gulf between masculinity and denial of femininity in fighter images, the rites of passage, and the preparation for and praxis of killing, maiming, and destruction. These all involve violence as an inherent factor of “doing fighter.” Beyond this, the system-

atic lack or denial of care for the traumatized fighter body and mind carries another aspect of violence with it. The diverse parameters of violence are extensively discussed in feminist theories and include direct, social, and cultural violence. The human body stands at the centre of war and violence studies, as it does in feminist theory. In this paper I am concerned with physical violence in the construct of the gendered fighter body and the legitimacy given to the gendered fighter body to use violence against all the “others,” the outsiders, those who are not fighter comrades (Weber 2007, 315ff.).

The discrepancy between the women’s self-perceptions as active members of the SPLA and their exclusion from active positions by the movement itself is well illustrated by a speech made by Commander Salva Kiir at the SPLA women’s convention in southern Sudan in 1998:⁹

The women in the New Sudan have played and are playing a great role in the military struggle. Since the start of the Movement, women were recruited into the army but were few in numbers and they mainly participated in taking care of the wounded. In 1986 the first five officers were graduated in shield three and from that time up to now there are more than 20 female officers and their role has been as effective as men in the field. However, our women have had minimal representation in the decision making of the SPLA as compared to man. (Salva Kiir, New Kush)

Although the current president of southern Sudan, Salva Kiir, gave this speech at a SPLA women’s convention in 1998, the movement itself barely recognizes women as active members of the armed forces. Hardly any women are listed on the SPLA payroll and therefore eligible for a proper DDR package, a pension, or continued employment in the armed forces (Small Arms Survey 1998). Furthermore, women are not recognized as fighters in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) nor were they able to gain access to the CPA and post-referendum negotiations.

This exclusion of women from fighter status is not only a gendered dichotomy, an “us against them” enforcement of

⁹ Copy of the speech in the author’s archive. The speech was given on the occasion of the first women’s convention of the SPLM/A in 1998. The first convention of the SPLM/A took place in 1994,

ten years after the movement started. This was the first meeting where political objectives were formulated, and a change in political positions was discussed following the fall of Mengistu’s regime in

Ethiopia. The SPLM’s agenda changed from socialist/Marxist to capitalist/Christian, but none of these political labels were ever translated into a political program.

the unity of men in arms, but also a disempowerment of women (regardless of their war reality), because their experience is almost invisible and inaudible in the public discourse. This exclusion from active recognition in the armed movement denied women in southern Sudan the right to participate and have a voice in ceasefire and peace negotiations, in the architecture of state-building, and in vital decisions concerning the political, economic, legal, and military future of the country. However, as the example of Eritrea shows, even where women were part of the armed struggle, their actions are acknowledged, and they are portrayed as heroic fighter personae, their gain in decision-making power during the struggle will not necessarily prevail after victory has been won and the country is navigated back to “normality.” We see how dramatic a change this can be if we compare the EPLF’s revolutionary propaganda with the post-conflict reality:

The old belief that women are too soft to stand the trials of the battlefield has finally been put to rest. Over the past fifteen years Eritrean women fighters have seen action ranging from minor skirmishes to bitter full-scale battles. They have inspired their comrades and proven themselves effective and efficient. All this without losing their capacity for love and care. It is an achievement with few parallels in the history of modern warfare.¹⁰

And this is what one demobilized EPLF fighter had to say after the war of independence:

Those days of war were the best time in my life. I cried when I learned about our victory. Now we have to face this reality. Everybody is alone, on her own. This individualism, all these problems of everyday life. You have to start thinking about really unimportant things, like how to dress your daughter and yourself, since the neighbors are watching and we are not allowed to walk in combat uniform any more, we are not allowed to parade in our uniforms during the victory parade. We have wear traditional dress and behave like traditional women. Do you know that more than 80 percent of marriages between fighters are now divorced. The men are all looking for traditional wives in the village, they don’t want their female comrades any more. (Negeste, female former EPLF fighter, Asmara, Eritrea, April 1997)

The admiration, support, and legitimization of female fighters, of women in arms was quickly devalued after demobilization. The emergency phase of war was over, now

the reconstruction of state and society needed women to become normal, feminine, obedient members of society again, so that the society would not feel alienated and would continue to support the struggle despite hardships (Hirt 2010, 13).

