



**L-Università  
ta' Malta**

**Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding: Talking and Re-  
imagining Peace with Women in the Democratic  
Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia**

Esther Mojisola Beckley

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in International Relations  
Department of International Relations, Faculty of Arts

July 2024



L-Università  
ta' Malta

## **University of Malta Library – Electronic Thesis & Dissertations (ETD) Repository**

The copyright of this thesis/dissertation belongs to the author. The author's rights in respect of this work are as defined by the Copyright Act (Chapter 415) of the Laws of Malta or as modified by any successive legislation.

Users may access this full-text thesis/dissertation and can make use of the information contained in accordance with the Copyright Act provided that the author must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the prior permission of the copyright holder.

FACULTY/INSTITUTE/CENTRE/SCHOOL\_\_\_\_\_

## DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS

### (a) Authenticity of Thesis/Dissertation

I hereby declare that I am the legitimate author of this Thesis/Dissertation and that it is my original work.

No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or institution of higher education.

I hold the University of Malta harmless against any third party claims with regard to copyright violation, breach of confidentiality, defamation and any other third party right infringement.

### (b) Research Code of Practice and Ethics Review Procedure

I declare that I have abided by the University's Research Ethics Review Procedures. Research Ethics & Data Protection form code \_\_\_\_\_

- As a Ph.D. student, as per Regulation 66 of the Doctor of Philosophy Regulations, I accept that my thesis be made publicly available on the University of Malta Institutional Repository.
- As a Doctor of Sacred Theology student, as per Regulation 17 (3) of the Doctor of Sacred Theology Regulations, I accept that my thesis be made publicly available on the University of Malta Institutional Repository.
- As a Doctor of Music student, as per Regulation 26 (2) of the Doctor of Music Regulations, I accept that my dissertation be made publicly available on the University of Malta Institutional Repository.
- As a Professional Doctorate student, as per Regulation 55 of the Professional Doctorate Regulations, I accept that my dissertation be made publicly available on the University of Malta Institutional Repository.



## **University of Malta Library – Electronic Thesis & Dissertations (ETD) Repository**

The copyright of this thesis/dissertation belongs to the author. The author's rights in respect of this work are as defined by the Copyright Act (Chapter 415) of the Laws of Malta or as modified by any successive legislation.

Users may access this full-text thesis/dissertation and can make use of the information contained in accordance with the Copyright Act provided that the author must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the prior permission of the copyright holder.

## **Abstract**

Where do we begin the storytelling of International Relations and Peacebuilding? Who is rendered intelligible and who is not? Whose voices and knowledges are silenced? This feminist-decolonial research takes the reader on a journey to engage with and re-imagine peace through the experiences of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia. The aim is to comprehend what peace signifies to these women, articulated through their lived embodied experiences and strategies for nurturing peace within their communities. This research underscores the necessity for plural knowledges and approaches to peacebuilding, challenging dominant narratives.

Grounded in a feminist-decolonial framework, this study employs methodological approaches that re-centre embodied experiences and prioritise collaboration, relationality, respect, and reciprocity in understanding peace within conflict-affected societies. Fieldwork involved in-depth conversations with women in the DRC and Liberia, revealing that relationality and communality are central to their peacebuilding efforts. Ultimately, this research developed the concept of *communal peacebuilding*. This concept, deeply rooted in Congolese and Liberian women's lived and embodied experiences, challenges the individualism and linearity characteristic of liberal peacebuilding practices. It encapsulates a holistic approach that includes harmony, togetherness, spirituality, mutual support, healing, stability, and collective well-being.

The strategies employed by these women are intrinsically linked to their relational identities within their communities, positioning them uniquely to influence and sustain peace. By foregrounding the voices and knowledge of these women, this study critically intervenes in mainstream peacebuilding and IR discourses, which have often

marginalised indigenous women's perspectives. Additionally, it enriches the field of gender and peacebuilding by applying a feminist-decolonial lens to question the adequacy of 'gender' as an analytical tool for addressing issues pertinent to African women. Contextually, this research contributes to the growing scholarship on women and peacebuilding in the DRC and Liberia, introducing a feminist-decolonial approach absent in existing literature.

**Keywords:** women, feminist-decoloniality, resistance, relationality, communal peacebuilding, DRC, Liberia

To my mother  
my first teacher and  
example of resistance

## **Acknowledgements**

Getting to this point was no easy feat, and I am grateful for everything that has happened in the past four years and for everyone who has crossed paths with me throughout this PhD journey. It has been a challenging journey, but I am thankful for the laughter, gains, joys, tears, pain, sorrows, rock bottoms, health, and much more. I have learned and grown beyond what I could have imagined when I started this journey a little over four years ago.

It took a village to complete this thesis, and I would not have reached this point without the support of many people from the beginning of this process. To those who celebrated my smallest achievements, listened to my rants, hugged me in person and from afar when things got rough, and constantly reassured me that everything would be okay – you know who you are, and I am grateful to each of you.

My gratitude goes to Professor Anna Khakee, who agreed to supervise me again for my PhD. It has been an honour knowing and working with you for six years since my master's programme. Thank you for your support and feedback on my research, I am grateful.

Professor Rosalba Icaza, my passionate co-supervisor, recognised the potential of my research beyond what I initially imagined. Your warmth and personable attitude from our first Zoom meeting in 2021 until now is something I will never forget. Thank you for introducing me to the Nurturers support group for women of colour, a safe space for self-expression and knowledge sharing. I have learnt and grown a lot working with you at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague. Thank you for pushing me beyond my comfort zone in this research, instilling the needed confidence to achieve this task, and motivating me to broaden my horizons.

Lastly, I cannot thank you enough for standing by me and providing emotional support during the final days of making adjustments to this thesis. You constantly assured me that I was not alone and I am forever grateful for that.

My journey to academia and pursuing a PhD began with the encouragement and support of my mentor, Professor Oluwatoyin Oluwaniyi, from my undergraduate days in Nigeria. 'Prof mummy' as I fondly call you, thank you for being a mother, sister, leader, and friend to me. You have always been there, and I do not take that for granted. For praying with me, sharing in my pain, listening to my rants, celebrating with me, and nurturing me for the past 12 years, I could never thank you enough. I thank God for you every single time. *Ese gan ni, mo dupe!*

I am thankful to the Maltese Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs for sponsoring this PhD and my field travels to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia. Collaborating on projects such as developing Malta's first National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) and launching the degree-plus course on WPS at the University of Malta has been an honour. Special appreciation goes to Director-General Neville Aquilina at the Ministry. Thank you for everything, your kind is rare.

To my dear colleague Phyllis at Erasmus University College, thank you for allowing me to share my knowledge on women, gender, and peacebuilding with your students as a guest lecturer for three years. I cherish our sister-to-sister conversations over tea and lunch. To Sofia and Bruna at the Maastricht University Summer School, thank you for your support in launching my course on Gender, Conflict, and Peacebuilding. All these made my PhD journey less isolating and more fulfilling.

This research would not be possible without the amazing women I encountered in the DRC and Liberia who shared their stories and dedicated their time despite busy schedules. I hope I have done justice to your stories, and I am grateful for your time and trust. Professor Godefois at the Group for Studies on Conflict and Human Security (GEC-SH), thank you for hosting me at your research institute in the DRC. To my Congolese sisters Alice and Olga, who worked with me throughout my stay in the DRC, *asanteni dada zangu*. I am also grateful to Varlee for working with me throughout my stay in Liberia.

To my family, thank you for your love, support, and prayers. My amazing friends Titi, Tobi, Busola, Ife, Tolu, Funmi, and Daniel, you all are one in a million, and I am grateful to each of you. Taiwo my dear friend, thank you for everything. I am deeply grateful for lending me your laptop to complete my thesis when mine failed two weeks before submission to my supervisors.

Finally, to Ibikunle. Thank you for being my constant support, cheerleader, friend, lover, and life partner. We have been through so much together over the years, and you have always been there for me. After all we've been through, I am excited for our next chapter together. Now, we can get married!

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>xiii</b>
<b>List of Appendices</b> .....	<b>xiv</b>
<b>Chapter One   ‘I do not have any degrees, but I have the influence’: De-silencing Indigenous Women’s Knowledges and Approaches to Peace – Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 ‘We don’t do that in International Relations (IR): So it Began .....	1
1.2 Beyond Eurocentric Understandings: Thesis Focus and Research Questions .....	5
1.3 Conceptualising the Research: Women, Coloniality of Gender, Active Subjectivity and Resistant Agency, and Communal Peacebuilding .....	14
1.4 Contextualising the Research .....	21
1.5 Thesis Structure .....	31
<b>Chapter Two   Liberal Peacebuilding Critiques: Introducing Feminists’ Perspectives to the Debate</b> .....	<b>34</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	34
2.2 An Overview of Liberal Peacebuilding.....	35
2.3 Liberal Peacebuilding and its Critics .....	38
2.3.1 On Democratisation and Marketisation.....	38
2.3.2 Sustainability, Legitimacy, and Ownership.....	39
2.3.3 A New Form of Hegemonic Control?.....	42
2.3.4 How Should Peace Be Built? Counterarguments .....	46
2.4 Feminists’ Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding: Navigating Diverse Voices .....	48
2.4.1 Interrogating the Gendered Narrative in Armed Conflicts .....	48
2.4.2 Gender in Liberal Peacebuilding Projects: Unseeing Blindness.....	54
2.4.3 ‘Othering’ Gender and Liberal Peacebuilding.....	57
2.5 Reflections.....	66
2.5.1 Mapping Literature on Women and Peacebuilding in Liberia.....	69
2.5.2 Mapping Literature on Women and Peacebuilding in the DRC.....	73
2.6 Conclusion.....	80
<b>Chapter Three   Women Nurturing Communal Peace Amidst Colonial Shadows: A Feminist-Decolonial Framework</b> .....	<b>81</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	81
3.2 Gender, Colonialism, and the Coloniality of Gender .....	85

3.3 Motherwork and Communal Peace as Resistant Agency, a Decolonial Praxis .....	100
3.4 Conclusion.....	107
<b>Chapter Four   Methodological Stories on Re-imagining Peace with Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia.....</b>	<b>109</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	109
4.2 Feminist-Decoloniality as Method: Researching Differently.....	110
4.3 Before the ‘Field’: Cultivating Relationships and Navigating Ethical Dilemmas ..	120
4.4 The ‘Field’: Unlearning and Learning by Doing .....	131
4.5 After the ‘Field’: Sharing Stories through Writing.....	159
4.6 Conclusion.....	162
<b>Chapter Five   Talking Peace: Voices and Experiences of Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia .....</b>	<b>163</b>
5.1 Introduction .....	163
5.2 Women in the DRC.....	165
5.2.1 Sages, Soldiers, and More: Navigating the Simultaneity of War and Peace ....	165
5.2.2 Reconfiguration of Livelihoods and the Simultaneity of War and Peace.....	171
5.2.3 Congolese Women Conceptualising Peace .....	172
5.2.4 ‘Peacebuilding is in the Head and in the Pocket’: Congolese Women’s Approaches and Contributions to Peace .....	177
5.2.5 ‘A Single Finger cannot Kill a Louse’: Partnerships for Peace.....	187
5.2.6 ‘In the Bush, We Ate like Kings’: Congolese Women Critiquing the DDR Programme .....	193
5.2.7 ‘No, no, no! Not all Congolese Women are Raped!’: Debunking the Sexual Violence Victimhood Narrative.....	206
5.2.8 Congolese Women: Feminists? Women’s Activists?.....	211
5.3 Women in Liberia.....	213
5.3.1 Liberian Women Before and After the War .....	213
5.3.2 ‘We are not Firing Guns, but We are not at Peace’: Liberian Women Conceptualising Peace.....	216
5.3.3 Liberian Women’s Approaches and Contributions to Peace .....	220
5.3.4 ‘No One is a Hero when it Comes to this Work’: Partnerships for Peace.....	227
5.3.5 ‘Everybody wanted to be Experts’: Liberian Women Critiquing the DDR Programme .....	230
5.3.6 Liberian Women: Feminists? Women’s Activists?.....	233
5.4 Conclusion.....	233

<b>Chapter Six   Re-imagining Peace: From Women’s Perspectives and Experiences in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia .....</b>	<b>235</b>
6.1 Introduction .....	235
6.2 Debunking Single Stories .....	236
6.3 Continuities and Resistance: Echoes of the Past in the Present.....	252
6.4 Tensions and Contradictions: A Clash of Peace(s) .....	275
6.5 Multifaceted Understanding of Peace as a Continuous Communal Practice.....	294
6.6 Conclusion.....	302
<b>Chapter Seven   Coming Full Circle: Concluding Reflections on Communal Peacebuilding.....</b>	<b>304</b>
7.1 Research Contributions .....	307
7.2 Limitations, Lessons, and Possibilities.....	314
<b>References .....</b>	<b>318</b>
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>334</b>
Annex 1: Conversation Guides DRC.....	334
Annex 2: Conversation Guides Liberia .....	339
Annex 3: Mission Order.....	343

## List of Abbreviations

ACS	American Colonisation Society
AFEM	The Association of Media Women (L'Association des Femmes des Médias)
CAFED	Collective of Women's Associations for Development (Le Collectif des Associations Feminines pour le Développement)
CONADER	National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (Commission Nationale de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Reinsertion)
COWAGIL	Coalition of Women against Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Liberia
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration
DFJ	Dynamic of Women Lawyers (Dynamique des Femmes Juristes)
DGM	Director General of Migration
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FARDC	Armed Forces of the DRC (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo)
FDLR	Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda)

GEC-SH	Group for Studies on Conflict and Human Security (Groupe d'Études sur les Conflits et la Sécurité Humaine)
IR	International Relations
KJN	Welcome New Youth (Karibu Jeunesse Nouvelle)
LCS	League for Congolese Solidarity
LUCHA	Fight for Change (Lutte pour le Changement)
MARWOPNET	Mano River Union Women's Peace Network
MONUSCO	United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo)
PDDRC	United Nations Disarmament, Demobilisation, Community Recovery and Stabilisation Programme (Programme Désarmement, Démobilisation, Relevement Communautaire et Stabilisation)
TGDP	All for Gender, Development, and Peace (Tous pour le Genre, le Développement et la Paix (TGDP)
UNAF	The National Union of Women (L'Union Nationale des Femmes)
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council
WAHDI	Women in Action for Human Rights and Dignity (WAHDI)
WIPNET	Women in Peacebuilding Network

WONGOSOL

Women Non-Governmental Organisations Secretariat of  
Liberia

WPS

Women, Peace, and Security

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Conversations with Women in the DRC

Table 2: Conversations with Women in Liberia

## **List of Appendices**

Annex 1: Conversation Guides DRC

Annex 2: Conversation Guides Liberia

Annex 3: Mission Order

## Chapter One | 'I do not have any degrees, but I have the influence'<sup>1</sup>: De-silencing

### Indigenous Women's Knowledges and Approaches to Peace – Introduction

[I]mperial centers talk to colonial margins but rarely listen back to them; that is broadly the case in academia as well as politics proper. And, because centers rarely listen back, you will not usually find colonial voices articulating themselves in the repositories or archives of politics, that is, the mainstream recorded history of politics.

Robbie Shilliam, 2021, p.55

The danger in writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history, our economics, and our vision. What validates us as human beings validates us as writers. What matters to us is the relationships that are important to us whether with our self or others. We must use what is important to us to get to the writing. *No topic is too trivial*. The danger is in being too universal and humanitarian and invoking the eternal to the sacrifice of the particular and the feminine and the specific historical moment.

Gloria Anzaldúa, 1981, p.170

#### 1.1 'We don't do that in International Relations (I)R<sup>2</sup>': So it Began

During a discussion with a Professor in the Department of (I)R after a conference at a European university, I encountered this statement while expressing my intention to pursue further research on the reintegration of former girl soldiers in Africa during peacebuilding at the PhD level. This conversation took place after I completed my master's research in 2019, which specifically examined how the education of ex-combatant girls in Sierra Leone was addressed in international Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes aimed at fostering peace. My research was situated within the larger context of child soldiers, gender dynamics, peacebuilding initiatives, and the African context. As a Nigerian woman interested in

---

<sup>1</sup> Conversation with one of the Liberian women in this study.

<sup>2</sup> I write as (I)R to emphasise the individualism and parochialism inherent in Western norms that unfolds in liberal peacebuilding praxis. This is discussed in chapter 2 and further revealed in chapters 5 and 6.

these issues, I recognised the continued significance and complexity of this area of study and I sought to delve deeper into it at PhD level, believing that there were still significant questions to be explored.

In my PhD research, I wished to explore the persistent marginalisation of female child soldiers in peacebuilding efforts and its impact on their community reintegration, despite numerous international interventions. While discussing my research goals with this professor, I faced questions regarding the number of female child soldiers in conflicts, if they were substantial enough to be studied, and their significance for broader peacebuilding endeavours. As an emerging scholar, I found myself defending the importance of studying the reintegration of female ex-combatants within the context of peacebuilding. However, I was met with a discouraging response: 'We don't do that in International Relations'. The mansplaining continued about what they do in (I)R, and he told me that I would want my work published by top publishers like Cambridge University Press. As if to say that research on girl soldiers does not attract the 'top' publishers and is not worth publishing. Additionally, he suggested that I do something 'simple' on transitional justice and recommended a few case studies.

This dismissal reflects a broader issue in International Relations (IR), where certain topics and perspectives are deemed irrelevant or peripheral. Acharya (2014) critiques this phenomenon as part of the discipline's enduring Eurocentrism, arguing that mainstream IR is dominated by Western-centric epistemologies that determine what is considered legitimate knowledge. This gatekeeping, he argues, reinforces hegemonic narratives while marginalising non-Western perspectives. Similarly, Gani and Marshall (2022) contend that colonial legacies continue to shape knowledge production in IR, restricting the field's intellectual boundaries and sustaining power

asymmetries in global academia. These dynamics not only silence diverse voices but also maintain the status quo by privileging Western methodologies and perspectives.

This research is not 'simple' neither is it on transitional justice. It diverges from simplicity and delves into the complexities surrounding the concepts of mainstream International Relations (IR) and peacebuilding. It interrogates the processes by which these concepts are defined, the authorities who wield this power, and the voices that are marginalised, silenced, and considered unintelligible in these discourses. Rutazibwa (2020) prompts us to question the boundaries imposed by mainstream IR, challenging the notion that the field dictates what scholars are permitted to explore within it. There arises a critical examination of when and how IR gained autonomy to dictate the boundaries of scholarly engagement. Who, precisely, determines which topics fall within the purview of IR? Is it not predominantly individuals from specific cultural or racial backgrounds, often of Western descent? Shilliam (2021) adds another layer to this discourse by highlighting how established canons and disciplinary boundaries restrict our understanding and imagination, showcasing the dominance of Western epistemologies. This hegemonic narrative not only constrains the breadth of our comprehension but also reinforces power differentials, erasing other perspectives and contributions from beyond the Western paradigm. Acharya's (2018) notion of 'Global IR' also challenges this hegemony by advocating for a more inclusive, pluralistic approach that recognises diverse epistemologies and experiences.

Following Rutazibwa (2020, p.238), a pertinent question arises: 'What do we want IR to look like?', where do we start the storytelling (of Peacebuilding and International Relations)? This prompts an exploration into the narrative foundations of Peacebuilding and IR, necessitating an investigation into where the storytelling begins. Whose voices and stories are omitted? These inquiries serve as a point of departure

for this research, which aims to foreground the perspectives and stories of Congolese and Liberian women regarding peace, alongside their lived experiences and strategies for nurturing peace within their communities. That is, this research centres the voices of those who are not considered 'IR' enough and legitimate contributors to the discourse on peace and conflict issues within IR; thereby challenging conventional notions of legitimacy and expertise. As Sheik (2021) puts it, the process of recontextualising narratives involves more than just acknowledging erasures; it also entails filling the gaps of silence with relational knowledge. Relational knowledge here refers to the understanding and insights gained through relationships, connections, and interactions within a specific cultural or social context. This type of knowledge is not merely factual or objective; it encompasses subjective experiences and the interconnectedness of individuals within their communities. Through this approach, 'new points of departure are taken in the present which de-silence and reconceptualise taken-for-granted ideas and concepts' (p.14).

This redirection of focus seeks to redefine the parameters of peace within academic and practical realms. Further elaboration on these themes will be provided in subsequent sections. In the following sections, I will outline the primary focus of this thesis and articulate the research questions it seeks to address. Subsequently, I elucidate the key concepts central to this study, ensuring a clear understanding of the theoretical framework. I will then introduce the countries that are the focal points of this research, providing context and relevance. Finally, I will describe the overall structure of the thesis, guiding the reader through the organisation of the chapters and sections that follow.

## **1.2 Beyond Eurocentric Understandings: Thesis Focus and Research Questions**

This research is also motivated by a critical examination of mainstream liberal peacebuilding approaches, which will be further expounded in Chapter 2. Liberal peacebuilding, often characterised by its technocratic and top-down nature, has struggled to address the root causes of conflict and successfully engage with the diverse realities and complexities on the ground (Hudson, 2016; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Newman, 2009; Tanabe, 2017). It is such that the pursuit of peace in conflict and 'postconflict' societies finds itself entangled in the webs of hegemonic structures, perpetuating the marginalisation and silencing of certain voices and perspectives. This includes women who have long been relegated to the periphery and are often viewed as victims and passive recipients of externally imposed solutions.

Additionally, the consistent marginalisation of female ex-combatants within international Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives (Beckley, 2023; Coulter, 2008; Oluwaniyi, 2019) raises questions regarding the suitability of the approaches employed. DDR, an essential part of the liberal peacebuilding agenda, aims to establish security and stability in conflict-affected areas, paving the way for recovery and development. This process involves disarming former fighters and offering them opportunities to reintegrate into civilian life both socially and economically. (Pannilage, 2015). Ball and Van der Goor (2006, p.1) define it this way:

DDR refers to the process of demilitarising official and unofficial armed groups by controlling and reducing the possession and use of arms, and disbanding non-state armed groups and rightsizing state security services, and by assisting former combatants to reintegrate into civilian life'.

Specifically, there is a concern about the uncritical adoption of Western frameworks of peace in non-Western settings. For example, Reiling's (2024) study on Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire offers some analysis of this. This prompts consideration of other peacebuilding approaches that may be more congruent with the cultural contexts of conflict-affected regions and potentially overlooked by conventional liberal peacebuilding strategies. For instance, this has been the case of Ambon in Indonesia as presented in Soukotta's (2023) study. Furthermore, it begs the scrutiny of whether the conceptualisation of peace within the liberal peacebuilding paradigm is fundamentally flawed.

Amidst these reflections, the conspicuous absence of indigenous<sup>3</sup> women's perspectives in these discussions is notable. Reflecting on these issues and haunted by the refrain of 'We don't do that in IR', I am compelled to explore the potential insights that could emerge from reimagining peace from the lived embodied experiences of indigenous women in conflict-affected areas such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia. These women navigate the complex realities of living amidst both conflict and liberal peacebuilding efforts, yet persist in their own endeavours to nurture peace within their communities. What would peace mean and how would it look should we start IR's storytelling from the perspectives of Congolese and Liberian women?

---

<sup>3</sup> In this research, when I use the term 'indigenous', I am referring to a way of being and doing deeply connected to territory, community, and cultural norms that in some cases predate colonialism. It signifies a politics of positionality and a commitment to the well-being of the communities to which the women in this study belong. I am aware of the varied debates surrounding Indigeneity and First Nations peoples, especially in regions like North America and Australia. Yet, Indigeneity extends beyond these debates to encompass original inhabitants of various territories. In this light, anyone who ancestrally inhabits a territory could be considered indigenous. However, following Oyewumi (1997), my interpretation is not bound by a fixed definition. Instead, I view indigeneity as a concept shaped by complex historical processes.

Therefore, in an attempt to free myself from the shackles of canonical and disciplinary bondage, this thesis ventures beyond the confines of mainstream peacebuilding and IR frameworks. I do this by embarking on a journey to learn from Congolese and Liberian women's multifaceted life stories and approaches to peace in their respective communities. By foregrounding the lived experiences of women in these contexts, this study seeks to bring attention to their perspectives and contributions to peacebuilding efforts. Through this process, the thesis seeks to challenge existing dominant narratives and encourage a plural understanding of peacebuilding. Central to this approach is the recognition that knowledge is not universal or objective, but rather shaped by the specific contexts and individuals from which it emerges (Icaza, 2022). This is in tandem with Mignolo's (1999) dictum, 'I am where I think' which from my understanding means that the entirety of a person's being informs what they know and how they act. That is, there is an inseparable connection between one's identity and the intellectual frameworks they employ.

By embracing this notion, the study seeks to promote an open-minded approach to knowledge that values plural perspectives and fosters dialogue, curiosity, and collaboration. This approach acknowledges the richness that comes from incorporating different voices and experiences into the discourse on peacebuilding. In essence, this thesis argues for a plural approach to understanding peacebuilding, one that recognises the limitations of any single perspective and embraces the multiplicity of voices and knowledges that contribute to our understanding of peace (Azarmandi, 2023; Magalhães Teixeira, 2024). It also acknowledges the power dynamics in the political economy of knowledge, in which the dominance of Western views and networks of production, distribution and consumption of knowledge are tied to long legacies of colonialism. In line with Henderson's (2013) arguments, this thesis

challenges the racial and cultural biases embedded in traditional IR scholarship by foregrounding the voices of Congolese and Liberian women, thereby contributing to a plural understanding of global peacebuilding practices. Through this approach, it is hoped that new insights and possibilities for peacebuilding can emerge, grounded in a more holistic understanding of the complexities involved.

In the spirit of curiosity, dialogue, and collaboration, I engaged with Congolese and Liberian women to learn and understand their notions of peace and the actions they undertake, which serve to challenge and de-centre dominant liberal, modern, and Western ideas of peace, womanhood, gender, and feminisms. I learned how these women strategically employ their relational subjectivities as mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives to actively intervene in and prevent violence, fostering a sense of communal peace<sup>4</sup>. In this thesis, I show how relationality and communality are at the core of these women's peacebuilding endeavours. Following Chilisa (2012, p.108), this research understands relationality as a way of being 'that addresses relations among people, relations with the living and non-living, and a spiritual existence that promotes love and harmony amongst peoples and communities'. Communality encompasses relationality as Goduka (2000) explains. It encapsulates fundamental African philosophies, spiritual insights, and overarching perspectives. Goduka elucidates that while Africa is immensely diverse, there is a unity that is rooted in our shared worldview and cultural practices. That is, in our context as Africans, existence is fundamentally tied to others: 'I am we; I am because we are, we are because I am'. Goduka further explains that 'the principle of 'I am because we are' foregrounds the

---

<sup>4</sup> The concept of communal peace emerged from my theorisation with the Congolese and Liberian women in this study based on their understanding and everyday practices of peace. I discuss this briefly later in this chapter and further in Chapters 6 and 7.

community over the individual without crushing the individual but allowing the individual to flourish as a person<sup>5</sup>.

I also show how the women in this study display active subjectivity and resistant agency as conceptualised by Lugones (2005) and elaborated on in the subsequent sub-headings, evidenced by their expressions and practices dedicated to nurturing peace within their respective communities amidst the lingering effects of colonialism. This study reveals how the women involved in this research navigate these challenges, concurrently working towards the realisation of communal peace, which I propose as a form of decolonial peacebuilding praxis. I do this by grounding my analysis in feminist-decolonial<sup>6</sup> perspectives, drawing inspiration mainly from non-White feminists and women particularly Oyewumi Oyeronke (1997, 2003, 2016) and Maria Lugones (2005, 2010) and others who have illuminated other paths for understanding the intricate connection between women, gender, coloniality, and peace.

Coloniality existed alongside colonialism and continued even after colonialism ended, of which Mignolo (2011) tells us that today's modern world cannot exist without its colonial side in that the modernity we live in today has a dark underside, and that

---

<sup>5</sup> It is important to clarify that when I discuss cosmology and philosophy within African thought, I am fully aware of the continent's immense diversity, as highlighted by Goduka. My intention is not to reproduce any problematic generalisations about Africa. Instead, my focus is specifically on the scholarly work that examines the philosophies of communality and relationality prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa. I recognise and respect the rich diversity of African countries and cultures, particularly acknowledging that North African countries, with their distinct historical and cultural contexts, are not the focus of this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> In this thesis, I employ the term 'feminist-decolonial' rather than 'decolonial feminist' as conceptualised by Maria Lugones to reflect my awareness of the challenges in categorising non-White women under a singular label, particularly when considering the perspectives of various non-White women and feminists, and not relying only on Lugones' work. This thesis honours the long tradition of resistance by non-White women to being erased. Thus, this theoretical framework is constructed with a keen sensitivity to the inherent complexities and limitations of categorical classifications. Indeed, any conceptual category inevitably falls short in capturing the nuanced experiences of the women I engaged with in the DRC and Liberia. Further exploration of these tensions is provided in chapter 3 of this thesis.

underside is coloniality. It explains how power structures have historically been organised on a global scale, with Eurocentric knowledge systems asserting dominance. These systems were elevated and portrayed as inherently superior and applicable universally. They were characterised as ‘patriarchal, Christian-centric, sexist, heteronormative, capitalist, and positivist in nature’ (Grosfoguel, 2011; Tamale, 2020). I discuss this deeper in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Against this background, this research addresses this set of questions. The primary focus revolves around the first question: ‘How do women in the DRC and Liberia perceive peace, and what roles do they assume in nurturing peace within their respective societies?’. This inquiry delves into how Congolese and Liberian women navigate the issues of violence within their distinct socio-cultural contexts. I engage with different women including community leaders, market women, religious leaders, women’s organisations working for peace in urban and grassroots regions, and female ex-combatants. The aim is to comprehend the fundamental frameworks guiding their endeavours, the diverse local and international partnerships they engage in for the promotion of peace, the challenges they confront, and their strategies for overcoming these challenges. The primary objective is to unravel the intricate dimensions of peace as envisioned by these women, as well as the plural approaches they employ in navigating and negotiating peace within their communities.

The second question: ‘To what extent have women in the DRC and Liberia contributed to the reintegration of female ex-combatants in their respective communities?’, addresses my curiosity about the marginalisation of female ex-combatants in DDR programmes under the liberal peacebuilding paradigm and how/if indigenous women are involved in fostering the community reintegration of female ex-combatants. The focus is on exploring the involvement of indigenous women in the

process of fostering community reintegration for female ex-combatants. Questions arise regarding the extent of their involvement, reasons for potential non-involvement, and the consequent impact on their efforts towards communal peace. This question also exposes the tensions and contradictions existing between the principles of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm and the practical realities on the ground. The third question: 'How do the conceptualisations of peace and the practices of peacebuilding by Congolese and Liberian women inform theory?', has to do with theorising and theory-building in collaboration with these women. By examining the conceptualisations and practices of peace, this inquiry allows me to theorise 'communal' peacebuilding which is grounded in community, relationality, and embodied experiences.

I aim to critically engage with the research questions posed by employing feminist-decolonial theoretical frameworks and qualitative methodologies grounded in feminist-decolonial praxis. Chapters 3 and 4 of the thesis provide a detailed discussion of these approaches but here, I will highlight that feminist-decolonial perspectives help me to unveil the complexities of colonial legacies and gendered hierarchies that continue to shape peacebuilding efforts in the DRC and Liberia and how the women in this study respond to this in their own way. By embracing a feminist-decolonial lens, this research endeavours to dismantle preconceived notions and stereotypes, placing the experiences and knowledges of indigenous women at the forefront. Through direct engagement with women in both countries via group conversations, collaborative spaces were fostered. These spaces facilitated dialogue, co-creation of knowledge, reciprocity, and reflection. Importantly, they allowed for the articulation of experiences that are often silenced and marginalised. More so, the research centres the agency

and expertise of these indigenous women as active participants and stakeholders in the peacebuilding process.

This research holds more significance theoretically. This is not to say that there are no practical lessons to be learnt from the conversations with the women in this study. However, I contend that it is not a 'problem-solving' (Cox, 1981) thesis with an ambitious plan to resolve the issues in the contexts studied. Rather, by centring the voices of the women in this study and foregrounding their knowledge and approaches to peace, it offers a critical intervention in mainstream peacebuilding and IR discourses that have often overlooked the knowledges of indigenous women. It is also important to state here that with this research, my intention is not to speak for the women involved in the study but to honour the collaborative relationships that contributed to and co-created this work, as elaborated in Chapter 4.

Furthermore, this research addresses the neglect of feminist and decolonial perspectives in the study of peacebuilding, especially in the contexts of the DRC and Liberia. It also challenges the dominance of Western-centric frameworks that often fail to capture the communal and relational dimensions of peace, as conceptualised by the women in these contexts. By employing a feminist-decolonial lens, the research critiques the limitations of 'gender' as an analytical category within modernity/coloniality<sup>7</sup>, arguing that its application often perpetuates colonial logic rather than subverting it.

