

Women as War Criminals: Gender, Agency, and Justice

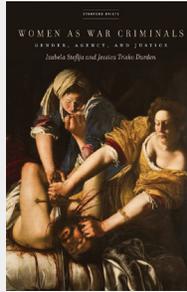
By Izbela Steflja and Jessica Trisko Darden

California: Stanford University Press, 2020, 180 pages, \$14, ISBN: 9781503613430

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Women are perennially considered as the symbol of peace and innocence, and this assumption has concealed their capability for inflicting ferociousness. Steflja and Trisko Darden's book, *Women as War Criminals: Gender, Agency, and Justice*, finds that justice is not blind to gender and that women are equally capable of perpetrating war crimes as men. However, few women utilize their feminine strategies to conceal their ferociousness. This work initiates a debate of war criminals between men and women, through examples that were prosecuted for similar crimes, unlike the rest of the literature of gender studies. In this work, the authors shed light on four female war criminals and their roles in times of war. Depicting women war criminals as 'Mother, Monster and Whore,' the authors draw a clear sketch helping to analyze their legal cases of war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and wartime abuses.

This book is divided into four chapters. The introduction provides a comprehensive summary of female war criminals and examines how gendered assumptions took center stage during their trials. Each chapter provides a detailed account of a female war criminal—Biljana Plavšić (president), Pauline Nyiramasuhuko (minister), Lynndie England (soldier), and Huda Muthana (student)—prosecuted under international tribunals, domestic courts, and military courts.



The first chapter presents the case of Biljana Plavšić, a war criminal from Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) Republika Srpska (RS) province. The authors highlight how Plavšić was involved during her tenure in many serious crimes and was charged on nine counts, including complicity to commit genocide; persecution on

political, racial, and religious grounds; extermination and deportation; willful killing, and murder as a violation of the laws of war. Furthermore, the authors evaluate Plavšić's dual character (mother and monster) and explain how she used the emotional card of being a 'mother' to the entire Serb nation which safeguarded her from severe punishments compared to her male counterparts and concealed her monstrous image. She also won mass support from the Serbs through her memoirs, dissembling to the international communities. In this way, as the authors demonstrate, Plavšić categorically applied gender strategies to dilute her agency in war crimes.

The authors underline gender imparity within the judicial system by comparing Plavšić's case with that of a camp guard. Plavšić's punishment was reduced and she was released in 2009, but no mercy was shown in the camp guard's case. This despite the fact that Plavšić was a notorious criminal and arrogant personality who showed no remorse for her doings. Indeed, her belief that Bosnian Muslim women were not raped by the Serb army but

worked as paid sex workers, proves her anti-Muslim beliefs which were often brushed under the carpet of motherhood.

The second chapter focuses on Pauline Nyiramasuhuko and traces her use of terror to uphold her socioeconomic status in Rwanda. She persuaded her son, Arsene Ntahobali, to become a murderous sexual predator, instilling fear among the Tutsi women. The authors argue that considering herself a mother, wife, daughter, or as a woman, “Nyiramasuhuko was supposed to be the most ‘legitimate’ victim of sexual violence, yet she became the most ‘illegitimate’ perpetrator of the same crime” (p. 54). Moreover, her family also claimed victimhood stating, “it was not culturally possible for a Rwandan woman to make her son rape other women” (p. 58).

The third chapter focuses on Lynndie England, a soldier at Abu Gharib prison in Iraq. This chapter offers insight into how lust and power turned England into a war criminal. England was found guilty on at least eight counts—including torture, unlawful confinement, and outrages upon personal dignity—and sentenced to a mere three years in a military prison. Three main features became focal during England’s trial: her gender, her sexuality, and her role. England’s defense team utilized her gender status as a mother to minimize her role in the abuse. England, characterized in the press as a bad girl of Abu Garib, describes herself as a passive player in the abuse who was sexually and emotionally exploited by an older, higher-ranking man. She once said, “her ability to proclaim herself as a woman in the male-dominated institution was impaired by her relationship with Graner. Her ability to function as a soldier was compromised by her vulnerability as a woman in a man’s world” (p. 91). But these are just assumptions ridiculed by her act of

forced masturbation of a prisoner. She was rather an infamous face of Abu Garib prison that was completely immersed in power and lust.

The fourth and the last chapter focus on Hoda Muthana, a 20-year-old college student. Popularly known as ‘Jihottie or the Jihadi Bride,’ Muthana went on her own to join a terrorist outfit in Syria (ISIS) at the age of 20. Unlike Plavšić, Nyiramasuhuko, and England, Muthana did not take advantage of claiming motherhood or womanhood and is filled with remorse, describing herself as a naïve and vulnerable youth who got brainwashed by her recruiters. In contrast to the previous three cases, Muthana, through her remorse and redemption, found herself excused as a ‘Mother-Monster’ figure. But both Muthana and Nyiramasuhuko tried to convince people through their dress code. Muthana through her blue jeans and polka-dotted shirt tried to show a reversal in her ideology, debunking the ideology of ISIS. And Nyiramasuhuko wore camouflages, fitting herself as an atrocious leader during the genocide. This work also attempts to distinguish between Muthana’s character from that of the other three women. Unlike them, Muthana was not in a decision-making or power position during her stay with ISIS, but still, her race, ethnicity, and religion are politicized, undermining her rights.

Summing up, this work highlights an important debate on gender parity that requires further elaboration. Through this work, the authors challenge the notion of women as passive actors in war crimes. The proportion of ‘gender’ violence between men and women is nearly parallel. However, women’s agency as primary criminals has been covered up by gendered notions, preserving archetypal images of women as victims and men as perpe-

trators. Thus, this work argues that women are equally capable of committing war crimes and other terrible atrocities, including enslavement, rape, mass-murder, genocide, and ethnic cleansing.

Three of the four war criminals broke international law and defended themselves, taking the advantage of leadership and motherhood, womanhood, and nationhood. These women knew what they were doing and acted with strong conviction and dedication, yet they blamed their male co-perpetrators and intentionally utilized gender strategies to

lessen their sentences. The authors argue that despite being constrained by patriarchal and male-dominated institutions, women do effectuate violence and war crimes. Concerning the limitations of this book, the comparative analysis between female and male war criminals and the gender disparity (in terms of justice) is not well-defined. But overall, this book is high-quality research, especially in terms of the presentation of legal cases and their detailed framework. It is a useful contribution and could benefit students, researchers, and academicians in international relations and gender studies.