3.2. “Doing Fighter”

Gender roles in society play a decisive role, as does the congruence between the image and the reality of the fighter. Construction of gendered fighter images entails attribution and is bound to historical roots such as age-group initiation, warrior tradition, guerilla ethos, and in some cases a just warrior narrative (Igga 2008; Pateman 1998). This section also reflects on society’s legitimization of the use of violence by fighters. I will show that in the context under discussion, men are not born, but made fighters, and women can perform, but not own the fighter status.

The construction will also relate to the political agenda, the programmatic scope, and the ideological embeddedness of the armed movement (Garang and Khalid 1992). Depending on the movement’s transformative objectives, its interest in social change, its promotion of equality, or conversely, interest in retraditionalization, the fighter image is closely linked to and constructed upon the movement’s rhetoric. Both movements recruited women, and in the beginning women were also recruited to SPLA combat units but were demobilized after the first battle. Formally they stayed in the movement, but had to shift to other tasks. In Eritrea after the conflict ended, female fighters were increasingly discouraged from wearing their uniforms and forced instead to blend into “society.” In southern Sudan their role as mothers and helpers is applauded while their active involvement in the struggle goes unrecognized. As Bangwat Amun explains in New Kush, southern Sudan:

We stay calm in this struggle. We have to win this struggle for ourselves, our children, our country. First, to liberate our land and start living in peace with each other. Then comes the second struggle we have to start and this might take much longer. This will be the war against men. Men who do or do not want to understand that women are not lesser than they, that whatever men

¹⁰ Eritrean Liberation Front, *Eritrean Women* (Port Sudan, 1980); the author collected and archived grey

literature by the EPLF during field work in Eritrea in 1997.

can do, women can do, and that women have been taking care of the survival of our people. There is the war to come to fight men about the status of women, our tasks and the respect these men lack. The next war is for us. For the involvement of women in decision-making processes, for visibility, respect. It was the women that were left behind in this war and we managed to fulfil every task, and after the war, this has to be recognized.

Further, the fighter construct – and exclusion from it – must be endorsed and developed by the civilian population if it is to prevail. In many interviews women in southern Sudan stated that the main obstacle to their interest in joining the struggle was society's response. As Victoria Akur Deng, another SPLA member from southern Sudan, explains: "This was not something that they [her parents] could understand, that I, their girl who they even sent to school, that I wanted to join the movement. Maybe my father understood, but he thought this is overdoing it, there are men in our country that can do the fighting. Why do they need you, women with guns?"

Military training, mobilization, songs, and bonding practices are relevant to understanding gendered fighter images and their reflection in society. Gendered fighter bodies and minds are sculptured: while the virile, strong, hard body of the masculine warrior is shaped in training, the ideal of masculinity goes beyond the perfect fighting physique. The masculine ideal is based on an epistemology of victorious men in battle, fearless warriors in a golden past, men taking the pain and hardship of initiation without whining.¹¹ Male initiation into adulthood in peacetime southern Sudan places a premium on "courage, aggressiveness and violence" (Deng 1972 68). In wartime, songs are used to boost aggression and detach the fighter from the domestic sphere. "Even your mother, give her a bullet! Even your father, give him a bullet! Your gun is your food; your gun is your wife" (Hutchinson 1996, 55).