Importantly, this thesis contributes to existing fields of study by bridging feminist, decolonial, and peacebuilding scholarship in an intra- and interdisciplinary way. It

---

<sup>7</sup> The notion of Modernity/coloniality encapsulates the inseparability of the two terms. According to Walter D. Mignolo, coloniality is the darker side of modernity. See *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Mignolo, 2011).

enriches the field of gender and peacebuilding by theorising peace through the lived experiences and knowledge systems of Congolese and Liberian women. In doing so, it not only advances feminist and decolonial critiques but also provides a more nuanced understanding of peace as a process that necessitates decolonial actions and options, as exemplified by these women. This theorisation challenges existing paradigms in peacebuilding and IR by introducing relational and communal conceptualisations of peace that foreground indigenous epistemologies.

More so, this research has implications for both academic scholarship and policy frameworks. Academically, it pushes the boundaries of gender and peacebuilding by offering a feminist-decolonial critique that demands a rethinking of how we conceptualise and operationalise 'gender' in conflict and post-conflict settings. For policymakers and practitioners, it highlights the need to engage with and learn from local, indigenous practices and knowledges, which are often dismissed or undervalued. By centring these voices, this thesis not only identifies the problem of exclusion but also demonstrates how plural approaches to peace can transform existing discourses and practices in meaningful ways.

In sum, the contribution of this research lies in its critical re-imagining of peacebuilding through a feminist-decolonial lens, its challenge to dominant paradigms in IR, and its call for decolonial actions informed by the lived experiences of African women. This approach ultimately advances the interdisciplinary dialogue between feminist theories, decoloniality, and peacebuilding.

### **1.3 Conceptualising the Research: Women, Coloniality of Gender, Active Subjectivity and Resistant Agency, and Communal Peacebuilding**

This thesis centres on four main concepts: women, the coloniality of gender, active subjectivity and resistant agency, and communal peacebuilding. Chapter 3 provides a detailed exposition of the conceptual framework through theoretical discourse. However, in this introductory chapter, I provide a concise overview of the significance of these concepts and outline my approach to addressing them throughout the thesis.

**African women** in war-affected regions have often been portrayed as mere casualties of conflict, stripped of agency, and relegated to the sidelines of the discourse (Hudson, 2012; Oluwaniyi, 2019; Smet, 2009). This victimisation narrative oversimplifies the experiences of these women and perpetuates a one-dimensional view of their roles in conflict zones. These women are often framed as victims who need to be protected and saved from catastrophe. My intention is not to invalidate the experiences of women who are also victims of war but my contention throughout this thesis is that the over-emphasised victimisation narrative not only neglects the plural experiences and identities of women in conflict but also perpetuates a skewed understanding of their agency and resistance.

Chimamanda Adichie (2009) talks about the dangers of a single story and the fact that the main issue with stereotypes is not that they are false, but that they only tell part of the story. So, when conversations around wars and women in Africa revolve around victimhood, the narrative not only oversimplifies the multifaceted roles that women play within conflicts but also implies a perceived incapacity for women to contribute to peacebuilding efforts. Such a perspective often frames women within the context of their victimhood, disregarding their potential agency in fostering and

sustaining peace. Essentially, it poses the rhetorical question: what contributions can individuals already classified as victims make towards peace processes?

Whereas, African women, far from being passive victims, engage in various forms of resistance, survival strategies, and community-building efforts amid the chaos of war, of which some even benefit from these wars. The point regarding some women benefitting from wars is reflected in Chapters 5 and 6. Therefore, when I think about how women are conceptualised and framed throughout this thesis, it is from a place of strength, resilience, and survival while also acknowledging the challenges they face. I do not conceptualise women in this study as singular beings with only one identity as victims of armed conflict. Despite the challenges they face, Liberian and Congolese women actively contribute to nurturing peace, often leveraging their networks and resilience to rebuild shattered communities. The dominant peacebuilding discourse, however, tends to overlook these contributions, reinforcing colonial gendered stereotypes. These stereotypes confine women to the 'private' sphere and portray their roles as peace nurturers in a heteronormative way. To be clear, throughout this thesis, the term 'woman' is employed, albeit with a departure from the colonial invention that equates 'female' with oppression and subordination. This is precisely why the coloniality of gender is crucial to this research to historicise the categories 'gender' and 'woman'. I could say 'anafemales' (i.e., anatomically females) which does not automatically translate to subordinate or weak as proposed by Oyewumi (1997), or 'peoples' but I have chosen to use 'woman' to unravel its problematics, trace where it emanated from, and reveal how the women in this study are reconceptualising their 'womanhood', as discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

The point on colonial gendered stereotypes leads me to the concept of **coloniality of gender** which is another key concept in this thesis. Feminist analyses of women's

experiences in conflict and peacebuilding often employ gender as an analytical tool to uncover power dynamics, inequalities, and marginalisation<sup>8</sup>. While this approach has been instrumental in highlighting women's experiences and contributions, it often essentialises and homogenises the category of women, overlooking the plurality of experiences within different historical and socio-political contexts. More so, some feminist analyses tend to conflate women with gender, assuming that women's experiences are synonymous with gender dynamics. Hence assertions like 'Peacebuilding is gender-blind' (see Gonzalez, 2018). This conflation reinforces binary understandings of gender thus buttressing colonial hierarchies and power structures. That is, colonialism historically imposed rigid gender binaries on colonised societies, erasing the fluidity of identities that existed before the colonial encounter (Oyewumi, 1997). By continuing to frame gender in binary terms, some feminist analyses inadvertently perpetuate these colonial legacies. As Lugones (2007) asserts, the imposition of binary gender categories was a fundamental aspect of colonial domination, reshaping indigenous social orders.

Consequently, the coloniality of gender remains unaddressed, enabling Western-centric narratives and marginalising indigenous and non-Western perspectives over sexuality, womanhood, and so on. Since the majority of feminist analysis of peacebuilding in Africa and elsewhere conflates women and gender without questioning gender as a fiction in certain contexts like Africa (Oyewumi, 1997), I challenge this by historicising the category of gender and interrogating its colonial roots. Speaking of gender as a fiction refers to its colonial imposition rather than a pre-colonial African reality. As Amadiume (1987), Nzegwu (2006), Oyewumi (1997), and

---

<sup>8</sup> This is elaborated in chapter 2.

other African feminists contend, pre-colonial African societies often organised social roles based on seniority, kinship, and other criteria rather than rigid gender binaries. This challenges the notion of gender as a fixed, natural category and reveals it as a cultural and colonial construct. This is further discussed in Chapter 3. By tracing the historical construction of gender within the contexts of colonisation and imperialism, the thesis sheds light on how colonial legacies continue to shape gender relations and inform peacebuilding efforts in the DRC and Liberia.

Lugones (2007) tells us that without an understanding of the history of gender, we continuously centre our analysis on patriarchy, a system characterised by binary gender norms, hierarchical structures, and oppressive practices rooted in male dominance. This approach lacks an appreciation of the interconnectedness of heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification. Lugones suggests that understanding these phenomena requires recognising their mutual dependence; they cannot be fully comprehended in isolation. By adopting Lugones' perspective, the colonality of gender allows me to name colonial, patriarchal, racist, and capitalist oppressions together and not separate from each other. They are not intersectional because they are not separable (Lugones, 2020). In essence, gender cannot be understood separately from colonialism.

In the DRC and Liberia, the colonality of gender manifests in various ways, from the imposition of patriarchal norms by colonial powers to the exploitation of women's bodies during periods of conflict, and so-called peacebuilding interventions aimed at 'gender mainstreaming'. Undoubtedly, the colonial legacy has left an indelible mark on societal norms and power dynamics influencing how women are perceived and how they perceive themselves in both conflict and peacebuilding processes. Therefore, by

interrogating the colonial roots of gender, this research aims to disentangle the experiences of Congolese and Liberian women from the broader concept of gender by recognising the plurality of these women's roles and identities. Throughout this thesis, I contend that a nuanced understanding of women in conflict and peace requires acknowledging the multiplicity of identities and experiences within the category of 'woman'.

Acknowledging the multiplicity of identities and lived experiences encompassed within the category of 'woman' necessitates an understanding of what agency and resistance mean to various women. Lugones (2005) introduced the concept of **active subjectivity and resistant agency** to understand this, which I have identified as another key concept in this thesis. Lugones' notion of active subjectivity connotes a fluid state of existence that transcends fixed, singular categories imposed by dominant discourses. She emphasises the importance of recognising the multiplicity of selves that intersect and coalesce within individuals, thereby challenging essentialist notions of identity based on fixed categories. Simply put, this perspective posits that an individual embodies multiple selves simultaneously.

In the context of this research, active subjectivity is employed to reveal the plural selves of Congolese and Liberian women as well as how this plays out in their work for peace. These women have demonstrated active subjectivity by refusing to be simply passive victims of violence and instead taking proactive steps to promote peace and reconciliation. This is evident in their participation in grassroots peace initiatives, advocacy for women's rights, and engagement in dialogue with conflicting parties. They actively redefine their roles, challenging colonial gender norms and patriarchal structures that perpetuate violence and single stories about them. In Lugones' (2005,

p.86) words, 'it is by exercising this active subjectivity that transformation is conceivable'.

Another key insight that this concept brings is its inherently relational nature. Lugones argues that subjectivity is not formed in isolation but emerges through complex interactions with individuals, with others, and with the broader social context. This relationality underscores the interconnectedness of different subjectivities and how they are mutually constituted. By foregrounding relationality, norms that privilege the individual over the collective experiences are disrupted. This is profound considering how the women in this study work towards communal peacebuilding based on their relational selves as mothers, public mothers, wives, daughters, etc. as further discussed in chapters 5 and 6. I am aware that in some feminist analyses, this can be read as essentialist in that these roles reproduce heteronormativity and restrict the possibilities for 'gender norms' transgression within 'patriarchal' African societies. Again, this is precisely why the coloniality of gender as well as active subjectivity and resistant agency are crucial concepts in this research to situate the historical origin of gender, intertwined with colonialism and modernity/coloniality. These heteronormative and patriarchal features are expressions of complex power dynamics and domination, of which the possibility of transgressing dominant colonial heteronormative/patriarchal norms need to be understood with this long legacy view and not merely as 'culturally' related to African societies. Therefore, I invite the reader to navigate this argument patiently, as it unfolds more comprehensively in Chapter 3 where I discuss these concepts in greater depth. Alternatively, it is possible to proceed directly to Chapter 3 to read the arguments I make about womanhood and gender, tracing these to the colonial encounter.

Lugones' concept of active subjectivity is deeply intertwined with resistant agency, which involves the ability to resist and subvert oppressive structures and ideologies through everyday acts of defiance and resilience. This emerges from the recognition of one's own marginalised position within oppressive systems and the refusal to accept such oppressions as inevitable or justified. With this concept, the emphasis is on the agency of marginalised individuals and communities in resisting and rejecting narratives of victimhood that disempower and dehumanise them. I aim to engage with how both Liberian and DRC women employ various forms of resistance to challenge the status quo and effectuate change. This resistant agency takes the form of community organising, activism, storytelling, and even just surviving, which is also a form of resistance in the context of centuries of systemic violence against women.

It is the active subjectivity and resistant agency of Congolese and Liberian women that has birthed the concept of **communal peacebuilding**, a notion that this thesis aims to contribute to our conceptual understanding of peacebuilding. By conceptualising communal peacebuilding with the women in this study, I aim to show how community, relationality, and solidarity are at the core of these women's peacebuilding practices. This communal peacebuilding as nurtured by Congolese and Liberian women is rooted in relationships that transcend hierarchical structures and class. It involves a deep understanding of one another, mutual support, care for each other's children and businesses, and other forms of solidarity.

It depicts Oyewumi's (2003) concept of *Ọmọyá* which signifies solidarity extending beyond familial boundaries, embodying values of solidarity, unconditional love, loyalty, unity, and togetherness. The exploration of this concept is reserved for Chapter 5, with further elaboration in Chapter 6. Despite their interactions with international

peacebuilding partners, these women consistently place their communities at the forefront of their envisioned communal peace. The concept of communal peacebuilding underscores the idea that peace is not an abstract, neat, and linear construct; instead, peace is embodied, relational, and messy. Throughout this thesis, I would argue that community and relationality emerge as fundamental organising principles in these women's work for peace.

#### **1.4 Contextualising the Research**

The DRC and Liberia serve as poignant contexts, emblematic of the myriad challenges faced in conflict and 'postconflict' contexts. These countries have been ravaged by protracted armed conflicts, contributing to a legacy of violence, displacement, and instability. Nevertheless, they also provide grounds for understanding the multifaceted dynamics of peace and the roles women embody in working for peace. Choosing to contextualise the research in the DRC and Liberia is not arbitrary; rather, it is a deliberate choice grounded in the historical, socio-cultural, and geopolitical complexities, as well as women's dynamics that characterise these regions. Both countries have undergone different forms of colonialism and warfare, leaving indelible marks on their societies. However, I will take a detour in the storytelling of these territories by not accentuating the wars as is usually the case with conventional peace and conflict narratives. I say this because if the focus is on the wars and mainstream peacebuilding approaches, telling the story of Liberia for example will begin with the United Nations going to intervene in the civil wars to 'save' people, of which the same applies to the DRC. As Mignolo (2020, p.10) asserts, 'It depends on where you start from: if you start from the heroes and maintain the silence of the "sovereign people", you remain within the colonial politics of knowledge'. I do not intend to remain within the colonial politics of knowledge which is why this research

redirects attention to the perspectives of women who have been instrumental in shaping and nurturing peace in their respective communities even before the advent of international interventions.

The decision not to prioritise the wars in Liberia and the DRC may appear unconventional within the prevailing trend of conflict studies. However, this research argues that an excessive focus on conflict tends to perpetuate the victimhood narrative associated with women, implying that women and girls are exclusively passive victims of wars. This is particularly evident in the case of the DRC, where war narratives frequently emphasise the victimisation of Congolese women through sexual violence (Autessere, 2012; Lewis, 2022). Contrary to this prevailing perspective, this study rejects the reduction of the Congolese narrative to a mere account of violence. Instead, I contend that an emphasis on wars obscures the plural identities of these women and overlooks their significant contributions to and ongoing efforts in fostering peace within their communities. Consequently, this research seeks to redirect attention towards the everyday practices, resilience, and knowledge that women bring to the forefront in these contexts.

### **The DRC**

Situated in the heart of Central Africa, the DRC is a vast and resource-rich country which has been marred by conflict for decades. A complex interplay of historical legacies, resource exploitation, political instability, and regional power struggles, to name a few has fuelled violence that continues to reverberate. The colonial legacy in the DRC is deeply intertwined with the exploitation of its vast natural resources by Belgium under King Leopold II, who considered the Congo Free State as his personal property (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2006). Leopold's brutal reign in the late 19th and early

20th centuries, characterised by forced labour, exploitation of bodies, violence, and mass atrocities, amounted to a genocide, leaving indelible wounds on Congolese society. Scholars such as Adam Hochschild have documented the extreme scale and deliberate nature of these atrocities, where millions of Congolese were killed or mutilated under King Leopold II's regime (Hochschild, 1998). The systematic exploitation and mass killings fit the United Nations' definition of genocide which covers actions intended to eliminate, entirely or partially, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

The aftermath of this genocidal colonisation, coupled with the remnants of authoritarian governance, has contributed to persistent cycles of violence and insecurity within the country. The social and political structures left in place by the colonial administration laid a fragile foundation for (post)independence Congo. According to Mamdani (1996), the legacy of colonial rule in Africa often results in fractured societies and governance systems that struggle with internal divisions and external exploitation. In the case of Congo, the colonial legacy exacerbated ethnic tensions and created power vacuums that fuelled subsequent conflicts. Moreover, the Rwandan genocide of 1994 had a significant impact on regional stability, particularly affecting Congo. The genocide resulted in massive refugee flows into eastern Congo, bringing with them armed groups and militias that have continued to destabilise the region (Prunier, 2009). These armed groups have been implicated in ongoing violence and human rights abuses, perpetuating a cycle of brutality and instability that traces back to the colonial and genocidal past. As Gourevitch (1998) argues, the aftermath of such acute atrocities often leaves a legacy of trauma and revenge, perpetuating cycles of violence that are difficult to break.

Therefore, acknowledging the genocidal nature of Leopold's regime and understanding its long-lasting impacts are crucial for comprehending the persistent instability in Congo. The interplay between historical atrocities and contemporary conflicts underscores the need for a nuanced analysis that considers both the direct and indirect consequences of colonial violence. The abundant natural resources of the DRC, including diamonds, gold, and coltan, continues to attract international interest, often exacerbating internal conflicts (Autessere, 2012). By situating Congo's ongoing challenges within this historical context, we can better understand the roots of its enduring instability and the complex dynamics at play in the region. This section will not delve into an in-depth discussion on colonialism and conflicts in the DRC which has been thoroughly accounted for elsewhere (see Hochschild, 1998; Lemarchand, 2009; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2006; Prunier, 2008).

The impact of these colonial legacies and protracted conflicts on women in the DRC has been weighty, with prevalent narratives portraying them primarily as victims of sexual violence in need of 'saving'. Nonetheless, these women exhibit resilience, actively participating in grassroots and national peacebuilding endeavours, as elaborated in Chapters 2 and 5. Despite their significant role in fostering peace, mainstream discourse tends to prioritise the victim narrative over their contributions as nurturers of peace. Their marginalised voices and initiatives, often disregarded in conventional peacebuilding discussions, offer pathways to peace grounded in community resilience, solidarity, and indigenous knowledge systems.

Furthermore, DRC serves as a complex and illustrative context for examining liberal peacebuilding efforts. Despite numerous interventions by international organisations and the deployment of peacekeeping forces, achieving sustainable peace, as

perceived by the women in this study, remains elusive. The United Nations Organization Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), one of the largest and most expensive peace operations globally, epitomises the challenges and controversies associated with international peacekeeping missions. At its peak, MONUSCO was the largest UN peacekeeping force in the world, involving over 20,000 military personnel, police, and civilian staff, and costing billions of dollars annually (Mkeremy and Lisakafu, 2023; Neethling, 2011).

However, MONUSCO has been marred by significant controversies, including allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers, inefficacy in protecting civilians, and accusations of exacerbating local conflicts rather than resolving them (Autesserre, 2010; Mkeremy and Lisakafu, 2023; Perera, 2024; Tasker, 2023). For example, the Congolese nationals in Perera's (2024) study expressed how MONUSCO workers were using aid money to throw lavish parties, exploit sex workers, and engage in illegal drug-taking. Perera shared how she was repeatedly told stories about the 'Deuxième bureau' ('Second offices') which involves UN troops from other countries who, while stationed in the Congo, take on a Congolese 'wife' and start a family with her. However, when their deployment ends and they return to their home countries, they often abandon these women, leaving them in a state of destitution. This scholar also learnt that young UN workers wanted to be deployed to Goma because it is a 'party town' where they can get paid a lot of money to drink and take drugs while claiming to live in 'danger' and advancing their careers. Similarly, the Congolese nationals in Mkeremy and Lisakafu's (2023, p.8) study expressed their frustration. One said, 'We don't understand why MONUSCO is failing to eliminate the armed groups while their arsenals, tactics and number of troops are much bigger than armed groups'. Another complained:

How can rebel groups just come and kill people while MONUSCO, which the UN has entrusted to protect us, are just watching? As a citizen of this country, I would rather see MONUSCO leave. We can protect ourselves!

This explains the subsequent series of violent anti-MONUSCO mass demonstrations in different parts of North Kivu, Goma, and Butembo (Mkeremy and Lisakafu, 2023). These controversies have not only tarnished the mission's reputation but have also highlighted the limitations of liberal peacebuilding frameworks, which often impose top-down, externally driven solutions without adequately addressing local dynamics and the needs of the affected populations. Thus, through engagement with Congolese women, this study challenges prevailing notions of liberal peacebuilding and underscores the significance of communal peace informed by indigenous women's knowledge and agency. Congolese women, often at the forefront of grassroots peace initiatives, offer insights and strategies that contrast sharply with the externally imposed liberal peace models. Their lived experiences and community-based approaches emphasise reconciliation, social cohesion, focusing on holistic and culturally sensitive methods of peacebuilding, as will be revealed in Chapter 5. In foregrounding the perspectives and experiences of Congolese women, this research advocates for a shift from a predominantly liberal peacebuilding paradigm to one that is more respectful of indigenous practices and knowledges.

## **Liberia**

Liberia, located on the western coast of Africa, presents a complex historical context shaped by colonisation, slavery, and recent civil wars. To understand Liberia's unique trajectory, it is essential to consider the historical circumstances surrounding its founding. This includes the repatriation of freed African Americans to Africa and the role of the American Colonisation Society (ACS) in this process (Akpan, 1982). The

idea of returning freed slaves to Africa originated in the early 19th century, amidst growing tensions over slavery in the United States. The core issue was not whether slavery could coexist with the principles of liberty and equality, but whether a significant free Black population could find a place in American democracy (Sawyer, 1992). Many believed that accepting Black individuals as full members of society would harm the Republic. This belief was rooted in widespread notions of Black inferiority, the perceived threat to America's European heritage, and the assumption that Black people harboured intense resentment towards Whites due to the brutalities of slavery (ibid).

Therefore, there was a discussion about colonisation as a means to achieve both the emancipation of Black people and a 'safe', 'peaceful', and 'morally acceptable' way of relocating them from the United States to another place. The American Colonisation Society (ACS), established in 1817, played a pivotal role in this relocation (Holsoe, 1971). The ACS comprised both White abolitionists, who believed that freed slaves would face insurmountable prejudice in America, and slaveholders, who saw colonisation as a way to remove free Black people from American society, thus maintaining the institution of slavery (Burin, 2008). The ACS began sending freed Blacks to Africa in the early 1820s, and in 1822, they established the settlement of Monrovia, named after President James Monroe. This marked the beginning of what would become the Republic of Liberia (ibid). By 1847, Liberia declared independence from the ACS, becoming Africa's first republic founded by African Americans.

The establishment of Liberia by freed African Americans, often referred to as 'Americo-Liberians', was an early instance of settler colonialism on the African continent (Sawyer, 1992). This 'Black settler colonialism' in Liberia distinguishes its

historical narrative from the broader African experience of European colonisation. Therefore, when some simplistically assert that Liberia was never colonised, it is important to clarify that this assertion refers to European colonialism. Americo-Liberians imposed their social, political, and economic structures on the indigenous African populations, creating a dichotomy between the settlers and the native groups. This internal colonial dynamic contributed to a legacy of social stratification and tension, which has persisted throughout Liberia's history. These historical foundations have influenced the country's contemporary issues, including its struggles with governance, identity, and reconciliation after prolonged periods of civil unrest.

Despite constituting a small minority, the Americo-Liberians wielded considerable political, social, and economic control over the country for over 130 years. They engaged in various activities such as exploitation, trade, and intermingling with different African groups, forming the ruling class. However, a coup d'état in 1980 ushered in an era of Afro-Liberian governance but this regime, marred by corruption and repression, was in turn ousted by rebel forces led by Charles Taylor in 1989, sparking a civil war lasting fourteen years (Fuest, 2008). The root causes of the Liberian civil war are multifaceted, encompassing the supremacy of the Americo-Liberians, economic reliance on exports and international trade, and a willingness among leaders to permit unchecked exploitation of natural resources, thereby fuelling the predatory interests of international businesses (*ibid*). Specifically, the international trade dynamics that contributed to the conflict include the export of Liberia's abundant natural resources such as rubber, iron ore, and timber. The Liberian economy was heavily dependent on these exports, with international companies playing a significant role in the exploitation and exportation of these resources (Ellis, 2006).

Moreover, international trade agreements and the presence of multinational corporations exacerbated internal inequalities and conflicts. For instance, Firestone, an American company, set up one of the world's biggest rubber plantations in Liberia in 1926, and has significant influence over the Liberian economy and politics, controlling vast amounts of land and resources (Gberie, 2005). The revenues generated from such exports were often siphoned off by corrupt officials, leaving the general population impoverished and fostering resentment since wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few, predominantly Americo-Liberian elites. The willingness among Liberian leaders to permit unchecked exploitation of natural resources attracted international businesses interested in profiting from Liberia's rich natural endowments (ibid). This predatory economic interest perpetuated a cycle of corruption. Leaders like Charles Taylor capitalised on these resources to finance their military campaigns, selling timber and diamonds to fund their activities, thereby internationalising the conflict and drawing in external actors with vested interests in Liberia's resources (Reno, 1995). The exploitation of Liberia's natural resources by international businesses not only provided the financial means for sustained conflict but also entrenched a system where political power was closely tied to control over resource wealth (Gberie, 2005). Despite the cessation of the second civil war in 2003 and subsequent transition to democracy, Liberia continues to grapple with governance, justice, socio-economic development, and other challenges.

Women played pivotal roles in ending the active phase of civil war through grassroots activism and advocacy for peace. Their courageous actions and leadership not only brought an end to the violence but also paved the way for women's inclusion in the peacebuilding and governance processes (Gbowee, 2011). This activism notably contributed to the historic election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Africa's first

female President. However, significant challenges persist for Liberian women, such as domestic violence, femicide, limited access to justice for women, dealing with the unsuccessful reintegration of ex-combatants, drug abuse, to mention but a few. These challenges remain prevalent as Liberian women continue their peacebuilding efforts<sup>9</sup>. Their ongoing struggles highlight the shortcomings of liberal peacebuilding frameworks and their implementation, which primarily achieved 'negative peace' – the mere absence of direct violence – rather than addressing deeper social and structural issues (Galtung, 1969). The DDR process in Liberia, a cornerstone of the liberal peacebuilding approach, exemplifies the limitations of this framework. Despite initial successes in disarming combatants and reducing immediate threats of violence, the DDR process failed to ensure the effective reintegration of ex-combatants into society (Awodola, 2009; Beckley, 2021; Jennings, 2007; Wollie, 2016).

Many former fighters, particularly those who were not adequately supported in their transition to civilian life, continue to struggle with unemployment, social marginalisation, and substance abuse (Moran, 2023). This failure has perpetuated cycles of violence and instability, undermining the prospects for peace, as understood by the women in this study. Moreover, it seems as if the liberal peacebuilding approach overlooked the local context and the importance of grassroots movements in fostering long-term peace. As aforementioned, the contributions of women and local communities were crucial in ending the war and building peace from the ground up. However, the top-down implementation of liberal peacebuilding policies marginalised these efforts, prioritising state-centric and externally driven solutions over indigenous practices and knowledge, leaving women to pick up the pieces of a failed DDR process

---

<sup>9</sup> Conversations with Liberian women in this study, elaborated in chapter 5.

(Gallo-Cruz and Remsberg, 2021). I discuss this further in Chapter 6 drawing from the stories shared by the women in this study. Therefore, engaging with the perspectives and experiences of Liberian women, this study seeks to uncover the complex dynamics of nurturing peace in a so-called postconflict context and interrogate dominant peacebuilding frameworks used to address violence.

### **1.5 Thesis Structure**

This thesis comprises seven chapters, with this introduction serving as a roadmap to the research's genesis, core arguments, research inquiries, and basic theoretical and empirical information to guide the reader's understanding of the subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 offers a comprehensive review of pertinent literature, encompassing critiques of liberal peacebuilding, the interrogation of the gendered narrative in armed conflict, unseeing gender blindness within liberal peacebuilding initiatives, critique of gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding endeavours, and the transition towards decolonising the concepts of gender and peacebuilding. This chapter delineates the evolution of my scholarly exploration throughout the PhD journey, detailing my engagement with existing literature and elucidating how this research endeavours to enhance existing scholarly discourse within this field.

Chapter 3 delves into theoretical discussions, elucidating the fundamental concepts essential for analysing interactions with Congolese and Liberian women in the study. In this chapter, I contend that the victimhood narrative attributed to African women stems from the coloniality of gender, persisting in contemporary conflict and mainstream peacebuilding practices. I also discuss how the women in this study simultaneously imbibe and resist this oppressive structure while displaying active subjectivity and resistant agency which I argue is a decolonial praxis. From these

women's active subjectivity and resistant agency as evidenced in their peacebuilding practices on the ground, I theorise communal peacebuilding which is grounded in community, relationality, and solidarity. Additionally, the chapter underscores the alignment of the theoretical stance with the methodological approach, a connection further expounded in Chapter 4.

In Chapter 4, I tell the methodological story of my encounters with women in the DRC and Liberia. In my narration I show the collaborative nature of this feminist-decolonial research before the 'field', in the 'field', and after the 'field', and take the reader through the process of co-creating knowledge with the different groups of women in this study. In Chapter 5, the women in this study tell their stories of peace, what it means to them, and how they work towards it based on their own understanding and lived realities. Here, Liberian and Congolese women's voices take centre stage, illuminating the challenges impeding their peacebuilding endeavours and the strategies they employ to navigate them. In this chapter, the reader will also observe the plural identities that these women embody, along with their varied interpretations of the conflict and peace dynamics within their respective contexts.

In Chapter 6, the narratives of women in this study are juxtaposed with the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 3, along with insights from both scholarly discourse and my arguments. The ensuing analysis of conversations with women in the study reveals the emergence of the concept of communal peacebuilding, which is subsequently explored in Chapter 7. In this chapter, I contend that communal peacebuilding represents a feminist-decolonial action undertaken by Congolese and Liberian women, independent of their collision with the liberal peace imposed through

international interventions. A synthesis of the preceding chapters is presented, culminating in my concluding reflections.

## **Chapter Two | Liberal Peacebuilding Critiques: Introducing Feminists'**

### **Perspectives to the Debate**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Liberal peacebuilding initiatives in conflict-affected regions, aimed at resolving conflicts and forestalling their recurrence or escalation, have sparked significant debate. Critics and observers alike have raised doubts about the legitimacy and effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts led by the United Nations and its partners across the globe since the 1990s. These critiques encompass scholars who endorse the liberal peacebuilding agenda and seek to enhance it, as well as those who interrogate its underlying principles and advocate for a more locally grounded approach. Additionally, feminist scholars have emerged as a significant voice in this discourse, some advocate for a more 'gendered' approach to liberal peacebuilding that acknowledges women and girls. Concurrently, some argue for a decolonisation of the entire gender and peacebuilding framework.

In this chapter, I delve into the ongoing discussions among scholars regarding gender and liberal peacebuilding, and I outline how my research aims to contribute to these discussions. The chapter is divided into five main parts. In the first segment, I provide an overview of the liberal peacebuilding agenda and the various debates surrounding it. In the second segment, I introduce the perspectives of feminists regarding the liberal peacebuilding agenda. This part begins with a brief explanation of the relationship between gender and armed conflict to support feminist arguments on gender and peacebuilding. Then, I discuss feminist viewpoints on gender within peacebuilding projects which ushers the reader into the section on some scholars' arguments on the need to decolonise gender and peacebuilding. Lastly, I offer my reflections on the aforementioned scholarly debates and articulate my perspective for

this research. Finally, I review scholarly literature concerning women and peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia, highlighting how my research aims to complement and strengthen these studies.

## **2.2 An Overview of Liberal Peacebuilding**

The end of the Cold War ushered in an era of intra-state conflicts caused by nationalistic struggles, and religious and ethnic rivalry amongst others as seen in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Somalia to name a few in the 1990s. The wars caused widespread human rights abuses and had serious repercussions for unarmed civilians (Oluwaniyi, 2018). Consequently, the United Nations began participating in global peacebuilding efforts to assist these nations in moving towards peace and functional governance.

In Boutros Boutros-Ghali's Agenda for Peace, he defined post-conflict peacebuilding as 'action to identify and support structures which will tend to consolidate peace and advance a sense of confidence and well-being among people' (Boutros-Ghali, 1995). Following this definition, the United Nations peacebuilding missions focus on political, economic, and social transitions. These operations have involved several international actors including regional organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development agencies, international financial institutions, etc. However, this multifaceted transition was not solely aimed at addressing instability in these countries but at building peace on liberal terms which incorporates development, humanitarian aid, democracy, governance, free trade, and human rights (Richmond, 2016). Contemporary mainstream peacebuilding is known as liberal peacebuilding which is founded upon Western Enlightenment philosophical framework (Richmond, 2011).

