

Fearless Fighters and Submissive Wives: Negotiating Identity among Women Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Following the global focus on sexual violence in the DRC warscape, attention to gender in defense reform initiatives in the DRC has tended to become almost synonymous with combating sexual violence. The complex interconnections between gender and militarized violence have been reduced to simplistic understandings of both gender and violence. Consequent ‘gender sensitive’ defense reforms efforts have largely aimed at reconfiguring soldiers who embody violent articulations of masculinity into responsible soldiers with respectable notions of militarized masculinity (e.g. disciplined protectors of the civil population, in particular women). Other (and surely related) explicitly gendered areas of contention, such as women’s situation within, and access to, the new national army have received very little attention. If the issue of women combatants and soldiers figure in the discussions at all, they figure as saviors through their embodiment of more peaceful and humanizing qualities (and only recently so). Echoing gender and SSR discourses in other contexts, some external actors have started to argue for the inclusion of more women in the state security forces in the DRC as a way to mitigate the high levels of abuses against civilians. Yet what of the many women who have served—violently—in the Congolese national army, as well as armed militia groups? How do they figure in such familiar gendered narratives—and reform solutions?

Based on interviews with women soldiers in the Congolese Armed Forces conducted between 2006 and 2009, this paper explores the identity of women soldiers within the DRC armed forces. It asks how women soldiers position themselves in relation to gender, soldiering and violence. By drawing on the women’s own voices and reflections regarding their subject positions, both in the household and in the zone of the military, the paper highlights the serious simplifications of the “add women and stir” arguments in the DRC context. In particular, the paper addresses how women soldiers described themselves as no different from their male soldiers in terms of propensity for violence and also explained/defended violence against civilians – including sexual violence – in a similar manner as their male colleagues. Most women soldiers and officers strongly argued for a full inclusion of women in all domains of the armed forces, basing their arguments on women’s rights to equal access, but particularly on women’s equal capacity for violence and combat. However, while women soldiers, on the one hand, strongly contested the femininity/masculinity binary underpinning dominant military traditionalist arguments opposing women’s increased access to the armed forces, they also embraced these binaries. While naming themselves ‘fearless fighters’ at work, they represented themselves as ‘submissive good wives’ at home. Many even argued that they were the ultimate good wives (much better than civilian women): through their work they had learned true submission and discipline. Hence, by sharply separating between the ‘public’ military sphere and the ‘private’ civilian spheres, they articulated two different (yet related) gender discourses: one that is

linked to their work within the Armed Forces and one which is connected to the 'private' life of the home. While this positioning reflects dominant gender ideals (the good chaste, submissive wife) in the civilian sphere, the strength with which it was articulated among women soldiers can be understood as part of strategies to counteract the stigma attached to women soldiers and combatants in society (as non-obedient, whores, women not suited for marriage). The paper thus draws on unique empirical data from the DRC and ultimately poses critical questions around the current ways in which connections are being drawn between gender and SSR more generally.