The sexualized female body exemplifies the "other," both the enemy and the desired aspect of home. The female body represents the honor of family/community/ethnic group and nation. The female body turns easily into muti-

lated territory, an enemy, a "non-we" to be ostracized. The female body is, it does not actively produce or create. Its creational power happens to the body (Cohen 1987).¹² "These things" – sexual intercourse, childbearing, menstruation – happen to the female body, with or without consent. The warrior body signifies the opposite. The warrior body actively transforms itself into a fighting machine. In order to become a warrior (body) the male body also has to be molded, since real men's bodies rarely constitute masculinity as idealized in the fighter. The transgression in the passage to become a real fighter body is therefore equally necessary for male and female fighter aspirants. Nobody is born a fighter. (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Hutchinson 1997; Perner 2001).

Hard bodies, steeled bodies, scarred bodies, bodies trained to endure pain and duress, bodies that are virile, bodies that keep a secret, bodies that are part of a larger body: the armed group creates and maintains a masculine image by overcoming the female body and the female sphere. Whether in Western regular armies, violent gangs, or armed insurgent groups, an important aspect in the construction of fighter bodies is the disconnection of the fighter body from the feminized sphere of the mother, the wife, the lover, the family, and the civilian community at large (Jok Madut Jok 2007, 232ff.). This may involve bonding through an act of collective violence which cannot be shared with or violates civilians, and thus bonds the new fighter body together. This of course profoundly contradicts the ideal of fighters as protectors of women and civilians. Various techniques of violence are at play in constructing the new fighter body (individual and group), including pain inflicted by his own group to mark the fighter's body. Forcing the initiated fighter body to inflict pain on others by raping, brutalizing, or even killing members of his or her family or community (Weber et al. 2003) is a rare yet increasing method of ensuring the loyalty of the newly constructed fighter body to the newly constructed we-group and guaranteeing that the new member feels fear and shame towards his group or community of origin.

¹¹ For initiation rites in southern Sudan see Perner 1994 and 2001 (pp. 82 ff.).

¹² Klaus Theweleit argues that on the contrary, the creational powers of women's bodies, lead men to develop womb envy and compensate by becoming

creators of death in wars (Cooke and Woollacott 1993, 283–316).

As two child soldiers, who were just captured by the SPLA in Northern Bahr al Ghazal explained “Kerubino’s men caught us, they told us to go back to our villages and take the food. We were given guns to make sure that our people would not resist us” (Duar Apuk and Mayen Atem, both 13 years old, interviewed in Ameth, Northern Bahr al Ghazal, following capture by the SPLA)

Although the protocol of dehumanization ensuring obedience is highly gendered, it makes little difference if the recruit is male or female. The step of humiliation is often based on an effeminizing concept (you are a girl, a pussy, you will be fucked) which apparently works for men and women alike. (Weber 2007, 307). Yet the long term consequence is highly gendered: women as fighters with female bodies find it hard to become acknowledged as active fighters, and women who cross into the sphere of masculine fighter images will find it hard to stay there and keep their status when the conflict, the “emergency” is over – when peace comes.

The use of violence as part of being a fighter (“doing fighter”) is not treated as a gendered trait. It is even understood that women in combat will act as violently as men – as this comment by one Eritrean EPLF fighter shows:

The Ethiopian prisoners of war were afraid to be guarded by women. They preferred men to guard them, since we women would be cruel. I would say to my comrades, why feed them and keep them, since they killed our people. Why not shoot them right away? (Lemlem, demobilized EPLF female fighter, Asmara, March 1997)

3.3. Fighter, Civilians, and Citizenship

The fighter-civilian sphere is constitutive to the legitimization of the use of violence against civilians, despite the protection of civilians being the original rationale of fighting, despite any code of honor, affiliation, or support by the civilian community (Kalyvas 2006; Schlichte 2009). This is a quite complex matter, since the distinction between protection of civilians from the enemy as the legitimization for using force in a just cause and attacks and abuse against civilians is quite narrow. Here the division between private and public, the exclusion of women from the public sphere, the exclusion of civilians from the front, is based on a gen-

dered concept. In any just war discourse it is the beautiful soul (Elshtain 1995, 140) that needs protection by the just warrior. The home front, women and children, the innocent need protection from the warrior/fighter, so the fighter is required to leave the protected sphere in order to protect it.

