

Gender, Health, and Emergencies: Humanitarian Intervention in Africa in Perspective

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Having spent the last 10 years researching my forthcoming book, *Healing the World: Trauma, Humanitarian Intervention, and Post-Conflict Recovery in Liberia 2004-2008*, in which I examine how healing the trauma of the Liberian Civil War has become a proxy for an array of human rights and humanitarian interventions, I've had the privilege this past year of moving into new areas of inquiry. Currently, with Catherine Panter-Brick of Yale University, I am co-editing a book on anthropology and medical humanitarianism – *Red Cross, Red Crescent, Blue Helmets: Medical Humanitarianism in States of Emergency* – that brings together fifteen anthropologists with research and practitioner experience in humanitarian emergencies to reflect upon the nature of medical humanitarian intervention. The cases we are considering include: the post-Tsunami reconstruction of Banda Aceh, Indonesia; the 2004 famine in Niger; the post-conflict recovery in Liberia; the reconstruction of Afghanistan; mobile medical clinics in the West Bank; and post-earthquake housing displacement in Haiti, among others. Our research seeks to engage humanitarian practitioners and anthropologists in a global dialogue around effects and efficacy in medical humanitarian practice.

As an additional dimension of our research into culture and medical humanitarianism, I have also led an initiative with Dr. Panter-Brick and an advisory board of 15 leaders in anthropology, global health, global mental health, and medical humanitarian practice to survey nearly 200 practicing anthropologists working in conflict zones. Our goal is to bring together anthropology and humanitarian practitioners in a global dialogue about how humanitarian intervention happens, in practice, and what its strengths, limitations, opportunities, and aporias are in the emerging global environment of crisis intervention and management. We have recently concluded the online survey component of our research, and look forward to publishing our findings in the next 18 months.

Additionally, with the support of the Univer-



sity of Florida, I have also had the opportunity this past year to pursue research on a new book project that examines local ethno-histories of gender-based violence in Liberia, and reconsiders the international application of human rights standards regarding gender-based violence in African contexts. My research in archives across the continental United States has indicated that gender-based violence involves a far more varied and complex array of practices and social relations than contemporary legal or global human rights framings allow. The consequences of holding a limited view of gender-based violence becomes fully apparent in places like post-conflict Liberia, where global definitions are mapped onto local realities and experiences in a way that creates substantial legal, social, and historical disjunctures. This book, which I have

tentatively entitled *Crypto-Histories of Gender Violence: Sex, Culture and Power in Liberia*, also uses missionary records, ethnographic fieldnotes, and colonial records from the last 150 years to uncover culturally encoded forms of gender-protection and gender-vulnerability in conditions that are currently dominated by violence and conflict. Through it, I hope to challenge global conventions regarding the role of “culture” and “tradition” in gender-based violence interventions in order to advance a different way of thinking about how gender-based violence is patterned in culture, cultural history, and cultural memory.

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