The three pillars of liberal peacebuilding are security, governance, and economic reform. Security incorporates Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) which lay the foundation for governance i.e., post-conflict elections, reinforcement of human rights amongst others, and economic reform which includes more prominently liberalisation, creation of an environment-friendly to private businesses, etc. (Barnes, 2010). Since the 1990s, liberal peacebuilding has been the way the United Nations has responded to contemporary conflicts across the globe even though scholars have argued that its impacts are controversial.<sup>10</sup>

Liberal peace serves as the theoretical foundation for liberal peacebuilding. According to Mac Ginty (2010, p.391), Liberal peace can be understood as ‘the dominant form of peacemaking and peacebuilding favoured by leading states, international organisations and international financial institutions’. This rationale is premised on the ‘democratic’ or ‘liberal peace thesis’ which suggests that liberal democratic societies tend to be more peaceful (Newman, 2009). Thus, liberal peace is assumed to be the solution for ‘failed states’ because if these states are democratised and modernised, there would be fewer tendencies of war. Let us take a moment to discuss ‘failed states’ and the ‘need’ for modernisation and democratisation. Mignolo (2011) explains how, during the long 19th century, the notion of progress significantly influenced global changes. These notions, such as liberalism stemming from the Enlightenment, aimed to propel humanity towards modernity. However, these ideologies had a darker side often associated with imperialism and colonialism. In essence, discussions about modernity or modernisation cannot ignore the shadow of coloniality. Vazquez (2009) also emphasises that concepts like

---

<sup>10</sup> This will be discussed in the following section.

progress, modernisation, and universality, are inseparable from notions of exploitation, violence, and segregation.

According to Mignolo (2005, p.xiii), 'the "discovery" of America and the genocide of Indian and African slaves are the very foundations of "modernity" more so than the French and Industrial Revolutions. Better yet, they constitute the darker or under side of modernity, known as coloniality'. Over time, this narrative has been reshaped and repackaged as liberal peace efforts, purportedly aimed at rescuing 'failed states'. However, beneath this facade lies a subtle form of imperialism rooted in notions of Western superiority and racist ideologies. Speaking of time, Vazquez (2009) suggests that understanding the relationship between modernity and coloniality requires examining how time is conceptualised. He argues that the modern politics of time manifests itself in a threefold hegemony: the rejection of historical legacies, a future-oriented mindset, and an emphasis on the objectivity of the present. This framework underscores how the narrative of liberal peace while projecting an image of progress and humanitarianism, remains deeply entangled with the enduring legacy of colonialism. That is, beneath the veneers of progress and saviourism in liberal peace lies a darker underbelly, one that is intricately intertwined with coloniality. Shall we then call this the coloniality of peace? This term encapsulates the intricate connections between contemporary peace efforts and the enduring structures of colonial domination and exploitation. This will reveal itself as we proceed in this chapter.

Segueing into the critiques, Richmond (2006) asserts that while liberal peace is assumed to be unproblematic in its internal structure and 'acceptance' in postconflict zones, its implementation is far from smooth. As a matter of fact, this scholar argues that the main components of liberal peace which include democracy, marketisation, human rights, and free markets, to mention but a few have been criticised from

different perspectives. It is these diverse critiques of liberal peacebuilding that the next section is centred on.

### **2.3 Liberal Peacebuilding and its Critics**

As the mainstream approach to peacebuilding remains under the sway of liberal ideals, critiques have emerged, highlighting its inadequacies. With the liberal peacebuilding paradigm's emphasis on state-centric approaches and technocratic solutions, critics have raised questions ranging from legitimacy to effectiveness and ownership. This section engages with the perspectives of these scholars on democratisation and marketisation, sustainability and legitimacy, a new form of hegemonic control, to mention but a few.

#### **2.3.1 On Democratisation and Marketisation**

On democratisation, which is at the core of liberal peacebuilding, Paris (1997) argues that peacebuilders should refrain from applying liberal democratic principles in divided societies until certain institutional foundations are put in place. Instead, he proposes a policy of 'Institutionalisation before Liberalisation' to enable post-conflict societies to gradually ease into liberal models of democracy. Paris accepts the Liberal peacebuilding model and its agenda to promote liberal principles like democracy but only laments about the conditions in post-conflict societies that hinder the full actualisation of this goal. However, it appears that spreading democratic models to all 'illiberal' and conflicted states might be a one-size-fits-all approach that could exacerbate rather than ameliorate the situation (Newman, 2009; Paris, 2009; Richmond, 2010). In addition to this, if we draw from Mignolo's (2011) and Vazquez' (2009) arguments presented in the preceding section, it becomes clear that these scholars are silent about the colonial origins of most of these conflicts. The erasure of

the role that colonialism and imperialism played (and still plays in its neo-formats) is central to the legitimacy of this approach.

Newman (2009) also states that while democratisation and marketisation are taken for granted in stable Western societies, they are often not applicable in volatile societies where 'stable institutions' are scarce. He argues that democratisation has sometimes exacerbated political conflicts and sectarianism. For example, the elections conducted in Bosnia further separated the parties instead of fostering their reconciliation (Newman, 2009). Similarly, in Angola and Rwanda, political liberalisation contributed to the relapse into violence (ibid). Nevertheless, problem solvers like Paris maintain that instead of abandoning the objective of peace through liberalisation, institutional solutions should be considered (Paris, 2010). On the other hand, scholars like Tadjbakhsh (2011) and Zambakari (2017) have criticised the liberal peacebuilding agenda for its top-down approach by highlighting market-oriented policies and the promotion of liberal democratisation. Tadjbakhsh (2011) unapologetically criticises the assumptions and what he perceives as contradictions within the liberal peacebuilding model and its claims of the 'pacifying effects of democratisation and marketisation'. This set of critics believe that political change should be towards the most appropriate good and robust governance model which may not necessarily be that of the liberal democratic model.

### **2.3.2 Sustainability, Legitimacy, and Ownership**

Some scholars have questioned the sustainability of international peacebuilding projects when top-down approaches are prioritised over bottom-up community-driven peacebuilding (Newman, 2009). This also leads to the question of ownership of the process as some observers have argued that local actors are often excluded or simply supposed to follow the instructions of international actors. Chandler (2010) argues that

at the empirical level, the result of this is seen as a façade democracy or reproduced state failure. Paris (2004) admits that while the international community's peacebuilding interventions have sometimes been useful in ending overt violence in conflict-prone states, in several cases they have not been successful in achieving the very peace – sustainable peace – that the intervention was supposed to support. That is, there is usually the tendency to de facto stop at negative peace. Nevertheless, for Paris, these are merely 'technical problems' associated with implementation rather than the design of the model (Cooper, Turner & Pugh, 2011).

Mac Ginty, a leading critical scholar of liberal peacebuilding explains that Liberal peace is an irony because it uses illiberal means to transfer Western liberal values. According to him, it is a conservative philosophy that supports the positions of power holders (national, regional, and international actors) while little is done to emancipate the general population (Mac Ginty, 2010). In this view, he likens liberal peace to negative peace as conceptualised by Galtung (2000) which addresses only overt violence but avoids structural change. Some critics posit that the reason for this is that most liberal peacebuilding interventions are not context-specific (Hudson, 2016; Tanabe, 2017) because international actors assume that what works in the West works everywhere. There is usually the tendency to prioritise Western knowledge over Indigenous knowledge and experience because, during peacebuilding, external actors assume the role of experts in the field. In Timor-Leste for example, the peacebuilding period was used to establish a Western-style state using liberal principles instead of local ones, of which power was given to a Portuguese settler elite instead of the local community leaders (Mac Ginty, Richmond, 2013).

Tanabe (2017) emphasises that a major problem with liberal peacebuilding is its universalistic and standardised approach coupled with its failure to engage with local

practice of conflict resolution and insecurities that evolve every day in societies recovering from conflict. As clarified by Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013), the idea is not to romanticise all things local but to structure peacebuilding in such a way that there is a constant social negotiation between localised and non-localised ideas and practices. While this point is valid, especially considering how the interaction between the local and international are important in the practice and theorising of peacebuilding. It is equally crucial to understand that these constant and even fluid social negotiations and interactions do not happen in a vacuum. The terms of the conversation set for those negotiations and collaborations to happen are not divorced from the political economy and colonial epistemic difference<sup>11</sup> (see Mignolo, 2002).

The Liberian and Congolese women, as highlighted in chapter 5 of this thesis, explain this better when talking about how their knowledges are often deemed inferior as well as their supposed lack of capacity in relation to ‘partnerships’ and ‘collaborations’ with their international peacebuilding partners. I link this to Hudson and Madsen’s (2024) argument on how space is constructed. For these scholars, the way space is depicted helps us understand how hegemonic ideas about space gain control by organising it, shaping the narrative based on dominant ideologies and deciding whose knowledge is considered important, whilst creating a sense of ‘Otherness’ for certain groups. Therefore, when major powers and international organisations pursue an expansionist liberal peace enterprise to save poor women from war in Africa for

---

<sup>11</sup> Mignolo explains that colonialism was not just about political and economic domination; it also involved imposing Eurocentric ways of understanding the world on colonised peoples, while devaluing or erasing their own indigenous knowledge systems. This created a hierarchy of knowledge, where Western ways of knowing were seen as superior and universal, while indigenous knowledge was marginalised or dismissed as primitive or backward. This epistemic difference continues to shape global power relations and perpetuate inequalities, as Western knowledge systems often still dominate academic disciplines, policymaking, and cultural narratives, while indigenous knowledge is often ignored or appropriated without credit.

example, the politics of space materialises as colonial hegemonic narratives that reinforce the marginalisation of Africa and women simultaneously.

### **2.3.3 A New Form of Hegemonic Control?**

To this end, some critics have likened the liberal peacebuilding agenda to a new form of hegemonic control and neo-imperialism (Hudson, 2016; Sabaratnam, 2017). Hudson (2016) asserts that in liberal peacebuilding, the burden of achieving peace falls on the Western 'Self', viewing the non-Western 'Other' as incapable of maintaining it. Thus, the focus is on solving problems posed by the 'Other'. Sabaratnam (2017) also states that liberal peacebuilding exercises forms of hegemony that suppress multiplicity while also exercising a colonial gaze in its treatment of local 'recipients' of international support.

It is for this reason that Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013), Richmond and Mitchell (2012), and Tanabe (2017), amongst others, call for a local turn in peacebuilding. But how precisely does the local turn articulate the 'local' which it seeks to turn to? Despite challenges in arriving at a definitive definition of the 'local', proponents often emphasise the significance of the 'everyday' as a fundamental reservoir of context-specific agency for peacebuilding. This notion underscores the abundance of peacebuilding potential inherent in local dynamics, which may often remain 'hidden' from the purview of international peacebuilding actors (Richmond, 2009). These scholars criticise the neo-colonial approach to liberal peacebuilding and clamour for a more emancipatory peacebuilding agenda where local communities are empowered to solve their problems. This may be a logical argument, but these scholars would be equally guilty of implying that local actors lack power and agency. As expressed by Egben and Napier-Moore (2009, p.291 as cited in Martin de Almagro, Ryan, 2019),

'the Achilles heel of empowerment is that it implies that you do not have power. Subordination is built in'.

More so, the fact that the 'local turn' is characterised by emancipation and empowerment also begs the question, 'Who is in charge of the emancipation and empowerment?'. This leads me to Hudson and Madsen's (2024) argument that sheds light on the intricate processes through which global norms are simply transformed into local practices by both norm makers and takers. Their discourse emphasises the nuanced interplay between global standards and indigenous contexts which I previously argued does not exist in a vacuum. Echoing this perspective, Chilmeran (2022) elucidates how the concept of the 'local' is often portrayed in a utilitarian and neutral manner, masking underlying power struggles for control over the peacebuilding narrative. This portrayal, as Chilmeran suggests, serves to obscure the complex dynamics of ownership and agency within local communities, thereby perpetuating asymmetrical power relations. Moreover, the phenomenon of the 'local turn' has not escaped critique. Randazzo (2021) challenges its propensity to perpetuate power imbalances akin to those found within the framework of liberal peace. By neglecting to interrogate the underlying power structures that shape local dynamics, the 'local turn' risks perpetuating a superficial understanding of peace that fails to address the root causes of conflict.

Brigg's (2016) analysis delves deeper into this critique by underscoring the neglect of relational dynamics within the discourse of the 'local turn'. By overlooking the relationships that shape the emergence of individuals and institutions, the 'local turn' falls short of understanding how power dynamics and political relationships configure the world. This sentiment resonates with the perspectives of Azarmandi (2018), Fitzgerald (2023), and Maldonado-Torres (2020), who warn against the uncritical

embrace of localised approaches to peacebuilding. They caution that without a critical examination of how the 'local turn' may inadvertently perpetuate forms of structural, cultural, epistemological, and ontological violence; there is a risk of legitimising oppressive systems under the guise of peace. In synthesizing these diverse viewpoints, it becomes evident that a comprehensive understanding of localisation in peacebuilding necessitates a critical examination of power dynamics, relationality, and the potential for 'unintended' consequences.

Nevertheless, Paris (2010) believes that scholars who liken liberal peacebuilding to neo-colonialism are only 'hypercritical'. In his analysis, he delineates the distinctions between liberal peacebuilding and colonialism, contending that the latter primarily served the interests of imperial powers, including through the extraction of material and human resources from the colonised territories. Central to Paris' argument is the assertion that while liberal peacebuilding missions still mirror the interests of the world's most powerful nations, they have not 'extracted wealth' from their host countries. This argument is particularly interesting because indeed, one key feature of liberal peacebuilding is that it is often driven by external forces and justified as 'benevolent' and 'apolitical'. However, let us address the point of not extracting wealth briefly. Hudson (2016) suggests that we should critically examine the tangible influence of infrastructural systems that appear to promote peace but serve as means of control and political organisation. An example of this can be seen in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where there are noticeable clusters of private security firms located in secured compounds with barriers such as high walls and barbed wire. These areas are subject to curfews and security screenings, aimed at safeguarding mining operations and the work of NGOs and aid workers. While I was in Goma, a city in the eastern region of the DRC, collaborating with Congolese women for this research, I

distinctly remember the conversation between myself, Olga<sup>12</sup>, and Isabelle Pendeza, the President of the Collective of Women's Association for Development (CAFED).

During our conversation, Isabelle said:

We also have a problem; it is the wealth of our country which is also a major challenge in relation to issues related to peace! There are also multinationals who are here for their own selfish interests.

Still on the point of wealth extraction, one might also wonder whether Paris considers knowledge as a form of extractable wealth. This notion finds resonance in Gibbings' (2011, p.528) discourse on the United Nations Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda, wherein a transition towards 'knowledge as industrial capital' is evident. By this, Gibbings refers to how speeches, reports, and talks around this Agenda label women as a resource, such that references are continually made to women as 'untapped resources'. Delving deeper, she elucidates how women from conflict zones are strategically invited to address the Security Council, heralded for their perceived ability to provide a 'grounded' perspective to the higher-ups. Similarly, Hudson and Madsen (2024), in their examination of Ugandan women's involvement in the 'localisation' of the WPS Agenda, underscore the pivotal role of these women as 'informants' on matters ranging from early warning systems for electoral processes to climate-related disasters and the detection/reporting of violent extremism. However, it is crucial to recognise that the participation of these women from conflict zones is not devoid of external shaping. Drawing from her firsthand experience as an intern at UN Women, Gibbings argues that these women undergo meticulous preparation, with their speeches scrutinised and refined to align with the UN's prescribed speech style. Thus, while ostensibly invited to share their 'grounded knowledge', their narratives are

---

<sup>12</sup> Olga was one of my co-researchers whilst I was in eastern DRC. She is further introduced in chapter 4 of this thesis.

carefully tailored to avoid implicating specific Member States, instead emphasising the potential for positive change, often deflecting responsibility away from them. More so, in the acknowledgements, gratitude must be extended to UN Women for their support (see Hudson and Madsen, 2024). In essence, when Paris talks about the absence of wealth extraction in peacebuilding, what precisely does he infer?

#### **2.3.4 How Should Peace Be Built? Counterarguments**

Richmond (2005) argues that discussions about peacebuilding often prioritise how it is done rather than the type of peace created or the intentions driving those involved in the peacebuilding process. Richmond's point mainly calls for the need to explore peace more in-depth and not just assume that it is a common concept understood and universally interpreted by everyone. Richmond further argues that when peace is not thoroughly analysed, the result is a virtual peace or what I term cosmetic peace where it looks good on the outside for those imposing it than for those who are experiencing it. In other words, what the international community calls peace might not exactly be peace for people experiencing it, particularly not for women and girls. That is, this peace may not resonate with the lived realities of those immersed in it. This assertion echoes the sentiments put forth by Stavrevska et al. (2022), who delve into the nuanced interpretations of liberal peace amidst contexts of violence. They shed light on how the very term 'peace' can evoke a sense of discomfort among those grappling with its imposition.

Paris (2010), on the other hand, believes that critiques of liberal peacebuilding belong to two extremes. This includes those like him who believe that liberal ideologies are the ideal panacea for failed states and those who view it as imposing a new form of hegemony on the local population. On one hand of the spectrum, there is the question of effectiveness which is linked to the duration of the peacebuilding

programme, whereas on the other end of the spectrum is the question of local ownership. In other words, the former requires a longer duration for the peacebuilding project to be effective which equally means a longer presence of external actors while the latter calls for a reduced presence of external actors. According to Paris, these conflicting views are the problem of liberal peacebuilding and that is why international peacebuilding missions remain experiments (Paris, 2009).

Therefore, unlike scholars like Tanabe, Richmond and Mac Ginty amongst others who call for a 'local turn' in peacebuilding, Paris believes that what is needed is not an alternative but an improvement to the dominant liberal peacebuilding model to make it more 'emancipatory' since this is what 'majority' of the critics clamour for (Paris, 2010, p.362). Bellamy (2004) states that problem-solvers like Paris are resourceful in identifying lessons to be learnt and proposing new strategies to policymakers but they lack the depth of thought about peace operations which can, in turn, reproduce social structures that constitute violence in the first place. For him, 'critical' perspectives on peace operations open up new ways of thinking about the future of peace operations theory.

Over the years, the literature on liberal peacebuilding critique has developed from discussions on the failure of international peace interventions (Chandler, 2010; Tadjbakhsh, 2011) and policy prescriptions on how to make them more effective (Paris, 2004), into a more in-depth theoretical discussion on the bases for international interventions and power in International relations (Hudson, 2016; Richmond & Mac Ginty, 2015; Sabaratnam, 2017). As highlighted by Richmond and Mac Ginty (2015), it has attracted the attention of many students, scholars and policymakers and has become one of the leading debates in International Relations. Be that as it may, there is still a need to have more perspectives in the field of peacebuilding to enrich these

debates. The next section will focus on feminists' perspectives on liberal peacebuilding.

## **2.4 Feminists' Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding: Navigating Diverse**

### **Voices**

The discourse around feminist perspectives on liberal peacebuilding is a lively one, where different perspectives intersect, diverge, and challenge dominant paradigms. This section embarks on an exploration of feminist engagements with liberal peacebuilding, highlighting the multifaceted nature of women and girls' roles in armed conflict and peacebuilding processes. My intention in this section is to show how gender lies at the heart of many feminist analyses of armed conflict and peace, including how gender tends to be used as a synonym for women. Additionally, I'll discuss the push to rethink gender and peacebuilding from a decolonial perspective as proposed by some scholars, revealing the complexities in feminist discussions on peace.

#### **2.4.1 Interrogating the Gendered Narrative in Armed Conflicts**

Feminist geopolitics scholarship presents a critical re-evaluation of traditional paradigms regarding the gender dynamics of armed conflict participation, highlighting the implications for female participation within liberal peacebuilding projects. Tickner (1995) posits that historical perceptions of warfare and military matters have been deeply influenced by 'gender' constructs. Distinct gendered roles, experiences of victimisation, and mortality patterns have characterised the participation of women and men in armed conflicts. However, pervasive stereotypes persist, portraying women as inherently peace-oriented while men are cast as the primary aggressors in conflicts

(Skalsbaek, 2001). This prevailing narrative often positions women as fragile beings, necessitating protection during periods of armed conflict and peacebuilding.

Such essentialist viewpoints, grounded in biological determinism, underscore the introduction of gender as a relevant analytical lens in the examination of women's roles in both conflict and peace processes. This is because for White feminist<sup>13</sup> scholars like Acker (1992), Butler (2004), Steans (1998), and others, gender is a social construct. This refers to the material relations that exist between men and women and not necessarily who they are biologically (Acker, 1992; Steans, 1998). Butler (2004) also asserts that gender is not exactly what one 'is' nor is it precisely what one 'has'. Rather, it is performative which makes it liable to change. To this scholar, to limit the meaning of gender to the simplistic binary of 'masculine' and 'feminine' or 'male' and 'female' is to reinforce the power hierarchies that exist in the norm and to restrict the meaning of gender. For example, Steans (1998) points out that in many societies, roles traditionally associated with males are often seen as more significant and esteemed compared to roles traditionally associated with females. For instance, individuals fulfilling the breadwinner role typically attributed to males tend to receive higher social status than those fulfilling the role of housewives. However, it is important to unpack these claims and consider their contextual and ontological underpinnings that inform these perspectives. This is because the idea of performativity and its relation to gender roles reflects a modern colonial reading that privileges representation and what is seen, which will be illustrated as we progress in this section.

---

<sup>13</sup> Following Verges (2021), when I mention White feminists and feminism, I am not just talking about feminism advocated by White individuals, although that is certainly part of it. I am referring to feminists and feminisms that uphold a worldview and analytical framework rooted in whiteness. This perspective is frequently used, whether openly or indirectly, to reinforce the dominance of White people on a global scale. Furthermore, Haastrup and Hagen (2020, p.134) argue that while there is a lot of complexity regarding the idea of whiteness, 'it is a system that reifies the status quo of White privileges, protections, and material advantages over People of Colour'.

However, before delving into this, it is crucial to examine the assertion that gender is a social construct and its origins. Oyewumi (1997) argues that if gender is indeed socially constructed, its manifestations will vary across different times and places. If we accept gender as a social construct, we must investigate the specific cultural and societal contexts where it was constructed, recognising the diverse actors involved in its construction. Furthermore, acknowledging gender as a social construct implies recognising a distinct period when it was established within different cultural contexts, suggesting that there was a time before its construction and existence. Therefore, understanding gender as a social construct also acknowledges its historical and cultural dimensions. Consequently, it is reasonable to consider that certain societies may not have had gender as a category of classification at all. The significance of this understanding lies in the recognition that assumptions about one culture's social organisation cannot be universally applied, nor can interpretations of one culture's experiences fully explain those of another culture.

So, when Tickner claims that wars have been deeply gendered throughout history, one must ask whose history this scholar is referencing and the origins of these gender biases in warfare. The same can be said of Steans' assertion about breadwinners being a male-identified position in most societies and held in higher regard than housewives. Again, it is essential to investigate the specific social contexts informing Steans' assertions and whether they can be universally applied. Furthermore, the concept that gender is socially constructed suggests that the characteristics defining male and female roles have varied across cultures prior to colonisation. Oyewumi (2002) also highlights her suspicion regarding White feminism, noting its roots in family structures, values, and social circumstances not indigenous to Africa and other cultural contexts. The point is that we must be cautious about imposing a universal

understanding of gender in efforts to foster solidarity since such attempts can instead lead to division as diverse experiences cannot be neatly encapsulated under a singular framework.

Now bringing this understanding to war and peace studies, one can begin to interrogate gendered claims that some scholars make and how gender tends to be used as a synonym for women in these discourses. This contradicts the supposed radical notion of gender being a social construct and its universal applicability. For example, Oluwaniyi (2019) argues that violence is central to upholding the gender hierarchy where men dominate and women are subordinate. Likewise, Tickner (1992) emphasises that wars and power politics in International Relations have always been positions specially reserved for men. Even when children are used in armed conflicts, it is usually assumed that only boys are recruited. Goldstein (2003) explains that war service is often interpreted as a test of manhood and 'real men' are expected to be fierce and courageous. Men who do not fight and fail at these warrior tasks are regarded as cowards. The perspective posited by these scholars, that warfare and violence are inherently masculine traits, is rooted in a Western essentialist ideology which equates biology, specifically sex, with gender – a notion contested by White feminists who argue that gender is a social construct.

That is, for these feminists, the distinction between males and females should be understood within the framework of social practices rather than biological determinants. This assertion was and is still heralded as a radical stance, especially in a context where gender difference was biologically determined, with men engaging in activities deemed 'masculine' and women in 'feminine' tasks. Oyewumi (1997) critiques the prevailing White feminist discourse, arguing that it operates under the assumption that sex and gender could be neatly separated and applied universally,

with sex being viewed as a natural category and gender as a social construct built upon it. However, she highlights that even within this framework, the body remains a central aspect. This means that while gender is portrayed as a social construct, certain traits and behaviours are still associated with specific genders based on biological distinctions. Oyewumi invites us to question why these binary attributes of 'masculine' and 'feminine' exist, particularly when considering diverse cultural contexts like Africa, where the visual sense is not privileged over other senses, and the body is not necessarily interpreted as a reflection of societal norms.

In African societies before colonisation, social roles were not primarily determined by biological factors. Instead, the imposition of Western imperialism introduced the concept of biological determinism, which categorised individuals based on gender<sup>14</sup> (Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997). This experience created gender stereotypes and overlooked social roles and identities that were not biologically determined. This is why Oyewumi (1997) contends that when scholars analyse societies through a gendered lens, they reinforce these gender categories. Speaking of social roles and identities not conceived by biology, during the pre-colonial era in Africa for example, women's roles spanned from daring acts like stripping naked to draw attention to their cause while also neutralising the voodoo used by opposition groups in the process, to launching conquests. Empress Taytu Betul (1850-1918) of Ethiopia is a standout example. Leading her army, she successfully defended against colonial forces, notably defeating Italy in the Battle of Adwa in 1896. Other notable figures include Queen Amina of Zaria and Yaa Asantewaa of Ghana, who courageously resisted

---

<sup>14</sup> I discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

British colonisation in the late 19th century (Oluwaniyi, 2019). These women exemplify the pivotal roles women played in military history.

In contemporary wars, women and girls have also been involved in wars as seen in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Uganda, to name a few. Some were even popular for their notoriety like the Krio mammy and Adama 'cut hand' in Sierra Leone (Beckley, 2021). Nevertheless, the focus on female participation in armed conflicts is often restricted to their gender roles such as cooks, spies, wives, messengers, and nurses, while their agency in other aspects is overlooked which in turn contributes to their marginalisation and invisibility during the peacebuilding era. As a matter of fact, some feminist scholars have concluded that liberal peacebuilding is 'gender-blind' (Gonzalez, 2018; Sjoberg, 2011).

The assertion that liberal peacebuilding is 'gender-blind' is fraught with issues. Considering gender as a historico-cultural i.e., colonial construct, as posited by scholars like Oyewumi (1997) and Lugones (2007), reveals that liberal peacebuilding does indeed acknowledge gender dynamics. However, it tends to view gender through a specific lens, primarily depicting women as subordinate to men, thereby necessitating an examination of its colonial underpinnings. The inherent visibility of gender within liberal peacebuilding is precisely why it struggles to comprehend the active involvement of women in warfare within diverse cultural contexts. Thus, when scholars argue that peacebuilding is gender-blind, the exact nature of their claim warrants scrutiny. Furthermore, to truly grasp the gender dynamics within liberal peacebuilding, these scholars must 'see' it intermeshing with race, class, and eurocentrism, essentially acknowledging its coloniality. The subsequent section will elucidate feminist perspectives on the purported gender-blindness of liberal

peacebuilding projects, utilising empirical evidence to demonstrate that the term 'gender' is often used as a synonym for women.

#### **2.4.2 Gender in Liberal Peacebuilding Projects: Unseeing Blindness**

Feminist scholars like Olonisakin and Hendricks (2013) argue that gender has been a 'last resort' or an 'after-thought' in the discussion on liberal peacebuilding as if it has no organic connection to the process. Therefore, it becomes an 'add-on' as exemplified in the popular 'and gender' suffix in most peacebuilding discussions. Skjelsbaek (2001) also explains that the point is not just to adjust peacebuilding and conflict resolution so that 'and gender' is inserted where necessary but to understand that ignoring gender makes it impossible to address important elements of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In most cases, it seems as if gender acts as a proxy for women and girls because it serves as a constant reminder that they must be included in all peacebuilding efforts. One major achievement the international community boasts of when it comes to recognising and 'including' gender is the adoption of the UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

The resolution acknowledges the disproportionately harmful impacts of armed conflict on women and girls as well as the importance of 'gender equality' in peace processes and conflict resolution. It recognises the role of women as active agents of peace and emphasises the fact that peace is intrinsically linked with equality between men and women (UNSC, 2000). Some have praised this Resolution highly because it marked the United Nations Security Council's first dedicated session addressing the experiences of women and girls during and after conflicts (Cohn, Kinsella & Gibbings, 2004). Still, it is arguable that this 'inclusion' stems from the liberal feminist perspective since it corresponds with liberal peace where women and girls in post-conflict societies

are viewed from the perspective of a white Western woman who seems liberalised and modernised (Hudson, 2021).

Despite the adoption of UNSCR 1325 and subsequent Resolutions to recognise and include women in peacebuilding projects, empirical studies (Beckley, 2021; Coulter, 2008; Denov & Richard-Guay, 2013; Oluwaniyi, 2019) have shown that the issue of 'gender-blindness' is yet to be addressed as women and girls are still constantly marginalised in peacebuilding processes. Hudson (2016) argues that this problem is linked to the conflation between sex and gender where the former has to do with the biological differences between men and women and the latter, for feminists is a social construct. Therefore, when women are viewed from their gendered nature as soft and fragile during the peacebuilding era, the 'masculine' roles they perform as warriors and fighters during wars tend to be ignored which often makes them ineligible for post-war benefits compared to their male counterparts. For example, during the peacebuilding era in Sierra Leone mostly boys and only a few girls participated in the formal disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme because the design of the programme made it seem like disarmament was strictly a 'man's thing' (Beckley, 2021). Similarly, in Colombia, women and girls were excluded from the DDR process because of the popular belief that war is amongst men, therefore, the 'rewards' or 'benefits' during the peacebuilding era should also be amongst men (Berrio, 2013).

Like Hudson, other feminist scholars have argued that men and boys are usually the priority during the peacebuilding era since it is assumed that they have the most disruptive influence on post-war stability. For example, Haer (2017) asserts that until recently, the study of child soldiers has been tantamount to the study of boy combatants since it will not naturally occur to individuals that girls can also be

combatants. This links back to the stereotypes that abound during wars as explained in the previous section which also, unfortunately, exist during the peacebuilding era. Scholars who conduct this empirical research have continuously highlighted the marginalisation of female ex-combatants in peacebuilding projects like the DDR and the need for their increased participation in such programmes (Coulter, 2008; Denov & Richard-Guay, 2013; Hauge, 2019).

In light of these examples, it is evident that the term 'gender-blind' used by scholars refers to the persistent exclusion of women and girls within liberal peacebuilding endeavours, effectively equating gender with women. This notion echoes Oyewumi's assertion that despite arguments by White feminists considering gender a social construct, the body remains central to gender dynamics, as previously discussed. Consequently, within the framework of Western gender discourses, it becomes challenging to characterise liberal peacebuilding as 'gender-blind'. By aligning with Oyewumi (1997) and Lugones (2007), if peacebuilding were indeed gender-blind, both male and female combatants would qualify for Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) benefits, as social attributes would not be dictated by the body. However, women are excluded from consideration as soldiers based on Western colonial gender standards, which stipulate that only men can fulfil this role. To elaborate further, Lugones (2010) argues that gender, akin to race, is a deliberate historical colonial/modern construct to control the bodies and subjectivities of the colonised 'Other'. This colonial gender framework dehumanised indigenous peoples, both men and women and continues to influence liberal peacebuilding initiatives. Thus, it is clear that liberal peacebuilding is not 'gender-blind'; rather, it perpetuates colonial gender norms and messianic narratives of rescue and salvation.

This is not to say that women and girls do not participate in peacebuilding projects as a few do, but delving deeper, some feminists have questioned the underlying knowledge and principles used to address 'gender issues' during the peacebuilding era. Since most peacebuilding projects are implemented in non-Western and illiberal societies, these feminists have questioned how/if the categories of differences are constructed, by whom and for what purposes (Martin de Almagro, Ryan, 2019). In examining the limitations of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda in addressing the perceived gender-blindness of liberal peacebuilding, Madsen (2018) argues that much of the agenda's implementation has trickled down from global to local levels. Additionally, Haastrup and Hagen (2020) assert that although the WPS agenda is presented as a universal/global framework, it reflects racial hierarchies, particularly rooted in whiteness. These scholars argue that whiteness, stemming from global white supremacy, has been solidified through colonisation and subsequent postcolonial interactions between the global North and South. This issue will be further explored in the next section, which also advocates moving beyond Western gender norms in liberal peacebuilding and embracing 'Other' ways of doing peace.

#### **2.4.3 'Othering' Gender and Liberal Peacebuilding**

Enshrined within liberal peacebuilding agendas are often essentialised and universalised notions of gender, primarily informed by liberal feminist paradigms. However, this approach has been criticised for seeking equality on men's terms and their approach has been dismissed as an 'Add women and stir' approach to peace (Hudson, 2012) or as Verges (2021) puts it, 'Add colonised women and stir', where women in post-conflict societies are simply added to the already existing colonial patriarchal structures that marginalise them. Clarke (2021) also argues that this approach overlooks the intricate nature of women's political subjectivities and the

diverse contexts of militarism and conflict. This simplistic ahistorical approach to gender and peacebuilding fails to acknowledge the historical complexities rooted in colonial legacies, notably prevalent in the global South. These colonial histories have shaped the dynamics of warfare and perpetuated entrenched power dynamics characterised by heteropatriarchal and racist gender norms, both historically and in their contemporary postcolonial iterations.