Yet precisely because of the loyalty to the new family, the armed group, the responsibility to protect is quite often turned around with astonishing ease, with the weak, female, and innocent – certainly on the enemy side – are used as targets and human shields. Because the feminine sphere of the civilian is not only in need of protection but has less value attached to it because of its members perceived weakness, unpredictability, and unsoldierliness (Ericsson-Baaz and Stern 2008, 62), the weak becomes the ugly, subhuman, the one violence can be used against indiscriminately. (Springmann 2011, p.388)

One constitutive factor of the legitimization and praxis of violence is the normative concept of obedience. “Mothering the frontline” becomes a prerequisite for the image of the peaceful woman/mother who cares for her own, but at the same time legitimizes the killing of the children of the other mother (Kaplan 1994). Here the caring role of women is understood as a substantive part of the war effort. By silently accepting violations carried out by its own fighters against other civilians, society legitimizes violence.

What Christina Thürmer-Rohr labeled complicity with the perpetrator (“Mittäterschaft”) (1989), unquestioning emotional and material support for fighters regardless of their activities, could be described as the grand narrative of obedience inscribed in most societies. It is based on a rather interconnected understanding of power, encompassing not only vertical power from above but reassurance and acceptance from below as a form of legitimization for violent structures (Foucault 2004; Rommelspacher 1995).

In order to gain full recognition, acceptance, admiration, and – even more importantly – support from civilians, an everyday practice of fighter-citizen relations is necessary. This can be accomplished through friendly interaction, following Mao’s dictum that “the people are like water and

the army is like fish”. Interestingly, in many armed movements, acceptance of the fighter image is maintained even where fighters enforce obedience, eliciting the support of civilians in the form of food, shelter, information, carriers, and manpower through the power of the gun.

3.4. Warrior-citizens

For an understanding of the status of fighters, the founding myth of the new nation-state is central: newly built in the case of Eritrea; just beginning construction in the case of South Sudan. In both countries the role of civilians during the struggle plays but a minor role in the national founding myth. Equally, recognition and reconciliation of violence and war traumas are sidelined in the effort to build the national identity. In both cases the identity of the vanguard, the elite, is based on the shared experience of the fighters during the struggle. The two states share a militarized interest, where “security first” is the dominant rule (with legislation and distribution of public goods secondary) (Woldegiorgis, FES 2010). They differ, however, in the strictness of the securitization of the state effort. In South Sudan there has so far been no need for forced conscription, nor does the leadership seek total control over the state territory or its citizens (nor would it be in a position to achieve that). Whereas Eritrean fighter images dominate the founding myth from heroic narratives (Connell 1997) to the ideal of honor, perseverance, and strength, in South Sudan the army has less of a heroic touch. While the rhetoric of war is omnipresent in South Sudan today and SPLA fighters are hailed for their endurance in the war against the North, peace and independence came through negotiations – unlike in Eritrea, where the EPLF’s military victory over the Derg regime marked the path to independence.

At the level of public pronouncements both states hail their women for their support of the struggle, but only Eritrea had the experience of the relational praxis of demobilizing female fighters from active military service to civilian life. The rewriting of history in both countries includes a devaluation of the active role of women inside and outside the armed group. Their supporting roles for the struggle are acknowledged, but not the transformation of individuals, of role models, the reality of active decision-making by women in the absence of men, and the strength, endur-

ance, and perseverance of civilians in the decades of struggle.

