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Book Review: *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda: Women as Rescuers and as Perpetrators*

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Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda: Women as Rescuers and as Perpetrators

Sara E. Brown

New York, Routledge, 2018

176 Pages; Price: \$49.95 Paperback

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Numerous scholars and journalists have drawn upon first-person accounts to document and analyze the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi. Some have interviewed Rwandans who committed the violence, while others have spoken with people who risked their lives to save others. However, these accounts have largely focused on the actions and agency of men, in turn depicting women as the victims of the genocide. In *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda: Women as Rescuers and as Perpetrators*,¹ Sara E. Brown artfully upends these typical stories of women as victims and men as perpetrators or rescuers by centering the women who committed genocide in Rwanda, as well as the women who risked their lives to save others.

Specifically, Brown poses three core questions: 1) how were women mobilized to participate in the genocide and in rescue efforts? 2) What were these women's actions during the genocide? 3) And, what were the longer-term consequences of perpetrating genocide and of rescuing? To answer these meaningful inquiries, Brown relies upon in-depth interviews she conducted with seventy-seven respondents between 2010 and 2014. Among these seventy-seven respondents, sixteen were women who had rescued, twenty-six were women who had committed violence, and the rest were other individuals who could speak to the social setting at the time. Refreshingly, when considering these data, Brown reflects on how her positionality as a white, Western woman may have impacted the conversations that unfolded with the participants. She likewise carefully addresses how her translator's perceived identity may have shaped conversations. Importantly, Brown also draws upon twenty-five previously collected testimonies as well as case records from *gacaca* court trials in order to triangulate her findings—a noteworthy and laudable methodological move given the difficulty of working with first-person accounts of violence.

Brown begins her well-written and impressively researched book by providing the reader with an account of Rwandan history. Yet, rather than simply retracing the events that unfolded prior to 1994—which have been well-documented—Brown highlights gendered dynamics within the government and society more broadly. For instance, she examines the position of the Queen Mother as well as the role of Agathe Kanziga Habyarimana, who was highly involved in the infamous *Akazu* that planned the genocide. Brown likewise emphasizes the gendered aspects of mobilization prior to 1994, pointing out that the first three of the well-known Hutu 10 Commandments directly invoked gender.

After tracing Rwandan history and pre-1994 mobilization through a gendered lens, Brown turns toward examining rescue efforts undertaken by women. This analysis is especially vital because of the lack of attention paid to women who rescued during the genocide in both Rwandan society and scholarship to date. Indeed, while families often rescued together, the male head of the household was typically accorded the recognition for these heroic acts (e.g., given a medal by their local leader). In turn, these men have become known as rescuers and subsequently interviewed by journalists and scholars alike. Yet, Brown illustrates that some women rescued alongside their husbands, while others had to convince their husbands to rescue, rescued alone,

¹ Sara E. Brown, *Gender and the Genocide in Rwanda: Women as Rescuers and as Perpetrators* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

or rescued with others. Their stories are underrepresented, and this especially fascinating chapter shows how Rwandan women used gendered assumptions to their advantage as they undertook rescue efforts. Women rescued other peoples' children, for instance, and they were able to use the guise of motherhood to their advantage. Brown even highlights how sexism could save lives, as members of the killing groups would not enter peoples' homes without the man of the house present, meaning that Tutsi hiding within their homes could sometimes go undetected. Put simply, such gendered aspects of rescue are fascinating and novel. In fact, the reader wishes to hear more about how these findings depart from prior understandings of rescue, including whether there were gendered differences in women's motivations to save the lives of others in the first place.

Gender and Genocide next considers women who committed violence, and Brown challenges the reader by asking, "... why would women *not* be perpetrators?"² Although some of the women Brown interviewed deny their crimes (or aspects of their crimes), Brown demonstrates that women committed direct and indirect violence, including genocidal rape. Nevertheless, many women had relatively peripheral roles in the genocide—roles that Brown suggests were due to women's constrained or situated agency. To Brown, understanding constrained/situated agency means that we must comprehend how various situational and structural forces shape—and often limit—the agency that women are able to exert. For instance, many women were tied to their homes during the day, which in turn influenced the types of violence they committed. The notion of constrained or situated agency is consequently quite significant, and if space had allowed, the reader would have benefited from a fuller discussion of how constrained/situated agency maps onto the existing debates regarding agency and structure.

Often the actors and actions that unfold during genocide are only examined within the context of the violence itself. Yet, Brown concludes this excellent book by skillfully addressing what happened to the women perpetrators and rescuers *after* the genocide ended. This chapter illustrates Brown's comprehensive approach to research, as well as her broad historical and temporal view. This chapter also joins the chorus of scholars who are skeptical about the depths of reconciliation and forgiveness in present day Rwanda.

All things cannot be done in one book, so critiquing a manuscript that already does so much can feel strange. Nevertheless, although Brown largely focuses on the intersection of ethnicity/race and gender, the reader does wonder how other social factors—chiefly socioeconomic status and age—impacted the women's situated agency and subsequent actions during the genocide. Furthermore, a new shift in genocide studies has emphasized that actors often undertake multiple types of actions during complex situations of mass violence. Many people who rescue also kill, for instance, and understanding the women who perpetrated violence *and* rescued would be fruitful for future studies.

Genocide studies is already richer, however, due to Brown's fantastic book. Guided by feminist approaches, Brown shines a light on a much-needed gap in existing literature by addressing women—and gender—head on. This book also contributes to literature on mobilization for violence, high-risk activism, and gender studies, and each chapter is brimming with critical insights. Brown's reflexivity when it comes to research methods only heightens the importance of her findings, and her assessment of post-genocide processes likewise holds numerous implications for policy. For instance, Brown explains that the general omission of women perpetrators from dominant narratives about the genocide leads to missed opportunities to enact meaningful policies tied to their reentry into society. At the same time, the lack of attention to women who rescued in Rwanda may mean that young girls do not see themselves in the heroes of the genocide, which could have numerous ramifications going forward.

² *Ibid.*, 114.