It is this approach that keeps asking the question: 'Where are the women?' to buttress the 'gender-blindness' argument. While this question may initially appear as an act of solidarity among women advocating for their representation, it also prompts an examination of who speaks for women and which women's experiences are echoed in feminist discourse (see Oyewumi, 1997). More so, this question implies uniformity among women because the subsequent question raised is, 'Which category of women – those perceived as in need of salvation or those acting as saviours?'. In the same vein, Hudson (2012) posits that this 'add colonised women and stir' approach perpetuates the notion of merely including women superficially, without delving into the deeper dynamics of power relations. It is more concerned with the data of women in the bid to achieve gender equality and address the supposed gender-blindness but does not provide enough insight into power relations. That is, the focus has been on numbers rather than on transforming power relations and dismantling colonial patriarchal structures.

Speaking of power relations, the liberal peacebuilding agenda which frames gender on White feminist terms has been criticised for portraying women in non-Western 'postconflict' societies as 'voiceless victims' who need Western actors to be their saviours and protectors (Hendricks, 2012; Hudson, 2021; Lewis, 2022; Parashar, 2018; Reiling, 2024). This leads me back to Haastrup and Hagen's (2020) argument

on the WPS agenda being steeped in whiteness as well as who the agenda addresses and serves on the global stage. Kunz (2016) also explains that international conflict feminism suggests that because women often face physical insecurity, promoting liberal governance is necessary to restore security and order and uphold women's rights. Indeed, the international community views the peacebuilding period as a window of opportunity to make a positive impact on gender dynamics in societies recovering from conflict.

The assumption is that women in post-conflict societies are 'helpless victims' who need to be protected from violent Brown and Black men. Little wonder why the liberal feminist framework advocates for the need to provide women in war-torn countries with 'special opportunities'. Case in point, a publication on *Gender Sensitive Police Reform in Post Conflict Societies* by UNIFEM and UNDP stated that postconflict settings can offer 'special opportunities' to attract a larger number of women in the security sector (Kunz, 2016). Parashar (2018) also draws our attention to the problematics of concepts like 'best practices', 'case studies', 'gender equality', and 'empowerment', arguing that they support the neoliberal projects (including peacebuilding) of Western governments. She elaborates that the WPS agenda endorses a specific vision of equality and peace that seems to exclude diverse interests and experiences. Specifically, it does not recognise women's agency that does not conform to the pursuit of individual liberation or empowerment within liberal paradigms.

This perspective is thought-provoking because it seems like international actors assume that certain measures in relation to gender were not established before wars thus for them, the peacebuilding era is a window of opportunity to provide 'special opportunities' and 'empower'/'emancipate' women in postconflict societies. Not only

does this assumption imply that these women have no power but as Hudson (2016) affirms, it appears that liberal actors are oblivious to the long history of women and feminists of colour who have developed 'other' ways of transforming gender relations. This correlates with Parashar's (2018) point on postcolonial subjectivities being predominantly moulded within the framework of neoliberal Western modernity, thereby overshadowing other ways of being and belonging.

Hudson (2012) further argues that if liberal peace fails to acknowledge how it portrays the 'Other', it could reinforce unequal gender roles and feelings of insecurity in a phase that is hypothetically intended to usher in a fresh start. What Hudson is referring to is what I term 'Peace as violence' or a 'Gendered cosmetic peace' where what seems like peace on the outside to the international community might, in fact, be violence to certain individuals in postconflict societies. Some observers also claim that gender serves as the Trojan horse of liberal peacebuilding used to promote liberal principles in post-conflict societies (Kunz, 2016; Martin de Almagro, Ryan, 2019). According to these critics, international actors bring in gender experts to carry out training since they assume that women in post-conflict societies lack opportunities which also means that they lack the necessary knowledge for gender and security.

Whetstone and Luna (2023) contend that WPS discussions have created a stereotype of a 'Brown'/'Black' 'woman participant' from the Global South who is portrayed as requiring external knowledge through 'white training' to achieve competence and empowerment. Basu (2016) supports this view, suggesting that women in the Global South are often seen as passive recipients of policies formulated elsewhere, with little recognition given to their agency within the WPS framework. Parashar (2018) observes that contemporary global feminist discourse can be interpreted as having colonial overtones, looking down on the Global South primarily

as locations of chaotic conflicts that can be used as empirical testing grounds for Western approaches to peacebuilding and rescuing women from oppressive patriarchies<sup>15</sup>. In essence, the WPS agenda is perceived as a component of a broader Western messianic narrative which has become ingrained in contemporary feminist vocabulary.

At the heart of this discourse lies the recognition that Western feminist frameworks often perpetuate a form of cultural imperialism, imposing Eurocentric ideals of gender equality onto non-Western societies under the guise of liberal peacebuilding. Such interventions tend to overlook the complex socio-cultural dynamics of conflict-affected regions, thereby failing to address the nuanced needs and experiences of marginalised communities. The effect of this is the marginalisation of extant indigenous women's knowledge and praxis. This way, liberal principles are smuggled into post-war societies through gender, and this has been illustrated in the way local NGOs implement peacebuilding projects on gender. Kunz (2016) calls this the 'NGOization' of feminist movements where NGOs and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) need to align their objectives and activities with the WPS agenda to remain relevant and secure funding from the international community.

Accentuating Kunz's argument, Obradovic-Wochnik (2018) states that internationally funded local human rights-based NGOs can also be agents of oppression and exclusion, not just 'emancipation'. In her work with women's NGOs in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, Reiling (2024) learnt that many international NGOs sought out local partners whom they felt had the 'capacity' to carry out a project. By capacity,

---

<sup>15</sup> I link this to the point made in the previous chapter regarding Lugones' (2007) proposition to historicise gender to avoid oversimplifying patriarchy as the sole enemy.

they mean the organisation must be big enough and capable of following donor priorities. Reiling further argues that this meant projects and funding went to 'repeat customers' with internationally entrenched ways of doing things instead of broadening perspectives. It also meant that smaller organisations who felt they could utilise the funding better for their communities were kept out of the loop. Whetstone and Luna (2023, p.6) drawing from Narayanaswamy (2016) call this 'an internal North-South divide in the Global South referring to the dominance of elite women-led local NGOs who perpetuate Western norms'.

Consequently, indigenous women's ideas are portrayed as lacking and inferior to liberal ideas, which might especially be the case for those who refuse Western ideals or choose to engage on their terms. Gibbings (2011) explains further that the tactic used by the United Nations is to encourage women activists and local organisations to take up greater roles and responsibilities during the transition phase since they understand the local but in the process, the UN advances a specific notion of womanhood and acceptable feminine conduct i.e. 'civilised', 'liberal', and 'modernised'. Similarly, Obradovic-Wochnik (2018) asserts that some local NGOs especially those funded internationally tend to be local gatekeepers for the 'Higher-ups' who speak on behalf of other locals and in turn impose their donors' visions of gender and peacebuilding onto their communities. In other words, some NGOs are the tools that the international community uses to infiltrate the 'local' with liberal principles. Thus, the principles of these NGOs come to mirror those of the West. As described by Gibbings (2011), the loyalty of NGOs often transgressed geographical areas.

Using economic reintegration to further explain how local women's activities are made to seem inferior, Martin de Almagro and Ryan (2019) state that the economies of most post-war states are dominated by informal economic activity, but this does not

tick the box in formal accounts of economic activities in peacebuilding. Whereas, these informal economic activities are the means of survival for most women and girls. Thus, these scholars argue that any attempt to separate women and girls' informal economic activities from formal accounting should be viewed as a political and imperialist strategy to render them invisible and illegitimate, as well as to devalue the representation of women and girls and their work in post-conflict economic recovery and development. Hudson (2012) also argues that the assumption that free markets will address the social and economic inequalities that are believed to be part of the factors contributing to conflicts in the developing world is usually at odds with local interests that may support economic wellbeing. Most importantly, such assumptions usually contradict the economic realities of many women in post-conflict societies.

These scholars' views reinforce the notion of women and girls in post-conflict societies being primarily victims in need of international support to be 'empowered'. Indeed, during the DDR process in Sierra Leone for example, more time and resources were devoted to the formal education sector than vocational training programmes, taking into consideration the duration of both programmes. The duration of skills training programmes was only six months which was not enough to learn anything while for formal education, there was the initial six-month preparatory course - Rapid Response Education Programme (RREP) then three years of Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS) or one-year fees payment for those who returned to normal schools (Beckley, 2021). Therefore, following Martin de Almagro and Ryan's (2019) argument, it would appear as if these programmes were deliberately designed this way to hinder female ex-combatants from contributing to the informal economic sector of their societies.

Shepherd (2011) also asserts that it is important to evaluate how the Security Council writes about women as well as the women in question. She links this to the fact that the Resolution writes some women as victims and most importantly assumes that 'most' women speak for 'all' women. According to this scholar, while the UN Security Council has written about women as supposed agents, this agency is both a rupture in the familiar representation of women as victims and an additional burden for some women to bear. That is, this supposed agency does not apply to all women but the women who have to step up to 'rescue' or 'save' the women who are written as victims, which is still a representation of Westernised women speaking and standing up for non-Western women who are perceived as 'victims' in need of protection. Gibbings (2011) also suggests that it is crucial to explore how the UN system's desires and norms influence assumptions about what actions are possible. Pratt (2013) asserts that the UNSCR 1325 prioritises gender over race, class or other relations of power when it comes to women's experiences and responses to conflict. Some have also argued that when gender is prioritised over race and class in Resolutions, little is done to challenge the structural or root causes as well as power hierarchies that facilitate women's inequality and insecurity (Hudson, 2016).

For Oyewumi (2002), since women are not a homogenous group and other forms of oppression abound, questions like 'To what extent does a gender analysis reveal or occlude other forms of oppression?', 'Which women's situation does feminist scholarship theorise well?' must be asked. Similarly, Olonisakin and Hendricks (2013) affirm that UNSCR 1325 was not intended as a panacea for the structural issue of gender inequality within peace and security. Still, member states are tasked with the responsibility to show their commitment to the UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security through national action plans (NAPs). That is, member states are mandated

to domesticate and localise the international gender standard in their respective countries which is a clear-cut example of gender being a Trojan horse used to smuggle liberal principles into non-Western member states. Oluwaniyi (2019) also states that NAPs have only succeeded in integrating international gender norms which remain problematic for women in non-Western contexts.

Likewise, Hudson (2016) affirms that despite many African countries adopting action plans to implement Resolution 1325, genuine transformation remains elusive. To this author, this is largely due to the utopian idea that the presence of women will automatically result in a positive change (Hudson, 2012). Parashar (2018) also contends that simply making 'women' visible is not enough to provide thorough intellectually and politically satisfying explanations for the marginalisation of women's interests. Olonisakin and Hendricks (2013) also argue that change cannot be achieved by merely emphasising representation over transformation. It can be deduced from this that Resolution 1325 which is yet to transform the gender problem, especially in non-Western states needs to be revisited by the international community and states to avoid the continuous undermining of women's agency in post-war societies.

In view of the above, some scholars have called for the decolonisation of gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding. On this point, Onyido (2013) asserts that women are not a homogenous group, and the experiences of women differ greatly depending on race, class, and other social contexts. Therefore, it is important to understand the meaning that indigenous women have attributed to peacebuilding. In other words, it is imperative to de-silence the voices and experiences of women in non-Western contexts instead of labelling them as voiceless victims to pluralise and contextualise understandings of women, peace, and security. Hudson (2016) also argues that the

decolonisation of gender in peacebuilding has to do with the appreciation of differences and widening the concept beyond the simplistic male/female binary.

I link this to Lugones' (1994) text talking about how things are often viewed through a lens that favours heterosexual norms. She discusses how there is a kind of game or parody happening between what is considered traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine. This can involve playing with the idea of gender roles, sometimes blurring the lines between them. She also challenges the idea of a clear-cut gender identity, intending to break down the idea of one fixed definition of what 'it' means (referring to gender). Additionally, she talks about how some people reject the strict definitions of masculinity and femininity in how they see themselves, instead preferring to define their own identities. Overall, she suggests a rejection of the idea of 'purity' in gender norms and identities. Purity here refers to the logic that constructs rigid categories of identity based on factors like race, gender, sexuality, and class. This is also why Oyewumi (1997) invites us to question the so-called social construction of gender, where and how it was constructed as well as the need to consider the fact that if gender is indeed a social construct, then there were certain cultural contexts where this was not the case until the advent of colonialism. While this might complicate analyses, these arguments call for a radical shift from the dominant and simplistic one-size-fits-all liberal Western approach to gender and peacebuilding in non-Western conflict settings.

## **2.5 Reflections**

The preceding section has illuminated the entrenched hegemony of Western gender norms in the discourse and practice of peacebuilding, underscoring the need for a critical re-evaluation of gender as a conceptual framework. While the inclusion of gender perspectives in conflict resolution efforts represents a crucial step towards

addressing gender-based violence and inequalities for some feminist scholars, the pervasive conflation of gender with women not only oversimplifies the complexities of gender dynamics but also perpetuates colonial legacies that marginalise non-Western voices and experiences. That is, when some feminist scholars conflate gender with women, they often fall short of addressing the deeper colonial legacies embedded within the concepts of gender and women. In this reflection and points of departure section, I will elaborate on the imperative to move beyond gender as a synonym for women, interrogating its coloniality and applicability in non-Western conflict-affected settings. Furthermore, I will articulate how this research aims to transcend conventional gender analyses to explore the coloniality of gender and feminist-decolonial lenses in understanding Liberian and DRC women's knowledges and approaches to peace in their respective contexts.

The binary understanding of gender as a dichotomy between men and women reinforces colonial heteronormative and patriarchal structures that privilege masculinity and marginalise femininity. By equating gender with women, conventional liberal peacebuilding approaches essentialise and stereotype women as passive victims and men as aggressors as discussed in section 2.4.2. Hence the 'gender blindness' argument and the need to 'engender' or 'gender' liberal peacebuilding by adding and recognising women. This oversimplification obscures the complex power dynamics at play within conflict-affected societies during liberal peacebuilding interventions and perpetuates the erasure of marginalised voices. It is why some have raised questions about who speaks for women in non-Western conflict-affected societies and the need to decolonise gender and peacebuilding. To my mind, decolonising gender and peacebuilding will include historicising gender and its entanglement with colonialism following Oyewumi (1997) also known as the coloniality

of gender as conceptualised by Lugones (2007), as well as centring and embracing indigenous women's knowledges and ways of doing peace.

The coloniality of gender analysis lies in its complicity with colonial discourses and practices that have historically imposed Western norms and values onto non-Western societies. I will elaborate on this in the next chapter. As highlighted by Parashar (2018) and other scholars cited above, Western feminism has often been co-opted as a tool for cultural imperialism, imposing universalising narratives that disregard the agency and epistemologies of non-Western women. These scholars have criticised the homogenisation of women in post-conflict societies as voiceless victims and the westernisation of gender and peacebuilding implemented in non-Western conflict-affected societies. In the context of peacebuilding, this coloniality manifests in the prioritisation of Western interventions and the sidelining of indigenous knowledge and practices.

To move beyond this colonial legacy, it is imperative to de-centre Western frameworks that underpin dominant narratives and practices and engage with indigenous women's perspectives of peace on their own terms. This is what I intend to do in this study with Congolese and Liberian women. This study will centre the narratives and experiences of these women from diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, paying particular attention to how colonial legacies continue to shape gender relations and peacebuilding efforts, and how they navigate and resist these while simultaneously nurturing communal peace in their respective contexts. The succeeding sub-sections will present arguments on women and peacebuilding in Liberia and the DRC, and how this research aims to contribute to the scholarly works on the two countries.

### **2.5.1 Mapping Literature on Women and Peacebuilding in Liberia**

This section provides a survey of scholarly works on the active nature of Liberian women in peacebuilding. It will also reveal the fact that the term 'local women' has been used rather loosely to describe Liberian women in most scholarly works on women and peacebuilding in Liberia. I do not intend for this to be an exhaustive discussion since these women will tell their stories in Chapter 5 of this thesis. My intention here is to show how this study contributes to existing research in this context.

According to Kunz (2016), Liberian women's involvement in the peace struggle emerged from long-established women's activism. Likewise, Bekoe and Parajon (2007) affirm that the efforts of Liberian women reveal the fact that when grassroots movements are coordinated properly, they can establish more inclusive peacebuilding. Gbowee (2019) and Garnett (2016) explain that while the international community and parties to conflict made no provision for women's involvement in the peace process, Liberian women refused to be silenced and marginalised. These women decided that they did not need permission from the supposed international 'saviours' to mobilise for peace. According to Gbowee (2019), some of the steps Liberian women took to advocate for peace include changing the global narrative of the war in Liberia, pressuring the government to agree to a ceasefire, mobilising Liberian women who were refugees in Ghana and those in Liberia to engage in peace talks and advocacy, walking, marching, and praying for peace, to mention but a few.

Liberian women equally leveraged their maternal nature or what Lawson and Flomo (2020) call 'Motherwork' in clamouring for peace. This is exemplified in the way that women's organisations such as the Mano River Union Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) and the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) effectively appealed to warring factions, leaders' wives, and soldiers. They emphasised their

roles as mothers, sisters, and daughters to garner sympathy and push for an end to the war (Garnett, 2016). Peace Huts were also established by these women to provide a safe space for peacebuilding and gender equality, intergenerational mentorship, and to support women and girls who were excluded from the United Nations-led DDR programme (Lawson & Flomo, 2020). Debusscher and Martin de Almagro (2016) and Garnett (2016) posit that the active roles played by Liberian women during the peace process continued even during the reconstruction era.

These women were labelled as peacemakers nationally and internationally and seen as relevant to maintaining peace in post-conflict Liberia. Thus, they gained a foothold in the political sphere and encouraged women to register and vote, resulting in a higher female-than-male turnout (Debusscher, Martin de Almagro, 2016). Consequently, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf emerged as the winner against George Weah in the presidential elections with more than 59% of the votes thus becoming the first elected female Head of State in Africa (Debusscher, Martin de Almagro, 2016; Garnett, 2016). Yet, a report by Amnesty International (2008) as well as scholarly works by Awodola (2009), Mackenzie (2012), Oluwaniyi (2019), Wollie (2016), etc., on the UN-led DDR in Liberia documented that female ex-combatants were mostly marginalised during the process. Does this mean that the experiences and knowledge of Liberian women were not taken into consideration during the DDR process? Does this also mean that the result might have been different if Liberian women were involved in the planning of these programmes?

That said, given the commendable roles played by Liberian women in their quest for peace and postconflict reconstruction, a major observation in the literature is that the term 'local women' has been used as a generic term and rather loosely to describe these women. Ostensibly, Liberian women as a whole constitute 'local women';

however, to be more nuanced, 'local women' can be classified into 'national elites' or 'grassroots' women. This classification reveals the hierarchy in women's peace organisations in Liberia and in Hellmuller's (2012, p.238) words, 'it forestalls any tendencies to see local actors as a unitary and homogenous group'. For example, Debusscher and Martin de Almagro (2016), Fuest (2010), and Gizelis and Joseph (2016) argue that since the women's peace movement in Liberia was founded by educated and professional women, tensions have ensued between the 'uneducated/County women' and the 'educated/Congo women', especially considering the latter's international partnerships.

This is reminiscent of Whetstone and Luna's (2023) argument made above about the internal North-South divide amongst women's NGOs in the Global South. Fuest (2010) explains how the 'workshop culture' associated with NGOs organised by educated elite women tends to be external to the local setting. For example, Fuest found that trainers use the English language which is not mastered by all Liberians as a means of communication as compared to the Liberian pidgin English. As a result, 'illiterate/county' people invited by these NGOs tend to be reluctant to participate in these events for fear of being shamed especially in an arena that is generally perceived to be 'civilised' or 'elite'. This scholar also asserts that participation in workshops is a source of prestige in the society where those who are privileged to participate may claim a superior social status in the society.

Linking this 'workshop culture' to the liberal peace concept, it can be argued that workshops were an avenue to promote liberal norms to infiltrate the local with international norms in what was described as the 'NGOization of feminist movement' by Gibbings (2011) in the previous section. Buttressed by Van Houten (2020), women's participation in peacebuilding activities can sometimes reinforce the elitist

agreements which may not reflect the needs and aspirations of grassroots communities. Also, one cannot but wonder how grassroots women participated in and contributed to the women's peace movement in Liberia, what roles they played, or if they had their own organisations and networks separate from the popular elite NGOs which were mostly funded internationally. Affirming the point on the NGOization of feminist movement, Debusscher and Martin de Almagro (2016) stated that most elite women-led NGOs tailored their projects to suit their donors' funding calls thus limiting their capacity and lacking real ownership. These authors also explained how existing grassroots organisations were marginalised as the 'big NGOs' with more funding built huge camps crowding spaces where these smaller organisations have worked for months. Hence the discrepancies between the urban elite-led organisations and grassroots organisations.

While these scholars have attempted to distinguish between the elite women-led organisations and the grassroots women-led organisations, the Liberian women's movement has been dominated by the country's educated elite women (Debusscher, Martin de Almagro, 2016). It is this group that most scholars have focused on in their discourse on women and peace in Liberia. Therefore, little is known about the grassroots women's involvement in the peace process and their ways of 'doing' peace as well as the relationship dynamics between different groups of Liberian women in their work for peace. That is, using the umbrella term 'local women' to describe all Liberian women renders the works of those at the grassroots invisible, which according to Lawson and Flomo (2020), grassroots women compared to State and profit-driven securitisation tend to place human and community needs at the centre of their 'postconflict' activities. In this research, I engage with different groups of Liberian women to learn about what peace means to them and their plural experiences in

working for peace in their respective communities. More so, analysing our conversations through a feminist decolonial lens adds more nuance to the existing literature.

### **2.5.2 Mapping Literature on Women and Peacebuilding in the DRC**

This section takes a slightly different turn from the previous section as the bulk of scholarly works on women in the Democratic Republic of Congo have focused on the homogenisation of Congolese women as victims of sexual violence as a result of the war. Therefore, this section begins with the arguments of scholars who clarify the fact that Congolese women have not only been victims of the conflict. It proceeds with existing scholarly works that explain how the misrepresentation of Congolese women impacts them during the peace process. Then, it reveals the movements by grassroots women for peace and how this research aims to build on this literature.

Most writings, mainly international narratives including reports on the conflict in the DRC and women have primarily been on women as victims of sexual violence and other atrocities lacking any form of agency. As buttressed by Hounbedji et al (2012), the protracted conflict in the DRC has often been misrepresented. This misleading narrative portrays women solely as enduring victims of widespread violence, with men consistently cast as the perpetrators. Autesserre (2012) and Van Houten (2020) also argue that sexual violence is one of the dominant narratives about women and the DRC conflict. In fact, it is a required topic of expertise for people who work in the DRC. However, Congolese women and girls have fought alongside their male counterparts in non-state armed groups like the Mai Mai and M23 (Hounbedji, Grace & Brooks, 2012). In fact, in explaining the DDR process in the DRC, Sadie (2010) states that at the end of the first national phase of the DDR in December 2006, 132,367 ex-combatants were demobilised out of the estimated 150,000, including 2670 women

and 30,000 children. This is an indicator of the fact that women and girls were not merely victims but also active agents during the conflict. Yet, sexual violence victimhood seems to be the overarching narrative of women and the DRC conflict.

Some scholars claim that most of these narratives are shaped by international actors i.e., the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. For example, Autesserre (2012) asserts that the dominant and simplistic narratives about the DRC conflict that have been shaped by international actors include: the extraction of mineral resources as the main cause of violence, sexual violence as the main consequence and the reconstruction of the State's authority as the primary solution. With regards to women and the sexual violence narrative, the United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict – Margot Wallstrom labelled the eastern Congo as the 'rape capital of the world' and the 'most dangerous place on earth to be a woman'. Therefore, advocates, journalists and aid workers have adopted these labels ever since and women in the DRC are rather treated as victims to be 'cared for' than engaged with during the peace process, and even if they are, the discussions are usually reduced to sexual violence (Autesserre, 2012; Davis, 2013; Lewis, 2022; Van Houten, 2020). This also explains the disconnect between female ex-combatants and the peace process in the DRC literature since the focus has mainly been on sexual violence.

Second and more importantly, there are recent scholarly works on the DRC where scholars have called for the need to recognise 'local' approaches in the peacebuilding process in the DRC (Malik, 2014; Van Leeuwen et al., 2020; Zvaita & Mbara, 2019). However, this does not seem to include the perspectives of indigenous women in the DRC. As a matter of fact, Martin de Almagro (2018, p.326) documented that the Congolese women she interviewed complained in their words:

We were a group of African women leaders that were taken to Sweden. The first thing they do is to show us a film on Liberian women as peacemakers and a second one on the Congolese women raped as a result of war. But we were also in Sun City, we also participated to the Inter-Congolese dialogue, we are also here, fighting.

From this narration, it appears that these women are perceived internationally and even locally as lacking any form of agency which seems not to be the case in reality.

This narration can also be viewed as a direct consequence of the dominant narrative of sexual violence victimhood attributed to Congolese women which in turn serves as a hindrance for them even during the peace process. Hellmuller (2012) highlighted the dominance of elite actors who were predominantly men during negotiations, of which local actors and civil society were not significantly included. Sadie (2010) connects the marginalisation of women in public negotiations to laws such as the Family Code in the DRC, which relegates women to a subordinate position. Despite official documents asserting women's rights and equality in Congo, their lived reality often contradicts these claims.

Nevertheless, Davies (2013) and Van Houten (2020) explicate that when women were 'allowed' to participate in official peace dialogues, their contributions were often limited to discussions on sexual violence which simply maintains the existing power dynamics between women and men in the Congo. Davies (2013) elucidated that women's associations that participated in the Goma Conference were required to only speak on 'women's issues' i.e. rape and sexual violence with 'one voice'. Requiring women to 'speak with one voice' at formal peace dialogues can be translated to reducing them to a homogenous group and their issues to only sexual violence which is not the case as discussed in the previous subheadings. Autesserre (2012, p.214) also stated that:

Since 2009, there has been no interest in the Congo at the UN Security Council except when it discussed incidents of mass rape and potential responses to them. Similarly,

US State Department top officials reportedly pay no attention to the Congo except when sexual violence grabs the headlines.

This would also explain why women's associations will push for a 'unified' goal like 'end rape and sexual violence' amongst other similar goals since that is what they are required to stand for. This is not to deny the fact that women bore the brunt of the conflict as sexual victims amongst other things but as clearly stated by Davies (2013), when national and international discourse on the Congolese conflict and women is centred on rape and other forms of sexual violence, it reinforces the image of Congolese women internationally as sexualised victims to be 'saved' as seen with Martin de Almagro's (2018) study and lacking any form of agency in shaping their society.

Sadie (2010) and Davies (2013) opine that there is the assumption that grassroots women are unable to articulate their rights and needs thus leading to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and International organisations like UNDP, Oxfam and UNICEF advocating on behalf of women in the DRC. Van Houten's (2020) study on women's participation in official peace processes through CSOs also revealed that mostly elite women tend to participate, of which the majority of these CSOs are internationally funded and influenced by international actors. Just like in Liberia, the 'NGOization' of feminist movement is also present in the DRC. Hellmuller (2012, p.246) emphasises the point that local CSOs had to deal with what their international partners and donors suggested and then try to shape it to fit into context. This author gave an example of how a participant said sometimes they would have liked to disagree with the priorities put forward by the international community, but they had the funds, the participant felt obliged to 'shut up'.

This can also be linked to Autesserre's (2012) argument that advocacy efforts and fundraising succeed best when simple narratives are put forward; hence, the simplistic and dominant narratives about the Congolese conflict put forward by the international community. Thus, it is important for women's organisations largely influenced by international actors to speak with 'one voice' on women's issues i.e. rape and sexual violence. Could this be seen as a case of Western feminists speaking on behalf of or 'saving' their Brown sisters? Autesserre further states that the dominant narratives put forward by the international community like sexual violence being the major consequence of the conflict amongst others previously listed have maintained prominence because they resonate with non-Congolese audiences. Whereas, these dominant narratives are often contested by marginalised voices i.e. grassroots feminists.

In Van Houten's (2020, p.245) words, 'there is the absence of discussion of women's roles in everyday peacebuilding beyond peace negotiations'. That is, the majority of scholarly works on women's involvement in the peace process in the DRC have mostly been from the perspectives of CSOs largely influenced by international partners and donors to promote a dominant narrative of sexual violence. On the contrary, Sadie (2010) delineates that while the majority of Congolese women have been invisible in formal peace negotiations, they contribute to peacebuilding at the grassroots level as these women have been involved in 'humanitarian assistance and socio-economic development at the micro-level'. This author cites examples of grassroots women's development organisations like Forum des Masses Silencieuses<sup>16</sup> (FOMASI) in Kisangani (the south-eastern part of the DRC) and the

---

<sup>16</sup> The English translation is Forum of the Silent Masses.

Organisation des Femmes pour le Développement Intégral Communautaire<sup>17</sup> (OFEDICO) that have been teaching women to make and sell artisanal products. There are also organisations in the Masisi area (eastern Congo) that are involved in the economic development of women i.e. sewing, agriculture, animal farming, etc. There is also Le Bureau Territorial des Affaires Sociales (Territorial Bureau for Social Affairs) amongst others at the Masai Centre responsible for equipping women with skills like reading, writing, knitting and sewing. Sadie (2010) highlights that most of these organisations tend to be constrained by insufficient resources in rural areas since they do not receive any funding. This author affirms that 'grassroots communities form the bulk of the Congolese population and if these initiatives can benefit from public funding, they can fight the feminisation of poverty and assist in promoting the start of human development'.

The above reveals that while existing scholarly works have discussed and clarified the misrepresentation of Congolese women as mere victims of sexual violence, critiqued this exclusive focus and its effects on women's participation in peace processes, discussed NGO activities in peacebuilding generally, there is very little on the Congolese women's understanding of and approaches to peace. Therefore, this research seeks to contribute to these scholarly works by centring the voices and experiences of diverse Congolese women in their work for peace.

Much of the literature on these contexts has been shaped by paradigms that prioritise external interventions, state-centric approaches, and conflict economies. For instance, scholars like William Reno (1998) in *Warlord Politics and African States* and Séverine Autesserre (2010) in *The Trouble with the Congo* have extensively analysed

---

<sup>17</sup> The English translation is Organisation of Women for Community Integral Development.

the role of state actors, international organisations, and the war economy in perpetuating conflict and shaping peacebuilding agendas. While these studies are valuable, they often fail to centre the lived experiences and knowledge systems of local communities, particularly women's contributions to peacebuilding.

This thesis situates itself within this dominant body of work but intentionally diverges by adopting a feminist-decolonial lens. Rather than aiming to 'fill gaps', this study critiques the limitations of dominant approaches that marginalise indigenous perspectives. By foregrounding Congolese and Liberian women's localized peacebuilding strategies, this research expands the discourse beyond the confines of dominant paradigms.

For instance, existing studies often frame women's roles in peacebuilding through a donor-driven lens or as extensions of international aid frameworks. This is evident in the work of Porter (2007), which discusses women's grassroots activism but predominantly in relation to their integration into internationally defined peacebuilding processes. In contrast, this study highlights how women in Liberia and the DRC navigate and transform conflict through their own epistemologies, such as their use of traditional leadership roles, storytelling, and community networks to foster reconciliation and stability. These practices challenge the hegemony of externally imposed models by asserting the validity and efficacy of indigenous ways of doing.

For example, Liberian women's mass-action campaigns, documented by Leymah Gbowee in *Mighty Be Our Powers* (2011), showcase grassroots strategies that were not only independent of international frameworks but also pivotal in achieving significant political outcomes, such as the end of the Second Liberian Civil War. Similarly, in the DRC, the work of Congolese women's groups like SOFEPADI

(Solidarity of Women for Peace and Development) demonstrates how community-led initiatives address both immediate humanitarian needs and long-term peacebuilding goals. These contributions align with the critique of dominant paradigms while re-centring indigeneity in peacebuilding practices.

By explicitly engaging with dominant literature and articulating how it builds upon or critiques existing works, this thesis contributes a nuanced understanding of peacebuilding that bridges decolonial theory and practice. This approach reinforces its position not as filling gaps but as reshaping the discourse to embrace plural and overlooked narratives.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

As I conclude this literature review, I position this research within the growing body of critical literature that recognises the need for embracing complexities in peacebuilding research. The synthesis of liberal peacebuilding critiques, the complexities and interrogation of gender in armed conflicts, the inadequacies of 'gender blindness' in liberal peacebuilding, and the call to decolonise gender and peacebuilding paved the way for this research's contribution to the field. This research seeks not only to critique but offer other lenses through which women's voices in the DRC and Liberia can shape the discourse on peacebuilding. In the next chapter, I go into more detail on the theoretical lenses of this research and how they are applied in this research.