Grace Odong captures with great clarity the failure to acknowledge women’s decision-making power in southern Sudan during the struggle:

War takes away men from homes to the battlegrounds. In these situations women are in most cases separated from their husbands for very long periods. In the periods of absence women take the role of mothers, fathers, healers, educators, social worker, etc. In a way it forced lone parents to take control of meager resources. However, even though women gained greater control of resources than previously when their husbands were around, they have fallen back again over time. The gap between women and men grows and women are relatively less well off vis-à-vis men than they were in the past. In armed struggle like the current one facing us in Sudan, women are the ones sacrificed on the altar of the struggle. (Grace Odong, southern Sudanese women’s activist, Equatoria, 1998)

4. Conclusions

The results reached through my field research in southern Sudan and Eritrea can be summarized as follows:

1. Women have restricted access to power positions during conflict because they are not fully acknowledged as active fighters.
2. Women are able to perform but not transform gendered fighter images. They can act as fighters but not become “real fighters.” As a result they fail to benefit from the fighter-citizen connection created by the masculine fighter image. Even if they turned into fighters during the war, they are forced to turn back into women afterwards and thereby leave the masculine sphere of power.
3. Masculine fighter images are idealized by men and women alike. But for women to become fighters means crossing established gender lines. Fighter ideals are grounded in gendered body images and narratives and practiced through gendered social roles.
4. Women actively participate in the construction of the masculine fighter idea(1) and legitimize the fighters’ use of force and violence.
5. There seems to be no apparent difference between men and women in the use of violence; it is merely the opportunity factor that leads more men to legitimized uses of violence.

6. The armed movement and civilians create a sub-status of supporters of the struggle, which is hardly contested. Thereby the high status of the fighter is manifested whereas the supporters are not fully acknowledged as active participants in the struggle.

While feminist theorists and peace scholars (Alison 2007; Ruddick 1990, 1994; Reardon 1985, Gilligan 1992; Chodorow 1989), masculinity scholars (Theweleit 1993, 284), and war theorists (van Creveld 2001) discuss both inherent and socialized peacefulness of women and war-proneness of men, my research clearly demonstrates that despite socialized gender norms women can play violent roles during conflicts, both in active fighting and in legitimizing violence. The case studies from Eritrea and southern Sudan clearly show that women possess an interest in the use of violence and in becoming active fighters. Yet one of the manifestations of structural violence in gendered fighter images is exclusion (Weber 2007). In many insurgent groups, armed forces, rebel groups, and militias, women are simply not allowed to operate as fighters. And if they do, they are not formally recognized as active combatants and fail to gain high positions in the military hierarchy. This enforced absence from the armed forces themselves by no means excludes women from war and conflict; on the contrary, the home front, support, and supply are continuously tended by women. And civilian casualties are much higher than casualties amongst fighters.

It is also apparent that civilians, despite the hardship they suffer through war – from the enemy but also from the armed groups of their own side – support masculine fighter ideas and ideals and legitimize privileged access to power through fighting positions. This has already been reflected in studies of men and women in Western armies and conflicts (Boulding 1988, 2000; Cooke 1993; D’Amico 1996; Enloe 1983, 2000; Isaksson 1988; Kaplan 1994; Stiehm 1996, Tobias 1990) and is part of the ongoing debate in feminist theory and masculinity studies (Connell 2005; Goldstein 2001; Hooper 2001). The crystallization of gender dichotomies during war and the privilege of hyper-masculinity (hegemonic masculinity) is discussed, yet the debate lacks analysis of the knock-on effect of this militarized masculine mindset on post-conflict society.

The significance of this evidence for post-conflict societies, demobilization, state-building, peace negotiations, and conflict management is widely neglected. Analysis of war and political violence (Kalyvas 2006; Schlichte 2009; Tilly 2003) addresses “exceptional” politics (Agamben 1998, p.145), but forgets that exceptional politics and the use of violence are normal everyday praxis in gender relations.

The discussion generally focuses on the aspect of peaceful women as carers and mothers, rather than reflecting their function in mothering the frontline, legitimizing violence by “their” sons, and keeping quiet about atrocities. Active female fighters are hardly considered at all, and where they are, are mainly depicted as the exception, the travesty (Sjoberg 2007; Sylvester 2011). While there is a growing literature on the role of men as warriors and fighters in southern Sudan (Burton 2007; Deng 1972; Madut Jok 2007;) and autobiographies of military men turned politicians (Akol 2009; Arop 2006; Igga 2008; Nyaba 1997), there are very few reflections on the experience of women during the war (Hutchinson 1996; Turshen 1989) or autobiographical writings by influential female figures in southern Sudan. The experience of women in the war in Eritrea is more visible (Wilson 1991), but rarely reaches beyond biographical anecdotes (Schamaneck 1989) and is rather unreflective of the political exclusion of former female fighters and the potential consequences for post-conflict state-building. It is important to acknowledge the reality of these women in demobilization and reintegration schemes, and their experience and expertise need to be reflected in conflict management and peace negotiations, precisely because it differs from that of mainstream male fighters.