## **Chapter Three | Women Nurturing Communal Peace Amidst Colonial Shadows: A Feminist-Decolonial Framework**

### **3.1 Introduction**

I begin this chapter by acknowledging the difficulty and discomfort I grapple with in constructing a theoretico-praxical<sup>18</sup> framework that avoids replicating what I learned from my interactions with women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia. First is the challenge that arises from the reluctance of many women in these regions to embrace the label of 'feminist'. Instead, they prefer self-identifying as 'Congolese/Liberian women' or 'women activists'. This reluctance prompts a critical reflection on the limitations of conventional feminist labels in capturing the complexities of these women's experiences, aspirations, and perceptions of peace. The second challenge, intimately linked to the first, lies in the potential pitfalls of employing labels that may inadequately represent the multifaceted realities of these women's lives.

Consequently, the development of this theoretico-praxical framework is underpinned by these very clear concerns and awareness of the inherent problems associated with adopting rigid categories and labels. In essence, this framework is constructed with a keen sensitivity to the complexities of identity and representation, aiming to transcend simplistic labels and embrace a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of women in the DRC and Liberia. It is not a 'neat' framework with a linear path, it is messy, it embraces uncertainty, difficulty and discomfort. Discomfort here is understood as a 'sweaty concept' as conceptualised by Sara

---

<sup>18</sup> I write it this way following Walter D. Mignolo's understanding that thinking is doing and doing is thinking. This enables me to delink from the separation of theory and practice, particularly when this framework is developed from the lived embodied experiences of non-White women and feminists.

Ahmed (2017), rooted in bodily and sensory experiences of difficulty that offers ways of thinking and knowing differently.

Indeed, attempting to encapsulate the multifaceted experiences of these women in fostering peace inevitably falls short within any predefined neat conceptual framework. This is particularly true when attempting to classify women who may not align with the label of 'feminist'. Therefore, when I cautiously say 'feminist-decolonial' or 'feminist-decoloniality' rather than strictly adopting Maria Lugones' concept of decolonial feminism, it is because I am aware of these tensions and not relying only on Lugones' corpus. This framework also draws from the insights of various non-White women and feminists across Africa and beyond, including Oyewumi Oyeronke, who does not align herself with the label of decolonial feminist.

Speaking of tensions without attempting to solve them here but for their heuristic value to this research, it is noteworthy to acknowledge the prevalent assumption that decolonial feminism is Latin American-centric due to its progenitor. This perspective manifests in scholarly preferences for terms like 'decolonial African feminism'<sup>19</sup>, emphasising the contextual specificity of theorising. Some even assert outrightly that decolonial feminism is inherently a Latin American philosophy<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, Oyewumi Oyeronke in a panel discussion on Decolonisation and Decoloniality (2024) asserted that 'the story decoloniality tells is a new world story which does not take Africa into account. For her, it is a Latin American story'. While I understand these scholars' sentiments to a reasonable extent, I am also aware of the fact that Lugones' work constantly drew inspiration from and honoured the philosophies and experiences of several non-white women and feminists on the margins, including African-American,

---

<sup>19</sup> See Muraina and Ajímátanraeje, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> See Velez, 2019.

Chicana, and women of colour feminisms. As a matter of fact, Lugones' conceptualisation of the colonality of gender was deeply influenced by Oyewumi's (1997) work<sup>21</sup> – *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse*. Thus, contrary to the notion that decoloniality is exclusively a narrative confined to Latin America or centred solely on Latin American experiences, it is imperative to recognise its broader scope and influences. Mignolo (2011, p.273) aptly clarifies this perspective asserting that, 'Decoloniality is a concept whose point of origination was the Third World... Decoloniality has its historical grounding in the Bandung Conference of 1955 in which 29 countries from Asia and Africa gathered'.

Hence, this feminist-decolonial/ity framework rests upon the traditions and lived embodied experiences, knowledges, and realities of non-White women and feminists specifically Oyewumi Oyeronke (1997, 2002, 2016), Maria Lugones (2007, 2010), Chandra Mohanty (1988), Gloria Anzaldua (1987), bell hooks (1989), Ifi Amadiume (1987, 1997), Nkiru Nzegwu (2006), Rosalba Icaza (2022, 2023), amongst others. By immersing myself in their works, I anchor my conceptualisation of communal peace in the understandings, struggles, and realities of wars and peace embodied by the Congolese and Liberian women in this study. The genealogies and scholarly works that inform my understanding of these women, even those who may not identify as feminists, are the contributions of the aforementioned scholars. It is noteworthy that some of these scholars eventually distanced themselves from the label 'feminist', recognising that women's struggles against colonality and patriarchy do not hinge on adopting a specific identity. This resonates with the observations of Dosekun (2021) and Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), who highlight the complex politics of self-naming and the discomfort that some women, particularly those from African contexts, may experience

---

<sup>21</sup> See Lugones, 2007.

with the term 'feminism' or 'feminist'. The recognition of this discomfort underscores the importance of acknowledging diverse forms of resistance and activism that transcend labels and encompass a broader spectrum of women's struggles for peace.

That said, this framework historicises the categories of 'woman' and 'gender', tracing these to the colonial encounter and underscores the active subjectivity and resistant agency demonstrated by the Liberian and Congolese women in this study through motherwork<sup>22</sup>, culminating in the communal peace they nurture. The relevance of this framework resonates deeply with the research questions this thesis seeks to engage viz: How do women in the DRC and Liberia perceive peace, and what roles do they embody in nurturing peace within their respective communities? How have women in the DRC and Liberia contributed to the reintegration of female ex-combatants in their respective communities? How do the conceptualisations of peace and the practices of peace nurturing by Congolese and Liberian women inform theory? I think of this framework as material that allows me to account for the manifestations of coloniality of gender in peacebuilding and how the women in this study navigate and resist this, while also nurturing communal peace in their respective contexts.

In what follows, this chapter expounds on the concept of gender with a focus on its colonial origins and contemporary manifestations. It acknowledges that merely recognising gender as a product of colonialism is insufficient; it must also be understood how gender dynamics persist and evolve in present-day contexts. While the previous chapter briefly touched upon the role of gender in modern conflicts and peace efforts, this chapter delves deeper into what it means for gender to be a construct rooted in colonialism. The subsequent section of this chapter explores how

---

<sup>22</sup> I explain this in the second segment of this chapter.

women in this study simultaneously navigate oppression and resistance, often through their relational identities as mothers, sisters, wives, leaders, etc. Their experiences demonstrate active subjectivity and resistant agency, which ultimately contribute to the communal peace practices in their respective contexts. This communal peace is understood as a decolonial praxis. The overarching goal of this chapter is to elucidate how this framework provides a lens through which to understand the lived experiences of the women in this study, particularly in relation to their communal efforts toward peace nurturing.

### **3.2 Gender, Colonialism, and the Coloniality of Gender**

Sjoberg and Thies (2023) posit that examining security through gender lenses yields diverse answers, all underscoring the centrality of gender in the context of international security. While this assertion may resonate with some, as I have already discussed in the previous chapter, the idea of gender lenses producing multiple responses is debatable, particularly when gender is equated solely with women in the realm of international security and peacebuilding. Such an approach reflects the Western preoccupation with visibility, suggesting that if women are not visibly participating at the 'formal' peace table negotiating agreements, their contributions to peace are deemed negligible. Thus, the narrative of 'Where are the women?' advocates for their supposed inclusion. However, this ideology overlooks the fact that some women may choose not to be 'added', erasing the knowledges and peacebuilding efforts of those not visibly present at peace talks. Does the absence of women at the so-called table imply that they are not actively contributing to peace in their own distinct ways? In essence, by presuming the ahistoricity or timeless nature of the category 'gender', the plural forms of being that women embody in their pursuit of peace are simply erased. This parallels Onyido's (2013) assertion regarding the

characterisation of women's grassroots peacebuilding efforts as 'informal', challenging the tendency to relegate women's peace work to the background due to its 'deviation' from established scholarly and United Nations-prescribed peacebuilding norms. I argue that a crucial question arises: 'Does non-alignment with prescribed norms diminish the peacebuilding nature of these efforts?'. In this regard, it is difficult to see how and where thinking about peace and security through a gender lens leads to multiple answers.

Gender as analysed by White feminists, often portrays gender oppression as the primary struggle of women globally (Dosekun, 2021; Mlotshwa, 2021; Oyewumi, 1998). Harper-Shipman (2021) contends that these feminists often impose their analyses onto Africa, presenting African women as a homogeneous group oppressed by African men. Shohat (2001, p.1207) labels this as the 'homogeneous feminist master narrative,' characterising Third World Women as lacking agency and perpetually victimised. However, women's struggles vary across diverse contexts; while gender is a predominant issue for some, it is not the only issue for others. This aligns with Walsh's (2023) observation regarding the issues and hegemonic tendencies within feminism, particularly within Euro-US-centric frameworks, which tend to overlook the distinct experiences of Black and Brown women. In a recent conversation with Sara Salem, Rosalba Icaza (2023, p.218) expressed, 'I don't want to think through gender anymore. It's not allowing me to see its coloniality'. Icaza's statement encourages a critical examination of gender as deeply colonial and limiting the potential understanding of various struggles. This is in line with Oyewumi's (1997) assertion that a preconceived assumption of gender inequality often distorts many analyses since it precludes a thorough examination of gender's integral role in social dynamics, inequality, production processes, reproduction, and ideology. But it is not

just the asymmetry that is problematic; assuming gender as a universal social construct poses its own set of challenges as Icaza affirms. For Oyewumi, if researchers presume the existence of gender, then gender categories will be found whether or not they exist. Therefore, the onus is on me as a researcher to move beyond the confines of gender. This leads me to reflect on whether exclusively employing gender lenses reinforces the colonial logic of domination in our analyses of non-Western women's experiences in peacebuilding. Taking a step back, when we assert that gender as a category is profoundly colonial, what exactly do we mean?

Oyewumi Oyeronke in her work, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) elucidated the link between colonialism and gender, asserting that colonialism introduced racial gender hierarchies in the following order: men (European), women (European), native (African males), and Other (African females). According to her, the tragedy of African women deepened in that they were thrown to the very bottom of history, an undefined category of the 'Other'. The consequence of this is that the 'Other' is deemed inferior. She further explains that the customs and practices established during the colonial period were rooted in a perspective that upheld the complete dominance of humans over entities deemed non-human or subhuman, the prioritisation of masculine attributes over feminine ones, and the favouring of modern or progressive ideals over 'traditional' or 'uncivilised' notions. Hence, the coloniser made a distinction between the male and female bodies, subsequently adapting their actions based on this differentiation.

This adaptation of actions encompassed the severe violation of African women's bodies through exceedingly aggressive acts of sexual exploitation, the transformation of their bodies into commodities, and the implementation of authoritative dominance. An illustrative case was the public exhibition of Sara Baartman, a South African

woman, in various European cities, reinforcing prevailing narratives about the supposed sexual deviance of African women and the dehumanising perception of Africans (Boateng, 2016). Baartman's body was subjected to trafficking, objectification, and examination, with a particular focus on her genitalia even after her death (Walsh, 2023). This so-called scientific scrutiny contributed to portraying African women as beings of excessive sexuality, perpetuating notions that justified their dehumanization and sexual exploitation. This also speaks to what Oyewumi (1997) calls the 'gaze of differentiation' of sex, skin, and cranium size, highlighting the intertwined nature of race and gender during colonisation and the West's obsession with what is seen. This scrutiny not only marks differences but also reinforces a violent social order based on race and gender.

Nzegwu (2006) also observes the influence of colonisation on gendering African societies. She posits that colonial policies and labour relations established a normative model where patriarchy became the societal organising principle, designating women as dependents of male heads of household. This practice defined women's roles in terms of the provision of labour, child production, and the fulfilment of sexual favours for men, relegating them to the private sphere. Meanwhile, Amadiume (1987) and Sudarkasa (1986) tell us about 'woman-to-woman' marriages in African societies. To these scholars, woman marriage highlights the notion that gender does not determine eligibility for the role of 'husband' in African societies. Consequently, the authority associated with this role is not strictly tied to gender. For instance, in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987), Ifi Amadiume presents the Ibo community of Nnobi in the eastern part of Nigeria, where women could become 'husbands' due to their seniority within women's market networks and their connections to spiritual deities and goddesses. Similarly, Clarke (2021) recounts her experience encountering her 'female

husband' in Lusaka, Zambia. These examples demonstrate the fluidity of masculine and feminine identities, which are not confined by rigid, binary, or body-centric gender theorisations.

Also, speaking of spheres, Sudarkasa (1986) challenges the conventional understanding of the private and public spheres, particularly drawing from her research on pre-colonial African societies such as the Ibo, Tallensi, Asante, Nupe, and Yoruba. In these societies, the distinction between the 'public sphere' and the 'private sphere' was not as rigid as often presumed. Contrary to the typical portrayal where the public sphere is dominated by men, these societies recognised both sexes as significant contributors within the public sphere. Sudarkasa's research reveals that the clear-cut division between public and private spheres was not universally applicable in these societies. Oyewumi (1997) further argues that the binary gender categorisation prevalent in Western contexts did not exist in pre-colonial African societies. Examining the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, it is noteworthy that the Yoruba language lacks distinct gender binary terms such as he/she or his/her. However, there exists Yoruba terms for they/them, we/us/our, and I/you reflecting a recognition of fluidity in identity and roles. As Sudarkasa (1986, p.101) writes:

The absence of gender in the pronouns of many African languages and the interchangeability of first names among females and males strike me as possibly related to a societal de-emphasis on gender as a designation for behaviour. Many other areas of traditional culture, including personal dress and adornment, religious ceremonies, and intragender patterns of comportment, suggest that Africans often de-emphasise gender in relation to seniority and other insignia of status.

Indeed, Yoruba customs did not define women in relation to men. Instead, individual roles and statuses were and still are influenced by factors such as age, lineage, and other social considerations. Amadiume (1987) further underscores the flexibility of this system, which historically facilitated women's access to economic resources and

positions of authority and power before the impact of colonialism. Women's roles were seen as complementary to those of men, rather than subordinate. For instance, while men were often involved in farming, women played essential roles in food processing and trading. This division of labour along sexual lines fostered a reciprocal relationship: as men tended to the fields, women processed and traded the produce. Even in cases where both men and women participated in similar tasks like farming or weaving, they often produced different goods, thus contributing distinct but equally valuable products to the community (Sudarkasa, 1986).

In this context, the concept of sex did not rigidly determine gender-specific attributes and activities. As Adesina (2021) puts it, the compartmentalisation of vocations contributed to the gendering of African lives. This also means that there was a point in history where the ways of being and doing were not gendered in that women were always subordinated. Tamale (2020) postulates that several legendary women were involved in shaping and reforming their societies long before colonisers arrived on their soil. Among these influential figures are Queen Eyleuka (Dalukah) of Ethiopia, Queen Amina of Zaria (Nigeria), Queen Lobamba of Kuba (Congo), Princess Nang'oma of Bululi (Uganda), Queen Rangita of Madagascar, and Queen Nzinga of Angola, of which this was not restricted to queens and elite women (Amoah-Boampong and Agyeiwaa, 2021).

Expanding on these viewpoints, Maria Lugones conceptualised the colonality of gender to understand the imposed modern/colonial gender system as the oppression of non-racialised men and women over racialised (colonised) females and males. Once more, I will explain the notion of colonality to better grasp the concept of colonality of gender. While colonisation typically denotes the process in which one

group exploits or seizes the land and resources of another without their consent, extending their political dominance over them (Tamale, 2020), coloniality extends beyond territorial acquisition. It 'refers to the colonial matrix of power consisting of four interrelated spheres of social organisation including economic control, control of authority, control of gender and sexuality, and control over knowledge and subjectivity' (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012, p.44-45). It is what shapes various aspects of societal structure and individual experience.

Coloniality existed alongside colonialism and outlived it, of which Mignolo (2011) tells us that today's modern world cannot exist without its colonial side in that the modernity we live in today has a dark underside, and that underside is coloniality. It explains how power structures have historically been organised on a global scale, with Eurocentric knowledge systems asserting dominance. These systems were elevated and portrayed as inherently superior and applicable universally. They were characterised as patriarchal, Christian-centric, sexist, heteronormative, capitalist, and positivist in nature (Grosfoguel, 2011; Tamale, 2020). Tamale (2020) further explains that 'coloniality reminds us daily that, in this (post)colonial period, we still live under colonial conditions. The colonial machinery never goes to sleep and is extremely efficient, it is always in search of new ways of reinventing itself' (p.7).

Therefore, Lugones (2010, p.746) asserts that 'unlike colonisation, the coloniality of gender is still with us; it is what lies at the intersection of gender/class/race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power'<sup>23</sup>. It is 'the analysis of racialised,

---

<sup>23</sup> Where intersectionality engages with race and gender as separable categories that must be interlocked to see the oppression of Black women, Lugones opines that intersectionality reveals *what is not seen* when categories such as race and gender are conceptualised as separate from each other. She argues that while modernity organises the world in terms of fictitious atomic, homogenous, and separable categories, there is a need to reject that understanding and recognise the fact that race is inseparable from other categories such as gender and sexuality. According to Lugones, there is no race without the colonial construction of a binary hierarchical, sex/gender system, incorporating all 'women' into one racialised group or another.

capitalist, gender oppression' (p.747). Thinking about the colonality of gender enables us to think of historical beings only one-sidedly, as oppressed. In other words, Lugones refers to how gender roles, identities, and relationships are products of colonialism and its ongoing effects. This idea suggests that how societies understand, and construct gender are not just isolated cultural phenomena, but are deeply intertwined with historical patterns of colonial domination and power.

In simpler terms, Lugones is saying that the way people think about and act out gender is connected to the history of colonisation, where one group of people exerted control and authority over another. This control was not just about political or economic domination but also affected how people see themselves and others in terms of their gender roles and identities. The colonality of gender shows how these historical dynamics continue to impact the understanding of gender today. In essence, this analytical tool highlights how gender is perceived and treated, particularly in ways that perpetuate the marginalisation and objectification of African women's bodies.

It appears that the concept of gender, seemingly neutral, proves to be far from innocuous. Merely conducting a gender analysis is insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of how Congolese and Liberian women's ways of being, knowing, and doing peace in their respective communities. The contention arises that gender, rather than aiding, might inadvertently impede the germination of these women's visions of communal peace. In reality, they are nurturing peace amid these shadows of

---

So for Lugones, when intersectionality shows us what is not seen, we still have ahead of us the task of reconceptualising the logic of intersection to perceive gender and race as inseparable. In showing us what is missing, it constitutes the point of departure for a liberatory, coalitional project of decolonising gender. This coalitional project of decolonising gender captures what I mean in the introductory part of this chapter when I said this feminist-decolonial framework draws on the experiences and theorisation of various non-White women and feminists.

coloniality and patriarchy as I elaborately discuss in chapters 5 and 6. Additionally, upon reflecting on the arguments presented by these scholars, it becomes evident to me that the essentialisation of gender as an analytical category plays a crucial role in discerning the construction of femininity, masculinity, and female oppression.

While the relevance of such categorisation is undeniable in specific contexts, these scholars posit that sexual difference should not be automatically equated with male dominance and female subordination in all circumstances. Nzegwu (2006) contends that White feminism introduces patriarchy and gender dynamics into various cultures, presupposing an inherent power imbalance between males and females. This scholar does not dismiss the importance of scrutinising social hierarchies, unequal power relations, and interpersonal dynamics between individuals but emphasises the need to extend the analysis beyond the confines of gender. According to her, instances of unequal power relations, such as those between father and daughter, senior son and junior daughter, or even between husbands and wives, do not necessarily indicate gender inequality. These power differentials may stem from factors such as seniority, lineage, and other considerations, as argued by Oyewumi.

What this means is, working exclusively within a gendered framework limits a researcher's ability to analyse relations that extend beyond the confines of patriarchy. If patriarchy is the devil, as emphasised in White feminism, is it not also imperative to consider where this patriarchy emanated from? According to McFadden (2016), the patriarchal confinement of women within normalised 'roles' and 'duties' was brought to light through the invention of gender. McFadden contends that as the notion of gender gained global traction, the mainstreaming of gender emerged as a strategy often associated with supporting women's organisations. Consequently, gender evolved into a universal solution for the myriad challenges confronting societies and a response to

the diverse demands articulated by women. McFadden characterises gender as a language adopted by the United Nations (UN), wherein men positioned themselves within it as a 'comprehensive framework' for all matters related to women, regardless of contextual nuances. Given these premises, a critical question emerges: can gender, shaped within male-privileging conditions, genuinely deliver justice for women in formerly colonised patriarchal contexts? Does this not present an inherent contradiction?

Therefore, applying these scholars' perspectives to this research necessitates a critical examination of the underlying assumptions shaping the conceptualisation of Congolese and Liberian women's roles in conflict and peace nurturing. By deconstructing the imposed Western gender framework, a nuanced understanding of the plurality of these women's experiences and roles in their communities emerges, mitigating the risks associated with embracing a singular narrative, as highlighted by Chimamanda Adichie in her discourse on the 'Dangers of the single story'. It also helps me understand why several women in the study chose not to name themselves feminists. Thus, these scholars prompt me to question the preconceived notions about women's agency, urging a more culturally sensitive and context-specific analysis of women's contributions to peace.

In this research, the trajectory will not be dictated by gender as a category, allowing for the exploration of other rationales and possibilities. The arguments presented by these aforementioned scholars serve as a crucial analytical tool for unpacking the colonial shadows that shape women's lives in the DRC and Liberia, particularly through so-called partnerships with international organisations. The coloniality of gender allows me to scrutinise how Western notions of gender, embedded within these partnerships and peacebuilding interventions, have permeated the socio-cultural

fabric of these regions. This influence is evident in the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 on women, peace, and security (WPS), as well as the pervasive discourse advocating for 'gender equality'. These factors contribute to shaping societal expectations both during and after periods of conflict. The application of this conceptual framework aids in comprehending and problematising the category 'woman' particularly regarding the persistent labelling of Congolese women solely as sexualised victims of war and portraying Congolese men as inhumane rapists, specifically when juxtaposed with the perspectives of these women. That is, by adopting the insights of these scholars, I can understand and analyse the reasons behind Congolese women's aversion to the prevailing narrative that reduces them to mere sexualised victims of conflict i.e. 'woman' is synonymous with oppressed and subordinate, and how they resist this while nurturing peace in their communities.

In the context of Liberia, this framework illuminates the nuanced ways in which women both internalise and resist colonial gender norms. The emphasis lies in recognising the multifaceted nature of these women's identities, operating not within a binary framework but rather embracing their plurality. This complexity is crucial in understanding their roles in peacebuilding efforts, transcending simplistic categorisations as mere victims or fighters, mothers, community leaders, etc. By incorporating the insights of these scholars and applying them to the DRC and Liberia, where Western narratives tend to overshadow indigenous perspectives, the prevailing assumptions about women's roles in conflict and peacebuilding are subjected to scrutiny. The central premise is the rejection of the notion that the Western conceptualisation of gender suffices to capture the intricate nuances of women's experiences in these regions. This approach prevents me from perpetuating overly simplistic and potentially misleading narratives. These scholars advocate for a holistic

understanding that acknowledges not only the agency and power dynamics currently at play but also those that predated colonial influences. By doing so, a representation emerges, shedding light on the contributions of Congolese and Liberian women in nurturing peace. In essence, this research trajectory challenges existing assumptions and opens avenues for a more comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by women in this study as well as the resilience they exhibit.

Speaking of Western narratives overshadowing indigenous perspectives, Verges (2021) contends that the process of attaining a more 'humanised' and 'civilised' state came at the cost of disregarding the various forms of knowledge, aesthetics, techniques, and philosophies associated with the non-human. Similarly, Tamale (2020) highlighted that the knowledge systems that once shaped African livelihoods underwent modifications and lost their legitimacy due to the influence of colonialism and imperialism. Thinking along with Verges (2021, p.14), this particular ideology which marginalised and devalued the 'Other' as inferior beings, continues to shape the trajectory of development and, by extension peacebuilding practices that essentially say, 'you are underdeveloped, but you can be developed if you adopt our technologies, our ways of solving social and economic problems'. Verges further points out that this ideology also shines through what she calls 'civilisational feminism', which essentially says to Third World women, 'You don't have freedom. You don't know your rights. We will help you reach the right level of development' (p,15).

These arguments are in tandem with the concept of colonality of knowledge, as elucidated by Walter Mignolo, and are akin to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's concept of the metaphysical empire. In his work, *Something Torn and New* (2009, p.9), Ngugi wa Thiong'o contends that Europe imposed its memory on the colonised, a phenomenon

not unique to Europe but inherent in all colonial conquests and systems of foreign domination. According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o:

In an attempt to remake the land and its people in his image, the conqueror acquires and asserts the right to name the land and its subjects, demanding that the subjugated accept the names and culture of the conqueror.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o contends that, in this context, rationality assumed the guise of whiteness, with whiteness being the coveted human standard. Consequently, for the colonised, 'good intentions' paved the way to colonial hell. Building on Wa Thiong'o's perspective, it implies that cognitive prowess was equated with being White. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) similarly notes that one of the attributes ascribed to 'primitive' people was their purported inability to employ their minds or intellect.

They were deemed incapable of inventing, establishing historical institutions, engaging in imaginative endeavours, or creating anything of significance. This characterisation positioned them as lacking the knowledge of utilising land and resources, and they were considered devoid of the arts of civilisation. Consequently, this deficiency not only disqualified them from civilisation but also from humanity itself, rendering them sub-human. In a parallel vein, Mignolo (2000) posits that the production of knowledge is not a neutral undertaking but intricately linked to colonial histories and power structures. Hence, the coloniality of knowledge denotes the persistent structures of power, control, and dominance that endure even after the formal cessation of colonial rule, or what Tamale (2020) calls flag independence.

In his work *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011), Mignolo delves deeper into the coloniality of knowledge, emphasising the intertwining of modernity and coloniality. He argues that modernity-coloniality has not only been complicit in the marginalisation of other ways of knowing but has actively suppressed and subjugated other knowledge systems, particularly those originating from the colonised world.

Sabelo (2021) further asserts that discussions on the politics of knowledge cannot be divorced from considerations of empire and imperialism.

But how does the coloniality of knowledge fit within the context of peacebuilding and women in the DRC and Liberia? How is it applicable in the context of this research? Primarily, the relegation of non-Western knowledge restricts the comprehension of conflict resolution and peacebuilding practices grounded in indigenous wisdom. Recognising the significance of the knowledge often embodied by women in these regions is crucial for achieving communal and relational peace. However, mainstream liberal peacebuilding tends to sideline these perspectives, contributing to the marginalisation of women's experiences and perpetuating single, often skewed narratives about them.

In the DRC and Liberia, the indigenous wisdom held by women has historically played a pivotal role in fostering community unity and resolving conflicts, a theme expounded upon in Chapter 5. However, these practices have been marginalised due to the dynamics of knowledge politics and the coloniality of gender, leading to an oversimplified understanding of the agency these women wield. Through an exploration of the coloniality of knowledge, this study seeks to bring to the fore the voices of these women, acknowledging the significance of plural epistemologies in shaping effective peacebuilding strategies. It posits these women as legitimate contributors to the ongoing discourse on peacebuilding. In alignment with Icaza's (2023) proposition, this research underscores the importance of foregrounding that which is considered 'non-existent' or unintelligible or 'not International Relations' within the framework of Western academic norms, thus challenging and expanding the boundaries of intelligibility and IR.

In essence, by applying the coloniality of knowledge to this inquiry, the focus is directed towards individuals, experiences, knowledge systems, and events that disobey and resist the dominant norms of intelligibility in Western academia. In a conversation with Zine Magubane, Oyewumi Oyeronke (2016), said it this way, 'We have to think from where we are standing as a way of reconstructing the future'. This is in tandem with Mignolo's (1999) dictum, 'I am where I think'. My understanding of this is the entirety of a person's being informs what they know and how they act. That is, there is an inseparable connection between one's identity and the intellectual frameworks they employ. These scholars highlight the fact that one's intellectual positioning is not neutral but is influenced by historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors. It speaks to the need to recognise diverse ways of being, knowing, and thinking beyond the dominant Western-centric paradigm.

The coloniality of knowledge contributes to a nuanced understanding and analysis of the conceptualisation and transportation of 'peace' as a commodity from the West to the 'Rest' of the world. It also provides insight into the dynamics of whose knowledge and perspectives on peace are incorporated in the implementation of liberal peacebuilding interventions. Additionally, it enables me to critically evaluate the intersection of international DDR programmes with the actualities faced by communities seeking to reintegrate ex-combatants. Chapter 6 of this thesis comprehensively explores these themes, particularly emphasising the discrepancies between prescribed international approaches and on-the-ground realities of these communities.

The application of this theoretical framework to the contexts of Liberia and the DRC exposes underlying saviour politics shaping the interactions between indigenous women and their international counterparts. One notable manifestation is the

imposition of capacity-building programmes aimed at aligning the approaches of these women with those deemed acceptable by international organisations. This action implicitly perpetuates the notion that these women are not holders of valuable knowledge, casting doubt on the reliability of their intelligence and strategies. The relationship between the colonality of knowledge and gender dynamics comes to the fore, particularly in how colonial gender norms are embedded within the ideologies guiding peacebuilding efforts in these regions. The simultaneous analysis of historical and contemporary power structures discussed in chapter 6, unveils the persistent colonial shadows that the women in this study navigate in their work for peace. Recognising these dynamics is imperative for the development of peacebuilding approaches that are contextually relevant and culturally sensitive, aligning with the lived experiences of women in these countries.

### **3.3 Motherwork and Communal Peace as Resistant Agency, a Decolonial Praxis**

In this section, I discuss the notions of motherwork and communal peace, as practised by the Congolese and Liberian women in this study. I frame these as a form of active subjectivity and resistant agency, as conceptualised by Lugones (2005). This allows me to understand how the women in this study embody motherwork and communal practices as acts of resistance and decolonial action in their endeavours to nurture peace within their communities. Decoloniality exposes the lingering shadows of colonialism, encompassing gender as an integral component, and endeavours to deconstruct these shadows while advocating for the resurgence of indigenous worldviews. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) explains that decoloniality encompasses a variety of viewpoints rather than a single ideology. These perspectives all agree that coloniality is the central problem of the modern age. Yet, it goes beyond acknowledging the oppression of coloniality 'by providing materials that enable women

to understand their situation without succumbing to it' (Lugones, 2010, p.747). This concept/praxis offers a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play and provides a lens through which to comprehend the agency, resistance, and knowledge of Congolese and Liberian women in their pursuit of peace.

For African women, Chilisa and Ntseane (2010) argue that the construction of context-specific knowledge and power is through our relational worldviews encompassing aspects such as motherhood, family, community, sisterhood, and friendship. These scholars further elucidate that African women theorise from within their cultures, and lived experiences to cultivate knowledge that is not only contextually relevant but also instrumental in fostering relationships and facilitating healing within the community, as well as for oneself and the broader socio-cultural context. As discussed in the previous chapter, theorising from within one's culture and lived experiences is also done by White feminists but it is often universalised and assumed to be applicable in all contexts. Likewise, Leanne Simpson, in her work, 'As We Have Always Done' (2017), argues that indigenous women's knowledge is grounded in relationality and a profound interconnectedness with all life forms. This holistic worldview forms the foundation of their peacebuilding approaches, which prioritise dialogue, consensus-building, and the restoration of harmony.

This relational and communal worldview is an overarching feature I observed throughout my encounters with Congolese and Liberian women in the way they described what peace means to them and how they are working to achieve the meanings they attach to peace. This helps me to theorise communal peace considering how their relationships with each other despite the hierarchies and sense of community were at the core of their stories, which I discuss further in Chapters 5 and 6. The manner in which they conceptualise and engage in peace nurturing within

their respective communities is interwoven with their plural and relational selves as mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, friends, and leaders. This fusion underscores their inherent power, agency, and resilience. The practices and knowledge systems they employ, which revolve around themes such as reconciliation, solidarity, and community well-being, form an integral part of the foundational structure of nurturing communal peace in these contexts. As such, this research understands communal peace as interconnected networks of relationships among the women in this study, regardless of their background, ethnicity, class, or socio-economic status. These relationships play a vital role in fostering peace within their respective communities. It is embedded in the concept of *Ọmọ̀yá* conceptualised by Oyewumi signifying the highest form of solidarity which I explain further in the succeeding paragraphs.

In these contexts, 'motherwork' encapsulates the role of women as nurturers of peace within communities. Oyewumi (2016) theorised this as the matripotent principle, wherein matripotency encompasses the spiritual and material capacities derived from a mother's life-giving abilities. She argues that motherhood functions as the fundamental underpinning for social and family frameworks, as well as for identity and ethics among Africans. Similarly, Amadiume (1997) asserts that the matricentric unit, constituting the core structure of African matriarchy, represents the most pivotal productive unit and is present across African social formations. Ogunyemi (1995) also draws attention to the roles of women in public spheres and leadership positions, characterising them as 'Public Mothers'. These are self-confident, conspicuously cultured women, exemplifying and radiating influence across various facets of the community. According to Ogunyemi, these mothers teach us that women embody power, contributing to the historical and contemporary reverence accorded to mothers, biological or otherwise.

In addition, Oyewumi (2003) also examined the notion of 'Ọmọ̀yá,' a term from the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria signifying 'my mother's child/ren' in English. This term symbolises the highest form and model of solidarity. In her words:

The category of Ọmọ̀yá transcends gender; sometimes it is used to refer to an individual, but what it encapsulates is the collectivity. It functions to locate the individual within a socially recognised grouping and underscores the significance of mother-child ties in delineating and anchoring a child's place in the family... Thus, the most important shared experience that Ọmọ̀yá recalls and builds on is the fact that the group of siblings shared the womb of the mother (Oyewumi 2003, 12).

She further clarified that Ọmọ̀yá is a term for solidarity that is invoked in spheres beyond the family; it symbolises solidarity, unconditional love, loyalty, unity, and togetherness. Oyewumi's conceptualisation of motherwork or 'motherhood' as she phrased it, is largely reflected in these women's work for peace in nurturing their children and community. Nzegwu (2020) elucidates the influential role of mothers in fostering deep relational connections and interdependence, positing them as the generators of the highest forms of societal cohesion. Expanding on this notion, she contends that the concept of 'Omumu' or motherhood serves as a fundamental source of moral authority and societal harmony, emphasising inclusivity and interconnectedness.

According to Nzegwu (2020), the potency of 'Omumu'/motherhood shapes the social ontology that underlies the African maxim, 'I am because we are'. This philosophical principle underscores the African emphasis on communality over individuality, recognising the safeguarding of individual identity within the context of a broader community. It recognises that strong sibling bonds simultaneously preserve individual identity and value everyone as vital components and connections within the larger whole. Essentially, the principle asserts that one's identity is coherent only when existentially linked to a lineage of predecessors who nurtured and facilitated the

conditions for human continuity. In essence, Nzegwu (2020) asserts that our collective identity as humans is intricately woven by the nurturing influence of mothers, embodying the profound interconnectedness that defines our existence. In other words, 'we are who we are not just because we are human, but because mothers made us human' (p.54).

Indeed, the concepts of *Ọmọ̀yá* and *Omumu* are deeply ingrained in Liberian and Congolese women's understanding of peace which in turn guides their praxis. Their power, agency, and activism are constructed from their identity as mothers, whether biological or public. For these women, female bodies codify power because power is never gendered (Nzegwu, 2020). This perspective stands in stark contrast to the critique within white feminism that views the role of 'mother' and motherhood as a patriarchal imposition that is oppressive, suggesting that emancipated women should resist these roles to achieve true liberation. White feminism often positions motherhood as a private affair and a site of gendered oppression, thereby framing resistance to these roles as essential for autonomy and emancipation (ibid). Conversely, Oyewumi (2016) presents an understanding of motherhood that transcends these gendered limitations. She argues that in many African contexts, motherhood is not inherently gendered and extends beyond the private sphere into the public domain, functioning as a source of communal power and social cohesion. By embracing feminist-decoloniality, I aim to highlight and honour these indigenous approaches to nurturing peace in communities, challenging dominant narratives that may dismiss them as primitive, inferior or unintelligible.

This leads me back to the point on active subjectivity I mentioned earlier. This research understands Congolese and Liberian women's resilience and agency through their motherwork, relationality, and communality as active subjectivity – a

pathway to resistance agency as characterized by Lugones (2005). According to her, resistance is the tension between subjectification (i.e., the hegemonic construction of the subject) and active subjectivity which is the minimal sense of agency required by the oppressed. That is, it is the simultaneity of everyday oppression and everyday resistance that connotes the multiple nature of the individual as both oppressed and resistant. The fact that one is oppressed does not mean that they are not also resisting in their own way. In her work, Lugones rejects the Western idea of agency in favour of a more internal and confined sense of self-activity in transformation. She contends that the Western notion of agency guides one's sense of obligation towards a selection of preset possibilities, none of which are conducive to freedom. That is, individuals must conform and create intentions, make choices, and act in line with the norms of dominant worlds. In this context, women of colour are not expected to make sense of choices beyond the framework in which they are dominated. If at all they must display agency, it must be within the framework of the dominant worlds e.g., the add women and stir approach – western/'civilisational' feminisms. Whereas, Lugones postulates that active subjectivity has no ready-made context within which the acts and intents of the subjugated may be rendered reliable. That is, there is no need to prove that their knowledge and actions are 'right' and reliable by juxtaposing them with already existing dominant frameworks. Rather, the subjugated can create goals and meanings that go beyond the dominant trend, which is something that is done from within their plural selves.

Lugones highlights the significance of active subjectivity in exemplifying the power and agency of marginalised communities to formulate resistant interpretations in response to the established meanings and social structures imposed by dominant power dynamics. This means that the oppressed are other than what the hegemon

makes them to be. Lugones' concept of active subjectivity is essentially about individuals taking control of their own experiences and identities in a way that challenges the dominant power structures and societal norms. It is like saying, 'I am going to actively shape who I am and how I engage with the world, rather than just following what others think and expect of me'. This concept of active subjectivity is a form of resistance that goes against the grain of passive acceptance. Instead of conforming to preconceived roles, norms, or stereotypes, practising active subjectivity asserts one's unique perspectives, beliefs, and ways of being. It is a way of pushing back and asserting one's agency. Lugones' stance emphasises the importance of recognising and valuing diverse ways of knowing, being, and resisting. This resistance involves not only confronting colonial continuities including patriarchy but also critically examining how these dynamics have been internalised and resisted to cultivate communal peace by the women in this study. Lugones (2010) further argues that resisting the coloniality of gender is not a solitary endeavour. It happens within a shared worldview and way of life that acknowledges and supports one's actions. Communities, not individuals alone, facilitate this resistance; it is about acting together rather than in isolated individualism.

In the context of this research, the application of feminist-decoloniality serves to counteract colonial and paternalistic tendencies associated with external interventions, prioritising strategies that emanate from the lived communal experiences of women in the DRC and Liberia. More so, feminist-decoloniality aligns with the ethical principles of collaborative and participatory research, as it emphasises partnership with women in the DRC and Liberia (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012). In seeking to understand these women's knowledges and approaches to peace, it is imperative to engage in a dialogical process that respects their agency and

knowledge. In essence, taking a feminist-decolonial stance is not merely a theoretical abstraction but a methodological and ethical imperative. It functions as a guiding compass, steering this research toward reimagining peace in collaboration with Congolese and Liberian women, a topic that will be expounded upon in the subsequent chapter.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

The journey through this chapter has been one of navigating complexities inherent in the task of constructing a theoretico-praxical framework reflective of the nuanced lived realities of the Liberian and Congolese women in this study regarding their work for communal peace. From the outset, I have grappled with the discomfort of imposing labels that do not resonate with the lived experiences and self-identifications of the women I encountered during this research. The refusal of many women in these contexts to adopt the label 'feminist' underscores the inadequacy of conventional categories in capturing the breadth and depth of their aspirations, struggles, and contributions to peace. Acknowledging the limitations of existing frameworks, particularly those rooted in Western-centric perspectives, has been central to the development of this feminist-decolonial/ity framework. Drawing inspiration from a diverse array of voices, including but not limited to Oyewumi Oyeronke and Maria Lugones, among others, has been instrumental in grounding this framework in the embodied knowledges and experiences of non-White women and feminists. That is, this framework recognises the inadequacy of any singular conceptual category in encapsulating the plural experiences of the women in this study in nurturing peace.

A critical examination of gender, colonialism, and the colonality of gender lays the groundwork for understanding and analysing how gendered dynamics are embedded

within the processes of conflict and peacebuilding. Moreover, centring the active subjectivity and resistant agency of Congolese and Liberian women, particularly as manifested in their relational identities as mothers, sisters, and community leaders, has illuminated the multifaceted nature of their contributions to peace. It also challenges essentialist notions of victimhood and passivity.

At the heart of this framework lies a commitment to de-silence the voices and learn from the experiences of Congolese and Liberian women who, despite facing oppressions of coloniality and patriarchy, continue to nurture communal peace through their everyday practices and collective resilience. By situating their narratives within broader discussions of decoloniality and feminisms practised by non-White women, this framework not only seeks to elucidate the complexities of peacebuilding in conflict-affected regions but also to challenge prevailing paradigms that marginalise non-Western perspectives. Ultimately, this framework equally serves as a foundation for the methodological and empirical discussions in the succeeding chapters, providing a lens through which to comprehend the roles of women in nurturing communal peace amidst colonial shadows.

## **Chapter Four | Methodological Stories on Re-imagining Peace with Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The methodological stories that this chapter presents involve not only communicating empirical outcomes but also explaining my journey as a researcher – highlighting the methods employed, challenges encountered, and decisions made. This storytelling approach injects critical reflexivity and a human dimension into the ostensibly ‘scientific’ academic research. Tuck and Yang (2014) also postulate that social science research is intimate work because research is a human activity where we make meaningful relationships with participants in our work. Therefore, my objective in this chapter is to elucidate the stories behind the scenes, unveiling the thought processes and strategic steps undertaken to re-imagine peace with women in the DRC and Liberia.

The chapter unfolds in four main segments, starting with a discussion on how a feminist-decolonial framework as explained in the previous chapter grounds the methodology of this research. Following this section, I share the stories of my methodological experiences before the ‘field’ where I explain the ethical dilemmas and processes of establishing connections with the Congolese and Liberian women who contributed to this study. Then, I delineate the stories during the ‘field’ depicting the relational processes of working with the women in this study, insider-outsider dynamics, conversation guide and procedures, navigating language barriers, etc. The fourth segment tells the story of what transpired after the ‘field’ including the procedures for analysis and writing. The final segment is the conclusion which summarises what this chapter entails.

## **4.2 Feminist-Decoloniality as Method: Researching Differently**

In the pursuit of learning and understanding indigenous women's knowledge and approaches to peacebuilding in the DRC and Liberia, it is imperative to adopt a research philosophy that transcends traditional Western paradigms. Following a feminist-decolonial framework serves as a guide to explore, analyse and honour the voices and experiences of women in these countries. By embracing a feminist-decolonial lens, I aim to interrogate colonial legacies and their impacts on women's agency and knowledge as well as deconstruct dominant narratives that often erase indigenous women's contributions to peacebuilding. Drawing from Anzaldúa's (1987) notion of borderlands, this research recognises the liminal spaces where women negotiate their identities and roles in peacebuilding. These borderlands, often overlooked and silenced in mainstream research, become crucial sites for understanding the dynamic interplay of gender, coloniality, and peacebuilding efforts in conflict and 'postconflict' societies.

Mignolo (2017, p.13) explains further that Anzaldúa's borderlands is border thinking in action, of which this border thinking is decolonial; 'it implies epistemic disobedience and delinking from modern and post-modern epistemology'. He adds that borderlands as well as border thinking, living, and doing, are embodied experiences i.e., they are not abstract and disembodied. Lugones' (1992, p.31) interpretive essay of Anzaldúa's borderlands, explains how the concept of borderlands captures 'both an everyday history of oppression and an everyday history of resistance'. For Lugones, this describes 'the self as multiple in that if the self is being oppressed, then she can feel its limits, its capacity for response, pushed in, constrained, denied. But she can also push back' (p.32). This is essentially the notion of active subjectivity and resistant agency as discussed in the previous chapter, that shapes the thought process in this

methodological approach. Therefore, border thinking involves understanding and knowing in ways that differ from conventional methods. It is an embodied sensory experience of vulnerability by stepping away from safe, established ways of thinking, knowing, or doing. This challenges our tendency towards abstract, universal, and detached approaches to international issues, and questions our belief in objective scientific research as the sole path to 'right' answers (Icaza, 2017). Thinking along these lines helps us to see the liminal spaces that the women in this study operate from and how their multiple selves work together to nurture their vision of peace which is communal and relational.

In selecting the contexts of the DRC and Liberia for this research, I sought to foreground the lived realities of women in two distinct yet interconnected post-conflict settings, shaped by complex historical and sociopolitical dynamics. Both countries share a legacy of colonial and neocolonial exploitation, compounded by protracted conflicts that have disproportionately impacted women. These contexts offer rich, albeit challenging, terrains for understanding indigenous women's knowledge and peacebuilding practices.

The DRC, often framed within the dominant discourse as a site of endemic violence and hypersexualised victimhood, presents an opportunity to disrupt these reductive narratives. Women in the DRC, as my interactions revealed, are not merely passive victims but active agents of community-based peace initiatives. Liberia, on the other hand, provides a different yet complementary narrative of resilience. Having emerged from a brutal civil war, the country's women have been central to addressing post-conflict challenges such as gender-based violence and community reconciliation. The choice of these two contexts is thus deliberate, as they exemplify the interplay between resistance and agency within 'postcolonial' realities.

Furthermore, these selections are informed by the feminist-decolonial commitment to engage with spaces where women's voices have historically been marginalised or misrepresented. By focusing on the DRC and Liberia, this research aims to illuminate the nuanced ways in which women navigate and transform their sociopolitical landscapes. These contexts also reflect the multiplicity of African women's peacebuilding efforts, allowing for a richer, more textured understanding that resists homogenisation.

This deliberate focus aligns with the feminist-decolonial ethos of privileging indigenous women's perspectives and challenging the erasure of their contributions in dominant narratives. It is through these lenses that the selection of these contexts, rather than being a mere methodological choice, becomes an ethical imperative to honour the agency, resilience, and relational knowledge of Congolese and Liberian women.

The methodological approach of this research adheres closely to the principles of feminisms and decoloniality, emphasising the importance of participatory and collaborative approaches. Central to this approach is the acknowledgement of plural knowledges that emerges from the lived embodied experiences of women, particularly in contexts scarred by conflict. Smith (2012) clamours for the decolonisation of research processes and methodologies, and advocates a transformative approach, stressing the importance of engaging with indigenous communities on their own terms. This involves fostering respect, reciprocity, and cultural sensitivity. Chilisa (2012) builds upon this, asserting that true decolonisation necessitates a reflective shift in research practices. She underscores the importance of indigenous communities asserting their own voices, perspectives, and epistemologies. The concept of 'world-travelling' by Maria Lugones (1987) also proves helpful in this context, providing a

framework for me to navigate plural realities and comprehend the lived experiences of the women in this study with due respect for their varied ways of knowing.

Lugones believes that travelling to someone's 'world' is a way of identifying with them which helps us understand what it means to be them and what it means to be ourselves in their eyes. For her, 'knowing other women's worlds is part of knowing them and knowing them is part of loving them' (p.17). She further argues that this 'loving perception' is essential for world-travelling as it emphasises the importance of empathy, understanding, and care in our interactions with others. This loving perception is a response to arrogant perception which is a rigid, self-centred worldview that seeks to dominate and control. Using personal anecdotes, Lugones explains that those who operate from a place of arrogant perception see themselves as separate from others, viewing relationships as hierarchical and defined by power dynamics. This perception is rooted in the desire for certainty and stability, leading individuals to categorise and classify people and experiences in ways that reinforce their own sense of superiority. This is why she says:

The playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case, the uncertainty is an openness to surprise. This is a particular attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged. We are not wedded to a particular way of doing things. While playful, we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in a particular "world". We are there creatively (p.16).

Thinking along with Lugones, it became pertinent for me to adopt a methodological approach that does not succumb to an arrogant perception but one that allows me to be creatively playful and open to uncertainties. This imperative arises despite my Western training in research methodologies, which often promotes methodologies and 'data collection' techniques that inherently propagate a sense of superiority. For example, using terms like 'sampling' research participants evokes a troubling parallel

to objectification, positioning the researcher as an authority entitled to ‘sample’ individuals for research purposes. This positivist-driven methodology not only distances the researcher from the subjects of study but also establishes a hierarchical dynamic wherein the researcher assumes the role of an omniscient expert dictating the trajectory of inquiry, conducting detached analyses. While such a methodological approach may find favour within mainstream International Relations (IR), with its preference for linear, pre-defined methodologies, it fails to honour the agency and dignity of the Liberian and Congolese women in this study. These women are already subject to arrogant perceptions within dominant discourses surrounding peace and conflict. Thus, adopting an approach that perpetuates such arrogance not only undermines the integrity of the research process but also exacerbates existing power differentials, further marginalising the voices and experiences of the women in this study. Lugones (1987, p.18) puts it this way:

Through travelling to other people’s “worlds” we discover that there are “worlds” in which those who are victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of visions even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-awayable, classifiable.

Embracing loving perception and playfulness as I travel the worlds of the women in this study, I chose qualitative methodologies, exercising caution to uphold sensitivity and respect in my interactions. This approach of caution resonates with my identity as an African woman, where a profound appreciation and respect for culture, individuals, and community holds significant importance in our context. Still, I am not oblivious to the historical baggage of extraction and objectification of the master’s tools<sup>24</sup>, a

---

<sup>24</sup> This is a phrase derived from Audre Lorde’s (1984) popular dictum ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ that suggests that trying to use the same tools or methods that created oppression and inequality will not lead to any real change.

dimension encompassed within qualitative research methodologies. On this point, Smith (2012) contends that research, initially conceived as an 'imperial tool', has been employed to construct narratives about the colonised, resulting in the marginalisation of their identities, realities, and ways of knowing. In the context of this research, this poses a dilemma – how to utilise qualitative methods without perpetuating colonial power dynamics. On this matter, I concur with Soukotta's (2023) assertion that while these tools are implicated in and may not be effective in dismantling the master's house, they can be employed to (re)construct other frameworks that need not rely on the master and his house as a benchmark. Expanding on this perspective, I posit that these tools can also serve to uncover pre-existing structures unrelated to the so-called master and his house. It is with this perspective that I engage in the application of these tools, guided by the considerations inherent in the feminist-decolonial approach.

In this research, where qualitative methodologies intersect with feminist-decoloniality, I utilise deep conversations. These conversations involve the sharing of life stories, the use of African idiomatic expressions to elucidate points, and the initiation and conclusion of discussions with prayers. The latter point on prayers means I bring a spiritual dimension to this work which is constantly erased or misrepresented as 'backward' or 'subjective' in the arrogant perception of research. Similarly, decolonial scholar - Catherine Walsh opines that spirituality is key to understanding relational worlds because spirituality is decoloniality<sup>25</sup>. Through these interactions, I aim to co-create knowledge regarding women's contributions to community peacebuilding in Liberia and the DRC. By recognising the women I encountered as co-creators of knowledge, I challenge the dominant research paradigm in the social

---

<sup>25</sup> Notes from seminar with Prof Catherine Walsh at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, Netherlands on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September 2023.

sciences in general and IR in particular, that positions the researcher as an all-knowing expert and the participants as passive objects of study. As England (1994) notes, neo-positivist empiricism places the researcher in a position of omnipotence, controlling both the research objects and the research process, whereas the participants are, in reality, knowledgeable individuals and the 'main characters' of the research.

To further clarify, my approach intentionally diverges from conventional labels such as 'case studies' or 'focus groups.' While these terminologies might superficially align with aspects of the methodology (e.g., group discussions or in-depth dialogues), my focus was on fostering a collaborative space that respects the agency and cultural frameworks of the participants. For instance, rather than structuring encounters as traditional 'interviews', I cultivated what I term 'deep conversations', which were fluid, non-hierarchical exchanges rooted in mutual respect. These conversations were guided by African idiomatic expressions and spiritual practices, reflecting the lived realities of the women in this study. This approach represents a significant departure from the detached, extractive methodologies often associated with terms like 'sampling' or 'focus groups', which imply a level of objectification and hierarchical distance I sought to avoid.

Also, in the context of qualitative research intertwined with feminist-decolonial principles, this study follows a non-extractive approach, embracing reflexivity and positionality. Being a woman birthed and bred in Nigeria and pursuing a PhD in Malta, a European country, I approach this research as a scholar-activist. This means recognising that academia and activism are interconnected facets of my work. I reject the notion of divorcing the two, as doing so would inadvertently perpetuate the very systems of oppression that this research seeks to challenge. My role as a scholar-activist involves personally engaging with academia as a platform for activism,

particularly advocating for the rights and experiences of African women. In alignment with this approach, I view research and writing as conduits through which I express my activism. My approach is deeply personal as I share in the emotions of African women – expressing solidarity, frustration, celebration, and co-creating knowledge that authentically captures these sentiments in my research writings. As Ahmed writes in 'Living a Feminist Life' (2017, p.10), 'the personal is theoretical'. Typically, theory is regarded as abstract, gaining more theoretical weight as it becomes increasingly removed from everyday experiences. The process of abstraction involves pulling away, detaching, or diverting. Nevertheless, Ahmed suggests a reconsideration of this process, proposing that we ought to reintegrate theory, restoring its connection to lived experiences. Chadwick (2021) emphasises that the sensations, feelings, emotions, and affects present in research encounters are valuable interpretive elements and analytical tools. They should not be dismissed as mere 'noise' or distractions, which is a common approach in logical positivism. In short, this scholar is saying that the emotions tied to the subjective experiences of researchers have epistemic, political, and theoretical significance.

In this context, positionality is understood as the researcher's awareness of how identity, power, and social location influence the research process and outcomes. Drawing on Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledges' (1988), I recognise that my understanding is partial and shaped by my positional experiences. This situatedness, as a Nigerian woman navigating the intersection of African and European academic spaces, offers a unique lens for engaging with African women's peacebuilding efforts. Furthermore, Alcoff (1991) highlights the importance of recognising the ethical and epistemological challenges of 'speaking for others', which aligns with the decolonial principles underlying this study. However, as Gani and Khan (2024) caution,

positionality statements, while intended to acknowledge power dynamics and privilege, can inadvertently reify hierarchies or recentre dominant identities. They argue that such declarations might serve as hidden power moves, subtly reinforcing authority over marginalised groups. By recognising this critique, this study approaches positionality with reflexive caution, aiming to avoid performative gestures that could unintentionally uphold hegemonic structures.

Positionality also shapes the methodological stance of this study, particularly its storytelling approach. Storytelling, as a feminist and decolonial method, allows for the centring of African women's lived experiences and the co-creation of knowledge. It aligns with narrative inquiry frameworks (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1991), which emphasise the epistemic value of marginalised perspectives. Reflexivity plays a critical role in this methodology, as it involves continuously interrogating how my identity and experiences influence the selection, interpretation, and representation of these stories.

Drawing on Ahmed (2017) and Pillow (2003), this research resists the notion of detachment, instead embracing a relational and reciprocal process of knowledge cultivation. The emotions and subjectivities experienced during storytelling are not distractions but vital elements that contribute to a deeper understanding of African women's peacebuilding practices. By anchoring the storytelling approach within these broader theoretical and methodological discussions, this study challenges extractive research paradigms and situates itself within the feminist-decolonial tradition of transformative scholarship.

This perspective is not performative; rather, it mirrors my identity as an African feminist. Drawing inspiration from bell hooks' seminal work, *Teaching to Transgress*:

*Education as the Practice of Freedom (1994)*, it is imperative to integrate activism into educational practices. In this view, education becomes a realm of resistance against oppressive structures, including a PhD as part of the training process for future academics and researchers. hooks advocates for a pedagogy that empowers and equips students to critically engage with the world, fostering a sense of agency and social transformation. This perspective extends beyond the classroom, suggesting that researchers, like myself, should infuse their work with a commitment to social change. In my case, obtaining a PhD as a Nigerian woman is not merely a personal accomplishment but a pursuit of transformation and identity reconstruction for Congolese and Liberian women in particular, and African women in general. We are not to be seen as mere victims in need of 'saving' and 'protection'. This approach aligns with Mohanty's (1988) argument for a feminist-decolonial methodology that recognises the plurality of women's experiences. It urges researchers to actively confront colonial biases in their work and reject universalising narratives that marginalise non-Western voices.

In keeping Mohanty's spirit of confronting colonial biases and rejecting universalising narratives, I am cognisant of my positionality as a PhD researcher affiliated with a University in a European country. This recognition extends to the influential role of my Nigerian identity, which I recently came to realise while living in the DRC and Liberia. I elucidate this further in the succeeding sub-headings. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that the women I engaged with in the DRC and Liberia possess certain privileges, which are contingent upon their specific circumstances and interactions (Soukotta, 2023). In other words, their privileges like mine are not fixed but relational which means these depend on where we are and with whom we engage. In the context of this research, the emphasis is not on comparing

levels of privilege, as such disparities are inherent and vary across different dimensions and situations. Instead, the focus is on how these privileges are leveraged.

In the case of the women in the DRC and Liberia, their privileges are employed collaboratively to foster peace within their communities, navigating challenges posed by colonial and patriarchal continuities. They actively shape their understanding of peace and work in solidarity to achieve their desired outcomes. Conversely, my privilege is utilised to de-silence the voices of these women and centre their communal peacebuilding endeavours. This involves challenging and transcending singular narratives that misrepresent them. In what follows, I narrate my experiences of what transpired before my encounters with these women in their respective countries.

### **4.3 Before the 'Field': Cultivating Relationships and Navigating Ethical**

#### **Dilemmas**

This section outlines the preliminary steps involved in the research process, encompassing ethical considerations, establishing initial contact, and cultivating relationships in both the DRC and Liberia before commencing 'fieldwork'. But first, I problematise the terms 'field' and 'fieldwork'.

Contrary to the conventional arrogant perception that the 'field' is a neutral and abstract space for 'data collection', Nast (1994) challenges this notion by asserting that in feminist research, the field represents a social terrain with specific critical and liberatory objectives. These objectives are not formulated with the patronising intention of 'saving' the exoticized 'other'. Amadiume (2017) further emphasises that fieldwork entails a gradual process of social integration, rapid learning, and reflection, underscoring the significance of active social participation. From my perspective, this implies that as a researcher, I am actively involved in the process on a personal,

emotional, and spiritual level, rejecting the notion of detached objectivity. I challenge the notion that fieldwork allows for an 'objective observer' stance, as I consider it a deeply personal and immersive experience. Similarly, Harcourt et al. (2022) acquiesce that the knowledge cultivated by feminist researchers is shaped by our lives, cultures, relations, etc., departing from the dominant notions of research as rational, disembodied, and objective.

Reflecting on the extractive connotations associated with the term 'fieldwork', as highlighted by Larissa Barbosa da Costa, Rosalba Icaza, and Angelica Maria Ocampo Talero in their discussion on *Knowledge about, knowledge with: Dilemmas on researching lives, nature, and genders otherwise (2015)*, I acknowledge the tensions inherent in the terminology and navigate them ethically and reflexively in this research. For example, Barbosa da Costa explains how in the academic context, the field is often perceived as a 'wild' place, drawing a distinction between the designated academic realm for knowledge production and the field as a source of 'raw materials' for this process. However, it is crucial to recognise that these 'raw materials' are in fact people's life experiences and knowledges. Barbosa da Costa suggests reframing fieldwork as encounters, emphasising the dynamic interactions that involve meeting people, and sharing ideas, emotions, and knowledge. In this perspective, encounters evoke a range of emotions, including excitement, enthusiasm, and curiosity, as well as fear, discomfort, and perplexity (Barbosa da Costa et al., 2015, p.270). One of the major aspects of encounters is the relationality with the people. Angelica Maria Ocampo Talero expatiates this point drawing from her fieldwork experience:

It means seeing, perceiving, listening, understanding, learning, asking questions, reflecting together, opening the heart, experiencing fear, anger, joy, love and compassion; experiencing illness and healing in our mutual relationships at different levels (Barbosa da Costa et al., 2015, p.269).

In tandem with these scholars, my perception of fieldwork revolves around the notion of personal encounters. This perspective guided my approach as I prepared for my fieldwork in the DRC and Liberia. My intention was not to go into these countries as a know-it-all Western-trained PhD researcher but as a lifelong learner with an inherent curiosity to listen to women's stories coloured by their everyday life experiences in building peace in their respective communities. I did not go into the 'field' for an overarching perspective on the experiences of indigenous women in peacebuilding, nor did I approach the endeavour with a condescending gaze aimed at these women, particularly those in the DRC, whose portrayals in literature often depicted them solely as sexualised victims of conflict. As a Nigerian woman, I found such representations of Congolese women disconcerting. This sentiment spurred a conviction in me that there must be dimensions to their experiences beyond the prevailing narratives. While acknowledging the diversity among African women, there exists a commonality in our ability to exercise agency, providing, protecting, and navigating our circumstances irrespective of contextual differences (see Oyewumi, 2016). So, I went with the mindset to conduct research 'with' not 'about' (see Barbosa da Costa et al., 2015) these women as active community peacebuilders, acknowledging and respecting their resistant agency in shaping their pathways within this collective endeavour.

The concept of engaging in research 'with' rather than 'about' underscores a collaborative approach to learning, where the exchange of experiences and narratives is reciprocal. This approach was integral to prioritising the voices of these women in this study, allowing them to articulate their perspectives on wartime experiences and peacebuilding. Concurrently, I shared my stories on how, despite never having lived through wars myself, I found resonance in the resilience and determination of women

who contribute to peace in their communities. I spoke of the women in my own life who, through their everyday actions, have shown me the transformative power of empathy, dialogue, and solidarity. Through these shared stories, we found common ground and mutual understanding, enriching the research process. My objective was to gain insights into the women's contributions to peacebuilding within their communities, including the challenges and dynamics related to the reintegration of female ex-combatants. Nast's (1994) perspective emphasises that fieldwork enables the marginalised voices to be heard on issues of everyday life, challenging the historically predominant narratives dominated by a White, masculine, and abstract viewpoint. By centring the voices of these women, I aim to highlight indigenous conceptions and practices of communal peace rooted in their cultural beliefs – a dimension frequently overlooked within mainstream liberal peacebuilding discourse.

Speaking of fieldwork as a collaborative and relational experience, my reliance on the assistance of others, characterised by trust, generosity, and support, played a pivotal role. This included individuals who not only facilitated introductions to their contacts but also the women I encountered. Mitton (2021) underscores the notion that the success of engaging individuals in conflict-affected regions transcends the researcher's skills alone. Acknowledging the demands of this research, I recognised the necessity of embodied conversations, the exchange of ideas, experiences, and emotions, deep listening, and care. However, the challenge remained: how could I effectively navigate this terrain and establish connections with the women at the centre of this research? Fortunately, I received guidance and backing from seasoned 'fieldworkers', notably my mentor – Professor Oluwatoyin Oluwaniyi, from my undergraduate days in Nigeria. Concerning contacts in the DRC, she graciously facilitated an introduction to her colleague – Professor Jose Bazonzi at the University

of Kinshasa, in 2020 – two years before obtaining ethics clearance for travel in 2022. Emphasising this timeline underscores the temporal investment inherent in building meaningful relationships, a process that cannot be expedited merely for the sake of the researcher's fieldwork. A sentiment echoed by Barbosa da Costa et al. (2015), who emphasise the profound relational aspect of fieldwork.

The initial contact was established through email, warmly received by Prof Bazonzi. Following the initial email exchange, he proposed continuing our discussions informally on WhatsApp to delve deeper into the details of my research. Our first voice conversation was scheduled, during which he, being based in Kinshasa, the capital city, offered to connect me with a researcher at Groupes d'Études sur les Conflits et la Sécurité Humaine<sup>26</sup> (GEC-SH) in Bukavu, eastern DRC, the designated location for my research due to the prevailing conflicts in the region. Consequently, I was introduced to Alice Mugoli, and our interactions commenced. While my exchanges with the Prof Bazonzi were conducted in English, it became apparent that Alice had limited proficiency in English. Although I have a basic understanding of the French language, it proved insufficient for a comprehensive conversation<sup>27</sup>. I discussed this language barrier transparently with Alice, accompanied by the acknowledgement of my reliance on Google Translate for effective communication.

She was understanding and assured me that it was not a problem at all. The conversations with her were informal, much like those with Prof Bazonzi, encompassing discussions on the research alongside personal and spiritual matters, given our shared beliefs, fostering a unique bond. As a member of GEC-SH, she

---

<sup>26</sup> The English translation is Group for Studies on Conflict and Human Security. It is a research unit operating within the University Research Centre of Kivu of the Higher Pedagogical Institute of Bukavu (ISP-Bukavu).

<sup>27</sup> I talk more about the language barrier and navigating this in the succeeding sub-heading.

proposed that I conduct the research under the auspices of the Institute, facilitating the process of obtaining ethical clearance and authorisation from relevant bodies in the DRC. Additionally, she highlighted the advantages of GEC-SH serving as my host institution, providing access to workspace, logistical support, and opportunities for collaboration with fellow researchers.