Understanding the relational praxis of fighter-civilian interaction, the attribution of meaning and status to fighters and civilians before, during, and after conflict, is relevant for the success of post-conflict demobilization as well as for the shaping of societies and citizenship. Longstanding and protracted conflicts create social practices that carry on as habitual references after the conflict.

The United Nations acknowledges this connection and the necessity for women to become active participants at all le-

vels of conflict resolution and peace negotiations.¹³ However, analysis of the basis of the fighter construct and the fighter-citizen nexus is lacking, especially in the efforts to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

There is also a growing body of literature on African rebel or liberation movements that have become governments (Boas, Dunn 2007; Mampilly 2011; Rolandsen 2007), but a total absence of critical debate about either the broad exclusion of women from fighter status or the existence of female fighters and its repercussion for post-conflict governments.

5. Outlook

Whether gendered fighter images will become an important building block for the grand narrative of the “imagined community” or a mere ridiculized travesty will depend on the political and social transformation from conflict to post-conflict. Especially in cases where the new leadership is unwilling or unable to downsize the armed forces, successfully demobilize and reintegrate former combatants, and subsequently form a national army with a meaningful role, the image of the soldier is degraded. Masses of men with arms but no pay roam the streets – often far away from their families – and become a threat to civilians rather than a force for protection. This scenario is currently quite realistic in the case of South Sudan. The opposite case, mystified over-admiration for everything connected with the fighter, from the assumed spirit of honor and discipline to moderation and endurance, a hierarchical style of leadership, and the foundation of the national identity on an exclusivist fighter experience, is strongly visible in the Eritrean case. Neither the SPLA’s propaganda apparatus, nor its political agenda, nor its community outreach ever reached the level of organization of the EPLF. The SPLA never formulated the need for social transformation in southern Sudan – only a transformation of the political elite in Khartoum. There-

fore they did not think it necessary to educate or mobilize the rural and urban population for their struggle. Unlike the EPLF, the SPLA did not engage in literacy programs for the rural population, nor did they mobilize communities to educate girls and boys alike. The sectors of distribution of public goods, education and health was outsourced to international humanitarian agencies.

The fighter image is not constructed in isolation, but is closely linked to the efforts, discourse, and realities surrounding it.

Do women gain anything by actively joining armed struggles? This question has at least two answers. The skills, status, and acknowledgement acquired through active participation in the struggle empower women to perceive themselves as active members of society. The decisive question however remains whether their active involvement, their new skills, their transformed social gender role and praxis are acknowledged by the armed movement and the society at large. If female fighters remain a mere travesty of the construct of a “real” woman and the image of the “real” fighter remains a masculine image of a male person transcending beyond the sphere of femininity, the gains for active female fighters in political power, participation, and social transformation are limited. Whereas women in southern Sudan were kept in a subordinated feminine image of support and supply, in Eritrea the fighter image underwent a gender transformation during the struggle, including equal distribution of formerly gendered tasks such as fighting and bringing up children (Pateman 1990; 220).¹⁴ The reason why this deep transformatory aspect could not prevail has largely to do with the militarization of society after independence. The retraditionalization of gender roles had a broader support base (the patriarchal non-fighting society as well as many male fighters) that obviously benefitted from the traditional role of women.

¹³ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, “Women, Peace and Security” (S/RES/1325 (2000)).

¹⁴ The Zero School of the EPLF was a collective effort to bring up and educate the children of the revolution collectively by all fighters, not necessarily their biological parents.

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