To this end, she facilitated an introduction to the Institute's Director – Prof Godefois, who expressed enthusiasm in hosting and supporting my research. Considering the geographical scope of the fieldwork spanning Bukavu (South Kivu) and Goma (North Kivu), she proposed involving her sister – Olga Nalumva – an independent researcher and journalist familiar with Goma and its surroundings. This resonates with what Shawn Wilson says in his work *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods (2008)*, about the importance of relationships and how they are crucial to indigenous peoples. According to him, while most people will recognise the importance of families, all forms of interpersonal relationships take a specific significance within indigenous communities. Moreover, Wilson (2008) argues that working with co-researchers who are relatives and/or friends can help foster trust, reciprocity, and mutual respect, which I believe are essential elements of ethical and culturally responsive feminist-decolonial research praxis. Thus, in our collaborative research planning, Olga became an integral part of the process. We established a WhatsApp group, which we still maintain to this day, for seamless communication, fostering an environment for idea exchange, discussion of issues, personal expressions, birthday celebrations, and shared condolences. I observed that in our conversations, the term 'dada', Swahili for 'sister', was frequently used when addressing me or themselves. It turns out that beyond the research context, a sisterhood bond evolved among us. While seeking insights into the research's operationalisation, their mantra was, 'Don't worry, when you come, we

will see and figure it out'. This camaraderie mirrors the observations made by scholars such as Barbosa da Costa et al. (2015), emphasising the significance of forming profound connections during research.

The formulation of meticulous plans and the desire for comprehensive control over every aspect of my fieldwork initially emanated from my Western training in research methodology. I sought a systematic, explicit, and well-defined blueprint for the unfolding events in the field as if I could control and determine that. I align with Soukoutta's (2023) perspective on encounters, acknowledging the presence of unforeseen elements and unexpected occurrences beyond full anticipation. The assurance from Alice and Olga that we would address challenges together not only provided solace but also conveyed the message that attempting to rigorously structure fieldwork systematically might be impractical but also signal the arrogant perception of dominant epistemologies and methodologies that pretend to control everything and everyone. Mitton's (2021) counsel reinforces this sentiment, advocating for an approach that embraces the unpredictability of research, suggesting that planning to not have a rigid plan is a more reasonable stance. I link this to Lugones' concept of loving perception and playfulness discussed earlier in 4.2 about embracing uncertainty. Drawing inspiration from these insights, I refrained from overthinking the intricacies of fieldwork, shifting my focus to the anticipation of my forthcoming journey to the DRC.

The process of establishing contacts and cultivating relationships with my co-researcher in Liberia followed a similar trajectory, albeit with nuanced distinctions. Following the guidance of my mentor – Prof Oluwaniyi once more, I engaged with her colleague – Professor Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso – a Professor at Babcock University, Nigeria – whom she had previously introduced me to in 2019 for a collaborative book

project. Although Prof Yacob-Haliso had undertaken fieldwork in Liberia, she clarified that many of her contacts there had relocated to other countries. Nevertheless, she facilitated an introduction to Dr Peace Medie – her colleague at a university in the UK, who subsequently connected me with Professor Tanya Garnett at the University of Liberia, Monrovia. Following a detailed discussion of my research with Dr Garnett, she generously shared the contacts of potential researchers who had collaborated with her on similar projects.

Subsequently, I initiated communication with each of these individuals, outlining the research and potential fieldwork timeline to gauge their interest and availability. Responses were limited, and only one researcher expressed availability during the speculated fieldwork period in Liberia. Makula Sarnoh is an independent researcher, balancing part-time work. We initially engaged in formal email exchanges that transitioned to informal WhatsApp messages. However, she got a full-time job offer, rendering her unavailable for the fieldwork. Graciously, she introduced me to Varlee Sarnoh – her husband – who is an independent researcher and tour guide. While I discussed some of the practicalities of the fieldwork with Varlee, I refrained from seeking a perfect fieldwork plan, having learned from my Congolese sisters. I also knew that since I would be travelling to the DRC first, I would gain valuable experiential knowledge applicable to Liberia, even though they are different territories.

However, to go into these territories, obtaining ethical clearance from my home institution, the University of Malta, was imperative. Fisher (2021) elucidates that for researchers operating within what the World Bank terms ‘fragile situations’, justifying the rationale behind conducting research in potentially ‘dangerous’ contexts can be a formidable task. In my application for ethical review, I outlined two proposed fieldwork trips to eastern DRC (specifically Goma and Bukavu) and Liberia (encompassing

Monrovia, the capital, as well as Bong and Nimba counties), scheduled from December 2021 to June 2022. The ethics committee mandated the inclusion of a comprehensive risk assessment report, which I duly provided. The formulation of this report drew inspiration from templates provided by external academics, aligning with travel guidelines issued by the Maltese Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade (MFET) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). My choice of ECOWAS guidelines stemmed from the absence of pertinent information on travel guidelines from the Nigerian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and as Nigeria is an ECOWAS member state, it became the pragmatic alternative.

In accordance with the information available on MFET's website in 2021, guidelines stipulated that travel to the DRC and Liberia should be limited to essential purposes. I deemed 'fieldwork' in these countries as essential travel. Specifically, MFET indicated that travel to Goma and Bukavu in the DRC was permissible, contingent upon the completion of necessary vaccinations and compliance with local regulations. Similar conditions applied to Liberia, where travel throughout the country was authorised, except for remote border areas such as Grand Gedeh, River Gee Counties, and the northern province of Lofa County. In contrast, the ECOWAS simply mandated that travellers be fully vaccinated against both the COVID-19 virus and yellow fever before embarking on any journey. These details were meticulously incorporated into the risk assessment report submitted alongside my ethics application. Regrettably, my application faced initial rejection at the Faculty level.

The rejection rationale centred on the point that I was travelling to 'dangerous locations', posing implications not only for myself but also the university as a whole, lacking any precedent for guidance. While labelling the DRC as 'dangerous' may be justified in certain contexts, such a classification oversimplifies the risk setting,

implying a universal threat. The risk assessment explicitly outlined the planned research in Bukavu and Goma, underscoring compliance with protocols and collaboration with local contacts. The designation of Liberia as 'dangerous' was perplexing, prompting reflection on whether a similar classification would apply if the research were to be conducted in the United States, a context I, as a Nigerian woman with black skin, might perceive as 'dangerous'. Is race (read Black) factored into ethical considerations for fieldwork? This reflection aligns with Krystalli's (2021) assertion that ethical dilemmas revolve around power dynamics and how they shape choices. According to this scholar, locating the relevance of ethics and power always as 'elsewhere', at the sites of international fieldwork can obscure the nuanced manifestations and concealment of power and ethics in sites not conventionally deemed violent or volatile. In other words, labelling certain locations as 'dangerous' is laden with power dynamics, revealing a certain hypocrisy where the same dynamics may overlook instances of violence in the global north and affluent countries. Building on the insights of Stavrevska et al. (2022), this observation also highlights the racial and colonial assumptions inherent in the classification of violence, often dichotomising occurrences as 'over there' and not 'here'. In fact, this aligns with the assertion by Barbosa da Costa et al. (2015) regarding the academic portrayal of the field as a 'wild' place, further exacerbated when such fields are located in Africa.

The initial rejection of my ethics application necessitated a prolonged waiting period of four months for the decision from higher-ups at the University. The case was elevated to the Rectorate and Legal Services, adding a layer of bureaucratic processes. Throughout this waiting period, my supervisor – Professor Anna Khakee persistently advocated on my behalf, making an effort to attain a favourable resolution. Conversely, I experienced a range of emotions, including anger, worry, sadness,

frustration, exhaustion, and sleepless nights. Seeking solace, I frequently communicated with my mentor – Prof Oluwaniyi, alternating between tearful conversations and moments of venting. Emotional support became crucial, and I leaned on her, my mother, and my friends for care. I also remained transparent with my Congolese sisters, updating them on the situation as they eagerly anticipated my arrival in the DRC. Their words of encouragement, shared prayers, and my own prayers sustained me during this challenging period. However, there were moments when I found solace primarily in the prayers of my loved ones, as my emotional exhaustion and frustration overwhelmed my ability to pray.

The final approval for my fieldwork hinged on my procurement of travel insurance covering both myself and the third parties involved in the research. Additionally, I was obliged to sign a liability waiver declaring my intention to ‘undertake research overseas in dangerous locations’. This document essentially absolved the University of Malta and its representatives from any responsibility regarding my travels to these so-called dangerous locations. Fisher (2021) contends that, in practice, ethics boards often appear less concerned with the well-being of research participants or the research itself, particularly in the context of peace and conflict-related issues. Instead, they seem to position themselves more as representatives of the institution’s health and safety board or insurance officers.

Mitton (2021) also argues that the challenges in supposedly dangerous locations are frequently exaggerated, and the concept of ‘no-go’ zones is misleading, perpetuating harmful stigmas around these areas and their residents. I contemplate whether the ethics board adopted the notion of the DRC solely as a war zone and ‘rape capital of the world’. Additionally, the rationale behind classifying Liberia as a ‘dangerous’ location remains ambiguous to me, raising the question of whether such

categorisation is simplified based on Liberia being an African country. Mitton advises researchers to prioritise safety and avoid unnecessary risks while being cautious about uncritically accepting preconceived notions about danger and inaccessibility in certain contexts; as such ideas may aim to silence, marginalise, or dehumanise, becoming self-fulfilling when consistently propagated. The subsequent section delves into personal encounters in the DRC and Liberia, where Mitton's insights resonated vividly.

#### **4.4 The 'Field': Unlearning and Learning by Doing**

In this segment, I expound upon the interaction of my positionality as a Nigerian female PhD researcher from a European institution with my experiences in the DRC and Liberia. The discussion in this section also includes the process of gaining access to the women who contributed to this research, the modalities employed in 'data collection', and challenges encountered, including the language barrier, among others.

As a Nigerian woman affiliated with a European university, my journey into these countries presented me with a tricky web of insider and outsider dynamics. Being a Nigerian woman inherently places me within the broader context of the African continent, fostering a sense of shared cultural experiences and historical narratives. My shared African identity provided a foundation for establishing rapport and trust within the communities, allowing for engagements with participants. Still, I was aware of the multiplicities within Africa that necessitate a nuanced approach, as each nation bears its unique historical, cultural, and sociopolitical reality. Prior to my fieldwork, I thought about the power dynamics and privilege associated with being affiliated with a University in Europe, and how this might influence people's perception of and relation to me. However, I did not think being Nigerian had anything to do with power in these countries. It was in these nations that I learned being Nigerian seemed more

influential than being a PhD researcher from Malta as will be revealed in the narratives I will share in this section using examples of different occurrences.

While my identity as an African woman fostered a degree of insider status, the linguistic diversity of the DRC introduced a significant challenge. The multiplicity of languages, with Swahili and French serving as the official languages in eastern DRC, positioned me as an outsider grappling with the complexities of communication. The language barrier limited my ability to fully immerse myself in the local discourse, something that an insider might enjoy. Notwithstanding the language barrier positioning me as an outsider, it served as a catalyst for reflexivity. By this I mean, that I was propelled to engage in constant self-reflection, challenging preconceived notions and power imbalances within the research process. It became even more important for me to think critically about my identity and positionality, and how to communicate and approach conversations with the women I encountered. I knew I had to move with heightened awareness and sensitivity, as I will discuss in this section.

In February 2022, I travelled to eastern DRC to commence my two-month-long fieldwork. Upon landing at Goma International Airport, my initial observations were drawn to the array of mini planes and trucks branded with names and logos of various international organisations. Notably, I found myself repeatedly questioned by airport officials about my affiliation with the United Nations (UN). My experience at the airport made my status as an 'outsider' apparent due to my limited proficiency in French and non-existent knowledge of Swahili. Despite this apparent distinction, I successfully navigated the situation with the assistance of a gracious woman from Guinea-Bissau who communicated with me in English. Following the immigration procedures, I proceeded to the baggage claim area, where I was warmly received by Alice and Olga's uncle, a UN official. Pleasantries were exchanged, and upon exiting the airport,

I was greeted by Olga. We shared a warm hug in excitement, purchased a local SIM card for communication with my family, and departed from the airport to the seaport.

In light of my decision to reside in Bukavu rather than Goma, as suggested by Alice, our journey necessitated a 12-hour ferry ride from Goma (North Kivu) to Bukavu (South Kivu). Throughout this journey, Olga and I engaged in a bilingual conversation, transitioning between French and English, owing to her command of the latter. Amidst our conversation, the topic of identity surfaced, with Olga remarking that my non-Congolese background is not discernible in terms of physical attributes. However, she elucidated that my inability to interact fluently in Swahili or French may lead people to presume either that I am a Congolese residing outside Goma, perhaps in the capital city - Kinshasa, or that I am from a different country altogether. That is while being a skinfolk afforded me a degree of 'insider' status, the language barrier made me an 'outsider'. During the ferry journey, I observed a dominance of Nigerian songs, evoking a feeling akin to being in a Nigerian pub. Intrigued, I asked Olga about this, and she explained that the Congolese people enjoy Nigerian music and movies, and admire Nigerians. Even with this statement, it still was not clear to me at this point that being Nigerian had anything to do with power dynamics as I took it casually. We arrived in Bukavu at 6:15 a.m. and awaited Alice's arrival, who would transport us to our destination via taxi. Upon her arrival, warm greetings were exchanged, followed by a warm embrace. As we commenced our ride to the guesthouse I would be living in, we talked about my trip and other things.

Upon my arrival at the guesthouse, I was promptly escorted to my allocated room within a shared apartment, alongside a fellow resident from Belgium. Subsequently, Alice, residing close to the guesthouse, undertook the task of preparing a meal for Olga and I, allowing us a moment of rest and refreshment. Alice's gesture extended

beyond mere sustenance, embodying a deep sense of thoughtfulness and care. The meal, a generous serving of spaghetti garnished with diced sausages, elicited genuine gratitude. Our collective dining experience unfolded into a convivial exchange, marked by engaging conversation and shared laughter. Following the meal, I showed them the fabrics I brought for them from Nigeria, and we strolled through the guesthouse premises, talking about its administration, security protocols, and related matters. This amiable interaction set the stage for our first meeting, which transpired within the confines of my room. In this way, the unfolding narrative aligns with the principles of care emphasised in feminist research. Tronto (1998) posits that ethics of care involves attending to the needs of others, recognising interdependence, and promoting mutual well-being. Also in line with hooks' (2000) emphasis on the importance of reciprocity in research relationships, genuine care entails acknowledging the humanity of both the researcher and co-researcher, which challenges autonomy-focused ethics prevalent in traditional research.

During our meeting, we deliberated on the framework of the fieldwork. Our discussions encompassed the identification and interaction with different groups of women, strategies for overcoming language barriers, the anticipated timeline for fieldwork and transcription activities, as well as financial considerations. Particularly, Olga drew attention to the significance of including cross-border market women situated at the DRC-Rwanda border within the context of our study. She emphasised that a comprehensive exploration of peace must involve these women, given the impact of the conflict on their livelihoods, juxtaposed with their ability to sustain harmonious relationships with their Rwandan counterparts in their respective communities. According to Olga, if these women can maintain a peaceful relationship with their Rwandan counterparts in their business and communities, surely the know

something about peace. Olga's point resonates with Icaza's (2023) assertion in the previous chapter about foregrounding that which is considered non-existent and unintelligible, thus challenging and expanding the boundaries of intelligibility in IR and peacebuilding. At the end of the meeting, we identified four distinct groups of women from different socio-economic classes viz: cross-border market women, women in urban areas involved in peacebuilding, grassroots women contributing to peace efforts, and female ex-combatants. In addressing the language barrier, it was mutually decided that Olga would serve as the translator, extending her involvement from our initial plan of collaboration in Goma to also include our work in Bukavu. The meeting concluded at 7:30 p.m. due to Alice's familial obligations. However, Olga remained with me at the guesthouse, given the considerable distance to her family residence.

The following day, we took a taxi to GEC-SH, whereupon arrival, I acquainted myself with fellow researchers present and met the HR manager - Vianney, with whom I had corresponded regarding a letter of introduction from the institute before I arrived in the DRC. The reception was affable, and I was introduced as the researcher from Nigeria. After exchanging pleasantries in the outer office, Alice guided me to the inner office for an introduction to the individual temporarily assuming the Director's role at the research institute. Alice facilitated my introduction, after which I presented myself and conveyed my limited proficiency in French. He expressed understanding and engaged with me in English to some extent. Our conversation centred around the impending fieldwork, during which he clarified the necessity of obtaining a document known as 'l'ordre de mission' (mission order) before commencing any research activities in the DRC. He elucidated that this document, signed and endorsed by my supervisor, serves to introduce me, my research project, and delineate the specific areas of operation within the DRC.

He further clarified that Alice and Olga needed the same document stating their collaboration with me. This document, as he explained, had to be presented to the Ministry of Interior, the Director General of Migration (DGM), and the Military for official stamps, a prerequisite for registering my presence and commencing my fieldwork. Following the discussion with the Director's representative, Alice and I went into Vianney's office to seek additional information on the procedures for obtaining stamps from the Congolese authorities. He assured us that he would prepare mission orders for Alice and Olga while I awaited mine from my university. We said our goodbyes, Olga went home, and Alice and I went to Nyawera market to purchase some items before returning to the guesthouse.

Upon Alice's departure, I promptly informed my supervisor about the mission order and reached out to Prof Bazonzi, conveying the necessity for a mission order. Graciously, he offered to provide a sample. Seeking permission, I introduced him to my supervisor through email for further discussion. Our conversation on WhatsApp revealed his plan to be in Bukavu the following week for research, ensuring an in-person meeting. By the week's end, I received the mission order from my supervisor, marking the completion of the first task. The following step, preceding the commencement of my fieldwork, involved obtaining official stamps on our documents by visiting government offices. On the scheduled Monday, Alice and I adhered to our planned 10 a.m. visit to GEC. However, she informed me about the potential tension in Bukavu on that day due to the Governor's return because of the people's discontent with him.

This information was important due to the Ministry of Interior's proximity to the Governor's office, heightening the need for vigilance. Upon our arrival, I exchanged greetings with Vianney, who promptly highlighted the potential tension in the city due

to the Governor's arrival. As a precautionary measure, he suggested postponing our visits to the Ministry of Interior and other offices to the next day for safety reasons. This speaks to Mitton's (2021) point made earlier about researchers being cognisant of their security while in conflict-affected regions. During our meeting, Vianney printed and stamped Alice's mission order, a prerequisite for our engagements at the Ministry of Interior, Military, and other relevant institutions the following day. In the meantime, while Alice briefly stepped out, Vianney and I engaged in a conversation comparing the DRC to Nigeria in terms of cultural and linguistic aspects. Subsequently, Alice and I went to Nyawera market, concluding our visit with a stop at the pharmacy for medication to address my flu and allergic reactions around my neck and eyes. Once we returned to my residence, Alice stayed briefly to ensure my well-being. I extended hospitality by offering her tea and beignets (doughnuts) before her departure.

The following day, Alice and Prof Bazonzi visited my residence slightly after 9 a.m. Our conversation delved into my experiences so far in the region. Specifically, we discussed the socio-political landscape, drawing comparisons between the DRC and Nigeria. The discussion extended to the somewhat exaggerated narratives about conflicts and living conditions in the region (see Mitton 2021). Prof Bazonzi, a resident of Kinshasa, shared his initial expectations of heightened tension in the eastern part of the DRC. However, to his surprise, he found it relatively calm. He also acknowledged that conflict-prone areas like Ituri and Masisi contrasted with this general observation. Our dialogue also touched upon linguistic distinctions between the eastern and western regions. Notably, Swahili serves as the predominant language in the east, while Lingala is widely spoken in the west. I offered them apples and water, after which we collectively proceeded to the GEC-SH, continuing our discussion along the way.

Upon our arrival at GEC-SH, we extended greetings to Vianney, and the other individuals present. Prof Bazonzi graciously offered to drive us to the Ministry of Interior, situated in an area commonly referred to as Labotte, known for housing numerous government ministries and agencies with a beautiful view of Lake Kivu. At the Ministry, Vianney, acting as our spokesperson, introduced us to the Secretary, elucidating the purpose of our visit. The Secretary then notified the Minister, and we were granted an audience. The Minister welcomed us, invited us to be seated, and introduced himself. He then requested introductions from each of us. When I introduced myself as a Nigerian, the Minister sought clarification on whether it was Lagos, Nigeria, or Niger Republic. I affirmed it was Nigeria. Afterwards, he engaged in a brief conversation with me, questioning whether French is spoken in Lagos and how I managed to present myself in French. I explained that while I had consistently learned French, I had limited opportunities to practice the language due to residing in English-speaking countries. The Minister then requested our mission orders, which we provided. Upon inspecting mine, he inquired about the location of my university, to which I responded, 'Malta'.

He had confusion written all over his face which made it apparent to me that he had never heard about the country. He persistently inquired about the location of the university, prompting me to clarify that it is situated in Malta, a European nation close to Italy and North Africa. Then, he explained that due to the international origin of my mission order, I needed to obtain a stamp from the Governor's office, as the Ministry of Interior exclusively provides stamps for local institutions. Upon reviewing Alice's mission order, he asked about Olga, who was absent from our meeting. He expressed the necessity to meet Olga personally before proceeding with the stamping of our

documents. He instructed us to return the following day with Olga, assuring us that he would then assess how he could assist us.

We proceeded to the Military base by taxi, encountering an intimidating presence of military officials upon arrival. Contrary to our expectations, the Colonel in charge, who greeted us, exhibited a calm and amiable demeanour compared to the Minister at the Ministry of Interior. After introductions, similar inquiries about Nigeria arose, prompting clarifications about Lagos. Engaging in English conversation with me, he welcomed me to the DRC and inquired about the purpose of our visit to which he was briefed. Submission of mission orders followed, akin to the Minister's inquiry, he questioned the location of my university, and I informed him it was in Malta. Once again, a puzzled expression appeared on his face, prompting us to elucidate that Malta is a European country situated in proximity to Italy and North Africa.

During our interaction, he invited two additional officers to join the meeting, introducing us to them and vice versa. He inquired about the focus of my research, to which I provided a brief explanation in my less-than-perfect French, later supplemented by Alice's elaboration. He proceeded to delineate the distinct categories of fighters within the military framework. These categories encompassed ex-combatants, who retired due to age; demobilised soldiers who underwent the DDR process for civilian integration, including those from non-state armed groups and the regular army (FARC); and the 'Red Cards', who are former soldiers informally transitioning to civilian life without undergoing the DDR process, with women represented across these groups. As the discussion grew extensive, we expressed our intention to return for a more in-depth conversation, contingent upon the completion of the necessary document stamping.

The Colonel directed us to the division responsible for issuing stamps. Upon leaving his office, we took a taxi to the Military division handling stamp issuance. I observed a marked difference in the aesthetics of the current location compared to our previous one. Alice explained that we were now in the vicinity of the Governor's house, a more aesthetically pleasing area. We entered and met the officer overseeing stamp issuance, who introduced himself. Vianney provided an introduction for the three of us, explaining that we were directed there from the Military division in Labotte. The officer collected our mission orders, thankfully without inquiring about the location of my university. He stamped and signed the document. Our next destination was the office of the Director-General of Migration (DGM), but unfortunately, he was not available. Nevertheless, Vianney informed Alice and I that, once we obtained the stamp from the Ministry of Interior, the one from the DGM would be unnecessary. The following day, we returned to the Ministry of Interior to have our documents stamped, marking our official readiness to commence fieldwork.

### ***Co-creating Knowledge with Women in the DRC***

Several meetings were conducted at the guesthouse with Alice and Olga, focusing on strategies to engage with the groups of women previously identified. Our discussions encompassed the conversation format with each group, the translation process during meetings, and the transcription of our interactions. Categorically, my room evolved into our shared space for planning, discussions, reflection, communal cooking, and shared meals. Given my status as an 'outsider', my ability to establish contact with the targeted women was limited. Therefore, I depended on Alice and Olga to initiate contact in South and North Kivu, respectively. Learning by doing for me proved that in fieldwork you have to trust people. During these encounters, I was consistently introduced as a researcher from Nigeria. Interestingly, the supposed

privilege linked to my affiliation with a European university often took a backseat, highlighting the significance attached to my Nigerian identity. This trend became particularly evident in my interactions with the women in this study, as they expressed a stronger connection to Nigeria, citing preferences for Nigerian music, movies, fabrics, and admiration for the perceived boldness and fashion sense of Nigerian women. This cultural connection played a significant role in shaping their engagement with me both before and after our conversations.

I recall one of the women in Goma playfully suggesting that I bring Nigerian fabrics on my next visit. Another expressed her admiration for popular Nigerian music artists, P-square and Davido. Initially, I had not considered how my Nigerian identity would influence people's perceptions during my fieldwork. I reflect on this because as a 'Black' female Nigerian PhD researcher at a European university, I find myself in the minority and not necessarily in a privileged position. Quite frankly, some assume one is either an illegal migrant or at best an asylum seeker in Malta. I have encountered deeply offensive questions like 'Did you come by boat?' and 'How did you come to Malta?' along with racist statements such as 'Go back to your country!'.

Somehow, it was gratifying to be 'seen' differently by the women I interacted with, even as I acknowledged the complexities of privilege in these situations. This is in line with Soukotta's (2023) argument cited earlier about the fluidity of privileges. This equally takes me back to Lugones' (1987) concept of world-travelling as she explains that sometimes the world-traveller has a double image of herself and each self has ingredients that are incompatible with the other self, depending on the world she finds herself. In essence, I as a world-traveller, am a plurality of selves, I am different persons in different worlds to different people. More so, contrary to the propagated belief that as an educated person from a Western university, you have all the power

(Jackson, 2021), this was not the reality for me. I remained conscious that these women were in fact doing me a favour, recognising that my presence held a subordinate position in the context of their conspicuously busy lives. I possessed limited influence and felt appreciative of the opportunity to engage with them.

In the pursuit of establishing communication, our strategy involved reaching out to urban and grassroots women's organisations dedicated to peace. The implementation involved Alice and Olga initiating contact with these women through phone calls, leveraging their mutual relationships for introductions. Consequently, some women expressed the need for preliminary meetings to familiarise themselves with our team before committing to sharing their stories in another session. Accordingly, a series of preliminary meetings were conducted to get acquainted, while in other instances, meetings were promptly scheduled. Additionally, making contact with some women happened at random without even planning to. For example, in Bukavu, I recall we met most of the grassroots women working for peace at a local restaurant after a busy day of conversations with cross-border market women and two urban women working for peace.

Establishing contact with female ex-combatants posed challenges, particularly with those who concealed their identities, i.e., the 'red cards' who evaded the formal DDR process and faced penalties if identified. To overcome this challenge, our entry into this demographic was facilitated through relationships with market women familiar with them, some of whom had family ties with ex-combatants and were willing to facilitate introductions. Additionally, for those who underwent the formal DDR process and demobilised soldiers awaiting community reintegration, collaboration with the military proved instrumental in gaining access. Through a gradual process, we successfully

established connections with various groups of women, leveraging personal, professional, and communal relationships.

Before engaging with the women involved in the study, Alice, Olga, and I had preliminary discussions regarding the conversation format with each subgroup. Initially, I had formulated an interview guide as part of the ethical approval process, anticipating its applicability in both the DRC and Liberia. However, it became apparent that a singular interview guide was inadequate for diverse groups of women with distinct realities, as articulated through conversations with Alice and Olga, and my reflections. Moreover, it was evident that a uniform language and conversation structure were not suitable for effective communication. Alice and Olga highlighted the need for modifications in the conversation format. They explained that while the questions were comprehensible, adjustments were essential to facilitate deeper conversations with the women. The original formulation, according to them, risked eliciting responses that merely scratched the surface of the women's lived experiences. Drawing on my observations of interpersonal interactions at locations such as the Nyawera market, GEC-SH, and others I have encountered, I recognised the importance of fluid conversations to encourage the women to express themselves fully. Consequently, we decided to tailor questions for each group, considering their unique circumstances. I explained to Alice and Olga that the questions merely served as a guide to steer the conversation and maintain a sense of time awareness. However, I acknowledge the inevitability of participants deviating to discuss pressing issues on their minds, a natural and welcomed occurrence. In some instances, adherence to the conversation guide was unnecessary, as some women willingly shared their thoughts upon introduction to the research, prompting spontaneous and unstructured interactions.

Meetings with the women occurred at locations of their choosing, ranging from homes to offices to markets, local pubs, and the demobilised soldiers' campsite in Mubambiro (North Kivu). The choice of meeting location was a means for the women to ensure their security and comfort. Conversations encompassed the sharing of life stories, the use of African idiomatic expressions to clarify points, and prayers – integral aspects of African culture. On this point, Chilisa (2012) highlights that stories are central to the lives of the colonised, as they serve as powerful vehicles for conveying cultural knowledge and experiences. In her view, stories mirror a society's values and serve as both educational tools and critiques of societal norms, family dynamics, and social interactions. They bridge gaps and offer essential elements such as literature, theories, conceptual frameworks, and research methods within indigenous research paradigms. At its core, Chilisa's framework lies in an appreciation for the oral traditions embedded in indigenous cultures. She contends that stories, proverbs, and metaphors serve as vital conduits for the transmission of indigenous knowledge, encapsulating the essence of lived experiences and cultural wisdom. In this research, these became a medium through which lived experiences are woven into academic inquiry, challenging the hegemonic narratives that perpetuate inequality.

Conversations were conducted in Swahili, Lingala, French, and English, depending on the women. For instance, interactions with grassroots women predominantly occurred in Swahili, while a combination of Lingala and Swahili was used with different categories of ex-combatants. To illustrate, Olga adeptly switched between Swahili and Lingala when engaging with demobilised soldiers in Mubambiro, recognising that they came from various regions of the DRC, and not all were native speakers of Swahili, the national language in the eastern part of the country. Language choices were tailored to the preferences and backgrounds of the women involved to ensure effective

communication. For instance, when communicating with urban women, Alice and Olga primarily used French, while English was employed in conversations with select urban women, albeit mixed with French.

Before travelling to the DRC, my initial 'plan' as a first-time Western-trained fieldworker was to pose questions in English, with my co-researcher translating into the women's preferred language. However, upon reflection, I recognised the arrogance of this approach, as it involved initiating communication in a language unfamiliar to them before translating. This method would have been time-consuming, impeding the flow and fluidity of conversations, and creating an awkward and rigid atmosphere. Consequently, I needed to adjust my 'plan' and in some cases get rid of the 'plan' altogether. I realised that being, learning, and doing in the 'field' is different from what is envisaged prior to the encounters, often necessitating flexibility and adaptability.

To enhance efficiency and facilitate effective communication, we agreed that Alice and Olga would interact with the women in their preferred language. During natural breaks in the conversation, Olga would provide translations. This protocol was consistently communicated to the women, of which they were considerate. The language barrier emerged as a significant constraint, impacting conversations with the women and my overall mobility in the region. Safety concerns were not the primary issue, as familiarity with my surroundings increased over time; rather, it was the challenge of engaging in small talk with locals due to the language barrier. Despite this limitation, I navigated the language barrier with the assistance of Olga's translations. Translation is not a mere linguistic transfer. As Tschunkert (2021) argues, translators

are cultural mediators, influencing the construction of meaning. From my experience, this does not only apply to the translator but co-researchers in general.

This scholar goes on to explain that when conversations are mediated by translators, the meanings conveyed are influenced by the translator's experiences. Therefore, in such scenarios, the process of constructing knowledge involves an additional layer of interpretation. I link this to the point made earlier about the collaborative nature of this research. While acknowledging the potential loss of some information in translation, it is essential to highlight that meaningful discussions occurred with the women. Again, I believe Maria Lugones' concept of 'world travelling' offers a lens through which to examine the transformative potential of translation in feminist-decolonial research. For her, world travelling involves moving between different perspectives and understandings of the world, challenging fixed categories, and embracing the fluidity of identity. In this sense, translators and co-researchers become facilitators of world travelling, enabling researchers like me to access diverse voices and perspectives.

Nevertheless, in instances where French was spoken, I had a basic understanding, occasionally formulating clarifying questions in French. When needed, I communicated with Olga through writing to avoid disrupting the conversation flow, and she posed questions at appropriate intervals. Beyond verbal communication, non-verbal cues such as body language, silence, and facial expressions played a crucial role in the encounters. For instance, when discussing the narrative of sexual violence victimhood associated with Congolese women, many of the women expressed strong emotions, evident in their passionate speech and visible irritation towards the narrative. Some had the same irritation on their faces and shared a similar attitude

when speaking about the government and DDR programmes. In specific instances, there was an observable increase in the pitch of their voices when addressing certain topics, indicating a strong emotional connection to the subject matter.

Conversely, some women displayed a more reserved demeanour during our interactions, a trait Olga attributed to cultural variations, particularly noting that women from specific regions tended to be demurer. Despite not comprehending every detail of our conversations, there was an intuitive sense of understanding on my part that defies easy articulation in 'logical' terms. Frequently, during discussions on various subjects, the women would inquire about the status of women in Nigeria. In response, I would provide explanations in a blend of English and French, with Olga offering additional translation support. This dynamic fostered a mutual exchange of experiences. Following each meeting, a reflective process involving myself, Alice, and Olga was undertaken to identify areas requiring an adjustment in our interactions with the women. Additionally, they would clarify specific points made by the women to crystallise my understanding.

To address the potential concerns around language barriers and their impact on 'deep conversations', it is critical to emphasise the epistemological and methodological commitments of this study. As a feminist-decolonial researcher, I view knowledge cultivation as a relational and co-constructed process rather than a linear extraction of 'raw data'. While linguistic differences posed challenges, they also enriched the research by requiring collaborative interpretations, reflective practices, and reliance on non-verbal cues. The notion of 'deep conversations' in this context is not confined to verbal exchanges but extends to the emotional, intuitive, and embodied dimensions of communication, as discussed by Chadwick (2021).

Moreover, I acknowledge that some nuances may have been lost during translations. However, the deliberate strategies employed—such as involving culturally sensitive co-researchers, conducting post-meeting reflections, and engaging in iterative interpretations of meaning—ensured that the conversations remained meaningful and robust. By embracing Maria Lugones' concept of 'world travelling', this study frames translation and collaboration not as limitations but as transformative opportunities to access and honour diverse perspectives.

Finally, this study explicitly critiques the positivist assumption that linguistic fluency is a prerequisite for meaningful engagement. Instead, it advocates for an expansive understanding of communication, one that values relationality, reflexivity, and the co-creation of knowledge as central to feminist-decolonial research.

In contrast to conventional qualitative research methods, my 'fieldwork' experience differed in terms of interpersonal dynamics. One-on-one conversations were not prevalent; instead, interactions typically occurred within a group context, involving a minimum of three individuals. This was the pattern in North and South Kivu, where the usual formation involved me, Alice, and Olga engaging with the women. Occasionally, some would involve their colleagues, transforming the dialogue into a group conversation. Chilisa (2012) asserts that the conventional interview method like other 'data collection' methods leans towards individualism with the focus being on an individual knower. However, indigenous worldviews lean towards communities' togetherness, cooperation, and connectedness. This was what we experienced when some women involved other people in the conversation, helping each other to elaborate on different points. Sometimes, they asked each other questions and then directed the questions to Alice, Olga, and I. For Chilisa, this procedure upheld the

collective construction of knowledge, as well as love and respect for the relationships that the women have with one another.

When interacting with market women and ex-combatants, we made a deliberate decision to facilitate group discussions with a minimum of five women to optimise time. Most of our conversations typically extended for durations ranging from 45 minutes to one hour, and participants provided consent to be audio-recorded. Interestingly, the women involved in these discussions expressed no reservations about being audio-recorded. In fact, during an encounter in Bukavu, one woman actively took charge of the recording device, asking if we had sufficient batteries and positioning it before her. This gesture implied a willingness to share extensive insights. Another woman in Bukavu emphasised the importance of capturing every detail of her narrative, expressing a desire for heightened awareness regarding the situation in the DRC. Another woman in Goma said:

Thank you and welcome in DRC, we are so happy to see a Nigerian woman here and we think that the result will give another picture of DRC everywhere you will publish this research.

Possibly, these women found ease in sharing due to my identity as a Nigerian woman or their desire to control how their stories are portrayed, or a blend of both factors. This also speaks to the issue of anonymity and confidentiality, as they explicitly consented, verbally and through signed forms, to disclose their names and affiliations in the research. On this point, Chilisa (2012, p.207) asserts that this reveals an African orientation toward community knowledge production and 'an appeal for visibility where the position of the researcher as a knower is clearly marked. It ensures that the researcher is accountable to the participants and the participants are in turn accountable to their communities'. For Chilisa, information or stories lose their power

if the storyteller is unknown. Nonetheless, ex-combatants were pseudonymised intentionally to protect their identity and the sensitive narratives they shared. In total, 51 women, aged between 25 and 65 at the time of the fieldwork, contributed to this study.

<b>Table 1: Conversations with Women in the DRC</b>			
<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Locality</b>
Solange Lwashiga	Caucus des Femmes pour la Paix (Caucus of Women for Peace)	Executive Secretary	Bukavu
Collette Salima	Congo Hope Initiative	Coordinator	
Joly Kamuntu	Karibu Jeunesse Nouvelle – KJN (Welcome New Youth)	Director	
Eliane Polepole	L'Association des Femmes des Médias (AFEM) (The Association of Media Women)	Programme Officer	
Agnes Sadiki	Tous pour le genre, le développement et la Paix (TGDP) (All for Gender, Development, and Peace)	Founder	
Furaha Bisimwa	La Commission Diocésaine Justice et Paix (The Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission)	Secretary	
Sarah Ndebo	N/A	Human Rights Activist	
Esperance Chaguma	L'association des Femmes de Kadutu pour la Paix (The	Operations Officer	

	Kadutu Women's Association for Peace)		
Grace Malkia	Mwanamke Kesho (Woman Tomorrow)	Member	
Marie Riziki	Media pour le Genre (Media for Gender)	Member	
Valentine Migabo	Amani na Maendeleo (Peace and Development)	Member	
Judith Maroy	Lutte pour le Changement (LUCHA) (Fight for Change)	Member	
Kungwa Mazambi	N/A	Cross-border trader	
Amani Asumani	Association des femmes vendeuses transfrontalières (Association of cross-border women sellers)	Secretary	
Furaha Mazambi	Chuma yama chongo chongo <sup>28</sup>	President	
S.L	N/A	Ex-combatant	
P.M	N/A	Ex-combatant	
W.A	N/A	Ex-combatant	
Isabelle Pendeza	Le Collectif des Associations Feminines pour le Développement (CAFED) (Collective of Women's	President	Goma

<sup>28</sup> As explained by Alice, this is a Swahili adage used in eastern DRC that means a metal with multiple sharp points. These cross-border women sellers are saying that they are an association or group of serious women who are united for a good cause (peace in their commercial activity). And that society must understand their purpose. If someone abuses these women, they are capable and ready to demand their rights. So, they try to show rigor and serenity in their work. Because it is unwise to play with a sharp metal or misuse it, otherwise you may risk losing an organ of your body.

	Associations for Development)		
Gracielle Kibanja	Women in Action for Human Rights and Dignity (WAHDI)	Director	
Generose Wera	Dynamique des Femmes Juristes (DFJ) (Dynamic of Women Lawyers)	Lawyer	
Josephine Malimukono	League for Congolese Solidarity (LCS)	Director	
Francoise Mulawa	Commission Nationale de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Reinsertion (CONADER) (National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration)	Programme Supervisor	
Sandra Kavira	Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani (The Voice of the Congolese Mother)	Member	
Jose Ekwa	L'Union Nationale des Femmes (UNAF) (The National Union of Women)	Coordinator	
Florence Nguomoja	L'Organisation Communautaire de Base (The Grassroots Community Organisation)	Director	
Claudine Kafirongo	Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani (Voice of the Congolese Mother)	President	

Kavira Yeye	L'Association de Personnes Handicapées (The Association of Disabled People)	President	
Shami Kapami	La Coopérative des Femmes du Nord-Kivu (The North Kivu Women's Cooperative)	President	
<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>		<b>Locality</b>
Cross-border Traders	8		Ruzizi (South Kivu)
Ex-combatants at transit centre	6		Mubambiro
Demobilised ex-combatants and Red Cards	8		Goma

Alice, Olga, and I agreed to allocate one month for the transcription of our discussions with the women. This proved to be an ambitious task given the tedious nature of transcription. Due to consistent power supply, Alice and Olga opted to work at my place. Occasionally, Alice utilised the facilities at GEC-SH when necessary. Their responsibilities included transcribing and translating all dialogues into French. Meanwhile, I was responsible for the transcription of English conversations and the translation of documents from French to English, utilising the Microsoft Word translator. Recognising the potential inaccuracies of this tool, I frequently sought clarification from Olga and Alice.

### ***Co-creating Knowledge with Women in Liberia***

My research experience in Liberia proved to be more straightforward compared to my encounters in the DRC. Throughout my time in the DRC, I maintained constant communication with Varlee, seeking information on the administrative procedures for

fieldwork in Liberia. Upon my arrival in Liberia in April 2022, the airport procedures proceeded smoothly. Additionally, I did not encounter any language barriers initially, as all airport officials conversed in English. Varlee kindly picked me up from the airport and drove me to the hotel in Monrovia where I would be residing. During our journey, our discussions encompassed my travel experiences, Liberia as a nation, Liberian politics, women's issues, and the inevitable discourse on identity.

Varlee expressed admiration for Nigeria in comparison to Liberia, highlighting the respect and esteem Liberians hold for Nigerians. While I did not perceive myself as a complete 'outsider' in Liberia, I was not fully an 'insider' either. Varlee clarified that, although my physical appearance did not set me apart, my enunciation revealed that I was not Liberian when engaging in conversations. Indeed, through interactions with Varlee and other locals, I discerned that Liberian English is a blend of Ebonics (African American English) and Pidgin English (English-based Creole), both of which I am familiar with, despite regional variations in accents. Notably, Pidgin English, also referred to as 'Broken English', is widely spoken in Nigeria and some other West African countries. Upon reaching the hotel, Varlee and I agreed to convene for our first official meeting the following day since it was already late.

Our first meeting took place at the hotel's open-air lounge, where we discussed the logistical aspects of our upcoming fieldwork. We categorised our focus into four groups: women's organisations advocating for peace in urban areas, grassroots women's organisations dedicated to peace, market women, and women community leaders. While I expressed interest in engaging with female ex-combatants, Varlee cautioned that approaching them directly would be challenging, as many conceal their identities out of fear of stigma and marginalisation. He suggested exploring connections through the women we would be interacting with, but our attempts proved

unsuccessful. The women we spoke to confirmed that ex-combatants were largely in hiding, making it difficult to locate them. Some women appeared protective of the ex-combatants, questioning our motives for wanting to speak with them. Sensing the sensitivity of the topic, we decided to cease inquiries about accessing ex-combatants. I link this to Tuck and Yang's (2014) methodology of refusal in research. According to these scholars, refusal is not just about participants saying 'no', but it is also reflected in silence, redirection of ideas, unwillingness to say more, unwillingness to speak about pain, etc. For these scholars, a methodology of refusal regards limit on knowledge as productive and as a good thing indeed. That is, not knowing everything is not always a bad thing, as it could be a way of protecting certain people. Thus, in this research I acknowledged and respected these women's refusal.

While I did not have the opportunity to engage with female ex-combatants directly for this research, I recognise the importance of contextualising this research within the broader body of work on Liberia, particularly studies that have engaged directly with ex-combatants. By juxtaposing the stories of the women in this study with existing literature as the reader will see in Chapter 6, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play within 'postconflict' societies. Still, I recognise that not being able to directly engage with female ex-combatants may hinder a nuanced comprehension of the complexities surrounding their reintegration process and the factors influencing their 'postconflict' lives. Additionally, it may influence the richness of analysis between the stories of ex-combatants and non-combatant women, potentially overlooking differences and similarities that could contribute to a more holistic understanding of 'postconflict' dynamics in Liberia. Therefore, while leveraging existing scholarship provides valuable insights, acknowledging and addressing the inability to access female ex-combatants directly is crucial for this study.

For our fieldwork locations, Varlee recommended focusing on Monrovia and New Georgia in Montserrado County, Gbarnga, Salala, and Palala in Bong County, and Ganta in Nimba County, considering that we had just two months for the fieldwork. Unlike the DRC, we could commence fieldwork immediately without the need for a mission order from Liberian authorities. However, we recognised the importance of establishing contact with the women before officially starting the fieldwork.

The process of initiating contact with women in Liberia mirrored that of the DRC, wherein we utilised personal, professional, and communal relationships. For example, I met Prof Garnett who was my primary contact in Liberia before meeting Varlee and Makula. She treated me to a nice meal of grilled fish, fried plantains, and vegetables with Liberian beer, at a local restaurant. During our conversation, we delved into my experiences in Liberia, discussing both similarities and differences with Nigeria. The discussion also extended to my research, a topic aligned with her expertise, and she expressed her intention to facilitate an introduction to her aunt, who oversees an organisation dedicated to peace and development in the community. She successfully connected me with her aunt, who agreed to share her stories with me. Dr Garnett shared her aunt's contact details with me and Varlee and I set up a meeting based on her availability. Concurrently, Varlee, leveraging his network, arranged our first meeting – a group conversation with market women. Before engaging with the women, Varlee and I strategically planned the conversation format, drawing from my prior experience in the DRC and tailoring conversations to the unique circumstances of each woman involved.

The meeting involved engaging with diverse groups of women at locations of their choice, such as their homes, offices, and marketplaces. The discussions were conducted in Liberian English, initially posing a challenge for me to comprehend. However, with time, I became accustomed to the nuances. Like experiences in the DRC, the conversations were dynamic, incorporating the exchange of life stories and the use of African proverbs to elucidate points. Many of the women demonstrated assertiveness and outspokenness in sharing their experiences. Notably, one of the women in Ganta said to Varlee after the conversation, 'I wasn't expecting this conversation. I thought you were a politician who had come to run campaign. I was never going to support you!'. She emphasised the importance of increased female representation in national leadership and discussed her organisation's initiatives to support this cause. Like the DRC, there were no one-on-one conversations in Liberia as we were often at least three during each meeting. Additionally, the women agreed to be visible and identified in the research.

One major observation in Liberia is that, although some women participated in the study, a significant portion of the contacted women displayed a lack of enthusiasm for active engagement in the discussion. This phenomenon could be attributed to research fatigue among them, potentially stemming from the perception that Liberia has been extensively researched. Kelly (2021) elucidates the notion of 'over-researched societies', describing them as settings where an excess of fieldwork has taken place, resulting in repetitive or redundant research efforts. Still, we managed to engage with 25 women over the course of two months, ranging in age from 30 to 58 years old. The table below shows how many conversations were had and where they took place.

**Table 2: Conversations with Women in Liberia**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Locality</b>
Olivia Steward	N/A	Community Leader	Montserrado County
Rebecca Tenneh	Winner City Community Church	Pastor	
Mameke Sarnoh	Dawah Group	Chair Lady	
Maria Williams	Philadelphia Church	Women's President	
Denise Johnson	Mutual Justice	Director	
Maria Nelson	United Methodist Women	President	
Margaret Menyon	Coalition of Women against Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Liberia (COWAGIL)	Executive Director	
Joanna Ballah	Alliance for Women and Children's Development	Founder	
Anna Noah	United Women for Development	President	
Beatrice Slogan	Margibi Women for Development	Secretary	
Ophelia Karn	Mission of Mercy	Executive Director	
Ruth Sirleaf	N/A	Women's Leader	
Idole Kaiser	Rural Women Structure	Executive Director	
Justina Gbatu	Mudemu (Help yourself)	President	Nimba County
Yee Dahn	Kolakeh (We will do it) Women's Group	Chairwoman	
Mayanda Kromah	United Women for Peace	Secretary	
Dorothy Dunkor	Liberian Youths for Development and Change	Executive Director	
<b>Group Conversations</b>			

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Locality</b>
Market Women	8	Montserrado County

Although Varlee and I initially allocated one month for the transcription of our conversations, I recognised the ambitious nature of this timeline, considering my prior experience in the DRC. Unfortunately, we were unable to complete the transcription before I departed from Liberia. Nevertheless, our collaborative efforts continued beyond my departure, culminating in the successful completion of the task in August 2022.

#### **4.5 After the ‘Field’: Sharing Stories through Writing**

Upon completing my encounters in the DRC and Liberia, I had to do the messy meandering task of analysis, shaped by the invaluable support of my supervisors, co-researchers, and peers. Chadwick (2021) emphasises the importance of embracing and navigating through messy indecisions, discomforts, hesitations, disconnects, and epistemic uncertainties in order to conduct ethical and responsible feminist research. Therefore, the process of data analysis had to unfold as a collaborative endeavour. The guidance of my co-supervisor – Prof Rosalba Icaza was instrumental in navigating the complexities of feminist-decolonial analysis. Her encouragement to engage with multiple voices and perspectives fostered a more comprehensive understanding of the conversations had with the women in this study. Alice, Olga, and Varlee played a pivotal role in challenging my assumptions and biases, aligning with hooks’ (2000) emphasis on critical dialogue within feminist research. This collaborative nature of ‘data’ analysis ensured a richer interpretation of the conversations with the women, incorporating perspectives that transcended individual viewpoints.

The analysis phase for me unfolded as a decoding of power relations. I admit that this stage was not a neutral exercise but a conscious effort to deconstruct and challenge prevailing power structures in gender and peacebuilding and centre the women's voices. This is an act of epistemic disobedience as Mignolo (2011) calls it, resisting the imposition of singular interpretations and embracing plural understandings of reality. Thus, I utilised thematic analysis for its flexibility and adaptability to the research context. Thematic analysis allows researchers to traverse complex phenomena and gain insights into participants' experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is subjective and interpretive and can be approached in different ways depending on the research objective and theoretical framework. Buttressed by Nast (1994), strategies and methods that would best accomplish the research in terms of theoretical commitments, feminist praxis, and activist goals are usually selected.

This is a feminist-decolonial research and thematic analysis serves as a tool that allows me to unravel nuanced narratives and power dynamics that often remain obscured. When wielded through a feminist-decolonial lens, thematic analysis becomes a means of de-silencing the voices of Congolese and Liberian women. It allows me to prioritise narratives that emerge from within communities. Through thematic analysis, patterns of resilience, resistance, and agency emerge, contributing to a more nuanced portrayal of women's lives in these countries (Ahmed, 2012). Despite its usefulness in navigating complex phenomena, I realised that some narratives cannot be simply boxed into themes, yet this does not diminish their importance. Indeed, this is one of the key insights from my fieldwork experience in these countries, in that, not all the narratives and lessons from these women can be neatly textualized. Some are meant to be part of my continuous learning process and

reflexivity as a researcher, and not necessarily make it into the final text. I link this to Sara Ahmed's (2017) notion of 'sweaty concepts' in the context of writing where she asserts that we might not need to eliminate the effort or labour from writing. That is, not eliminating the labour becomes an academic aim especially since we have been taught to tidy our texts and not reveal the struggle that we encounter in getting somewhere. In other words, admitting the discomfort in writing and communicating ideas neatly is important in feminist research. Chadwick (2021) also contends that ignoring and erasing feelings of discomfort in feminist research can be risky. This is because disregarding discomfort may contribute to reinforcing hierarchical power dynamics and dominant ways of knowing.

The writing phase of the research process progressed as a dialogical process, shaped by ongoing discussions with supervisors, co-researchers, and peers. The writing process became an opportunity for continuous refinement and critique. It was not merely a reporting exercise but my commitment to centring the women's voices. I consider it a tool for disturbing dominant narratives about Congolese and Liberian women in the context of wars and peace and introducing these women's narratives that emerged from our encounters. My supervisors provided crucial feedback, emphasising the importance of situating my work within the broader context of feminist-decolonial scholarship. In retrospect, my post-fieldwork encounters with 'data' analysis and writing fostered a sense of community and collective relational accountability, reinforcing the ethos of this research that extends beyond individual achievements.

## **4.6 Conclusion**

As I conclude this reflective methodological story, it is evident that the journey of feminist-decolonial research extends beyond individual endeavours. I hope that I have been able to show that research is indeed ceremony, to borrow Shawn Wilson's (2008) words. In this 'messy' un-ideal academic research context, I have adopted feminist-decolonial methodologies that comprise critical reflexivity, collaboration and relationality, deep conversations, respect, accountability, uncertainties, etc. I have also tried to show how all these manifested in my experiences before, during, and after the field. I hope that in my attempt to take you the reader on my methodological journey, I have shown you why the arrogant dominant perception of research with its rigidity and pre-defined steps did not fit into this study. This is a collective labour, a continuous dialogue that draws strength from multiple voices and perspectives, propelling this research towards re-imagining peace with women in the DRC and Liberia. In the next chapter, the women in this study share their stories of living amidst wars and peacebuilding, as well as their stories of living in a presumed postconflict environment while still working for peace.

## **Chapter Five | Talking Peace: Voices and Experiences of Women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In the preceding chapter, I recounted my methodological encounters with Congolese and Liberian women within their respective contexts. In this chapter, I bring forward the stories of these women concerning their understanding of peace as well as their efforts and struggles towards achieving their visions of peace. I consciously refrain from labelling these stories as ‘findings’ because I underscore the agency inherent in their actions, particularly regarding nurturing peace on their own terms, which transcends any passive anticipation of being ‘found’. Their commitment to their own principles and approaches towards peace remains constant, irrespective of external validation or acknowledgement. I say this because the term ‘findings’, as commonly employed in conventional research paradigms connotes a hierarchical framework or arrogant perception where knowledge needs to be ‘discovered’ and validated. This, for me, implies an individualistic process that privileges the researcher as the sole arbiter of knowledge i.e., one who ‘found’ something; rather than an interactive, co-creative endeavour through dialogue and relationality.

I do not claim to have ‘found’ these women and what they do in the traditional sense of discovery. Rather, it is more accurate to say that these women ‘chose’ to share their stories and experiences with me, from which I have ‘learnt’. This distinction is crucial, as it underscores a collaborative and respectful methodology that values the agency and contributions of the women involved. Lugones (2010) posits that decolonising gender is necessarily a praxical task. This means it is not merely a theoretical endeavour but one that requires active and engaged practice. It involves placing the researcher in the midst of people, engaging directly with their historical and subjective,

as well as intersubjective, experiences, which is essential to understanding the dynamics of oppression and resistance as simultaneous lived realities. In essence, decolonising gender through this praxical task means immersing myself in the lived realities of the women in this study, 'learning' from their experiences, and recognising their agency in shaping the research. It is a process that demands humility, active participation, and a commitment to mutual learning and respect. Therefore, it is from these lessons based on the stories shared with me that this chapter is written.

As articulated in the previous chapter, while I attempted to organise these stories thematically, I also recognise the discomfort in neatly categorising stories that defy such compartmentalisation. Thus, the reader may sense instances where certain stories do not necessarily align with a particular theme. Still, my objective in this chapter is not to achieve neat categorisation but to share and appreciate these stories in their own right. With this preamble, I commence this chapter by sharing the stories of Congolese women, encompassing reflections on the simultaneity of conflict and peace, reconceptualising womanhood, and related themes. Subsequently, I pivot to the stories of Liberian women, encapsulating their perspectives on peace, 'postconflict' transitions, and multifaceted dimensions of womanhood, amongst others. Noteworthy here is also my fluid transition between the pronouns 'I' and 'We'. I use 'we/us' to reference the collective endeavour it took to engage with the women in this study. So, in instances where I say, 'We asked' or 'They told us', the 'we' and 'us' here refer to me, Alice, Olga, and Varlee respectively, as introduced in the previous chapter. The use of 'I' connotes my reflections.

It is important to emphasise that this chapter prioritises showcasing the stories and voices of the women in this study. It aims to allow their narratives to shine without interference. Their voices shining throughout this chapter is my contribution to

epistemic justice where they have a right to exist in this thesis in their own words. The quotes are important because of their conceptual possibilities and importance regarding how these women are redefining peace. It is for this reason that this chapter centres the women's voices to help me articulate plural ways of understanding peace. This is consistent with my argument at the beginning of this thesis that silenced voices and stories matter, and it is from these stories that I am reconceptualising peace. In the subsequent chapter, these narratives will be analysed and unpacked through a feminist-decolonial framework. This approach is chosen to ensure the voices of the women in this study are respected and understood within a framework that acknowledges and addresses power dynamics and colonial legacies.

## **5.2 Women in the DRC**

So, they said yes, we are victims of war! But also, we are actors of peace!

Solange Lwashiga – Caucus des Femmes pour la Paix, South Kivu

### **5.2.1 Sages, Soldiers, and More: Navigating the Simultaneity of War and Peace**

The simultaneity of war and peace reflects the complex and multifaceted realities experienced by Congolese women who are navigating their roles and identities amidst ongoing conflict. These women find themselves positioned between war and peace, as they engage in peacebuilding efforts while still being impacted by the violence and insecurity of the conflict. All the women we encountered affirmed that they are working for peace amid war as they are not yet in a post-conflict phase. They are not entirely at peace nor fully engulfed in war but rather exist in a dynamic space where they are actively working for peace amid ongoing hostilities. They are simultaneously experiencing oppression by war amongst other things, and resistance by surviving and struggling for peace. This simultaneity of war and peace also encompasses their

evolving roles and identities as they transition between homemakers and community builders to soldiers, activists, leaders, etc., in the face of conflict. The notion of simultaneity emphasises the plural nature of their experiences and the complexities of their lived realities, highlighting the resilience, adaptability, and agency of these women.

Reflecting on women's efforts in upholding peace in their homes and communities during the pre-war era, some of the women in this study affirmed the existence of women known as sages in their communities. These sages served as mediators, in whom people confided to resolve their interpersonal disputes. As explained by Solange Lwashiga:

Before the conflict, of course, you know that women traditionally speaking, are known as people who brought peace, who don't like to see disconnection. Whether she studied or not, she has capacity. So, there are women who people believe in when they take the floor, people can listen and they say Oh what Esther has said is good, Esther always guides people, let's go to see Esther, she's the one who can help us. And when we arrive at Esther's, Esther is not living in a building like this, no, she's living in a wooden house with thatch. That's it. So, of course we had traditional leadership among the women, women who knew what a woman is and who led other women. Yes!

Lwashiga further explained that DRC women, irrespective of their education, did not like any form of discord which is why they ensured there was harmony amongst children and neighbours in their community. Claudine Kafirongo buttresses Lwashiga's point on wise women in the community by referring to the nurturing nature of Congolese women as a way of preserving peace in the community. According to her:

The woman has a very sensitive heart from birth. Before this woman is trained and informed, by nature the woman is a counsellor, she is a mediator, it is innate in her. And from there whenever there is conflict in the family or whatever, often we talk about wise women. She played the role of mediator, advisor and peacemaker, and such things.

During our interactions, I learnt that women's involvement in peace and conflict resolution might appear to be mainly at the family and community level before the war because it was mostly men who led the 'Baraza' (local council) where community issues were resolved. There was also the 'Kihanda' (local assembly) chaired by the community leaders who were mostly men. This is due to the Congolese tradition where women were mainly supposed to uphold the household and not get involved in the 'Baraza' and 'Kihanda' where men gathered depicting a hierarchy amongst genders. Esperance Chaguma said: 'Before, the woman just had to look after the children and manage the household but not sit with the men where they meet. The woman was really not involved in big issues'. Jose Ekwa also said, 'But as our customs say that the woman must be silent'.

Speaking of 'big issues', some of the women we interacted with made it clear to us that while they did not participate in the 'Baraza' and 'kihanda' where 'big issues' were supposedly discussed by the men; maintaining togetherness in the home and with neighbours in the community through meal sharing, counselling, mediation to mention but a few was, in fact, a 'big issue' and a precondition for peaceful co-existence in the community. Solange Lwashiga puts it this way:

When people talk about peace negotiation what they are looking for is power, political position, they don't care about that woman who fought with her neighbour because the cow or the goat or the pig of the neighbour has destroyed one single plant of cassava. Do you know that such conflict can put fire on the whole province?

Buttressing this point, Kavira Yeye said:

It is the woman who fights for herself to be at peace with her neighbours. We grew up in peace and our neighbours were considered our brothers and this is the fruit of the peace that our mothers maintained in our communities. The woman creates peace even without saying anything. She can just cook a meal and give it to two men who are in conflict; when they eat together, they will speak the same language and get along easily. But despite this war situation, women have not folded their arms!

With the prevalent instability in eastern DRC, Congolese women have experienced a shift in roles and positions in their homes and communities respectively. Indeed, they 'have not folded their arms'. Some have taken on roles as breadwinners and community leaders, some were soldiers at some point in the war, while some fought and are still fighting for peace in the region. Explaining the evolution of Congolese women before the war and how they are navigating the simultaneity of war and 'peace', Marie Riziki said:

Women did not really know how to get up to take up arms and fight directly. But today, with all that is being done, with the recovery that we are seeing in our societies, we feel that women are gradually regaining their place. This woman who has been marginalised in time, she becomes aware, she gets up, and understands that she can do something.

Supporting Marie's point, Sandra Kavira also said:

First of all, women did not know about the existence of violence but with wars, they experienced this violence (especially sexual) unfortunately they did not have the say at that time, they did not know that they could also stand up to claim their rights. Later they realised that if they do not get up, they will never be able to reclaim their rights!

Losing their husbands to the recurrent violence also facilitated the shift in roles and positions in their communities. Women now had to provide for their children and take on leadership positions. Claudine Kafirongo stated, 'Often it is the men who go to war, it affects the woman, she stays there with the children. Sometimes the husband is killed there, the wife has to fend for herself!'. Jose Ekwa also said:

Let us note that there is an evolution of the situation of women, she who could not express herself before is now involved in several decision-making bodies! I went through our commune of Karismbi and I even went to Ndosho, I noticed that we have a lot of female leaders in the avenues and the neighbourhoods! I glorify God! Even me who speak to you here I am Nyumba Kumi (Head of ten houses)<sup>29</sup>.

---

<sup>29</sup> As explained by Alice, the Nyumba Kumi controls the security of her entities. She manages problems between neighbours (land disputes for example), organises community work and ensures that all houses or households in its entity actively participate. She also ensures the health, migrations, etc. within her entities.

Interacting with female ex-combatants also revealed how Congolese women took on roles as soldiers during the war. Contrary to the popular misrepresentation of DRC women as merely sexualised victims of war, these women expressed how they were recruited into fighting factions as well as the roles they played. Sharing her recruitment and wartime experience, one of the women from the focus group conversation said:

I had joined the army by force, and it was in the armed group PARECO in 2004 and then I had rejoined the national army. Because of motherhood and sexual harassment, work had become difficult! I worked more than a man because I was exploited as a sex slave and as a soldier.

Some joined fighting factions voluntarily and were in charge of logistics and ammunition while others even became leaders of platoons. According to one of the women:

I too was not forced but what pushed me to enter was because of the fact that I had been imprisoned at the small barrier while I was going to get the goods. I was angry and when I knew that there was recruitment into the armed groups, I joined!

Talking about the roles they played in the armed groups, one woman said:

I did the patrols, prepared the food, and served especially where the fighters were in hot spots and when the roads were barricaded, we were responsible for removing the stones on the road.

Another said, 'I was second in command of the 21st Battalion'. Two other women said, 'I was head of the women fighters' and 'I was a platoon leader of 36 people'.

While some women embodied roles as soldiers, others have struggled and continue to be more vocal in their quest for peace amidst the violence and insecurity plaguing eastern DRC. During our conversations, they all alluded to the fact that they are not yet in a postwar state. That is, the mainstream binary thinking of war-peace or rather 'peacebuilding' happening at war's end is not the case with the DRC as I will discuss further in Chapter 6. Peacebuilding is happening amid war and vice-versa, and the

everyday realities of Congolese women are how they navigate between the two occurrences. According to these women, while the region might appear to have seen some recovery, they are constantly fighting for peace even in a crisis. In the words of Valentine Migabo, 'Peace has not yet been restored in the DRC. We are still at war. Especially us who live in the villages!'

Explaining how Congolese women have displayed courage in their quest for peace, Jose Ekwa said:

The women of North Kivu even went to the rebels in the forests to plead for peace! There are women who have even gone to Rwanda to see the President of Rwanda to beg for peace to return to our country! They even begged the rebel leader Laurent Nkunda, they were not afraid to go where the men were afraid to go!

Solange Lwashiga also said:

Once in Sun City<sup>30</sup>, the parties to conflict, to armed conflict didn't want to have an Agreement, what did the women do? They closed the doors; I don't know if you have heard about that. They closed the doors and the windows, they told men, you men, you are the ones who plan for war and don't care about we your wives, sisters, kids because you're searching for power, you won't leave the room unless you sign the Agreement. There were other women who were in Sun City, but they were outdoors. So, there was a connection between women inside, women outdoors and women left in the country. What a great job! I think that it's the very very first experience how Congolese women intervene. You see, are they victims?

Seeing as Congolese women transition between homemaking to community building before the war to soldiers and active peacebuilders during the war, it would be rather conceited and ignorant to label them merely sexualised victims of the war. Nevertheless, the war had its impacts on several aspects of these women's lives, particularly their means of livelihood. This is discussed in the succeeding sub-heading.

---

<sup>30</sup> The Sun City Agreement resulted from the inter-Congolese dialogue between warring factions in 2003 held in Sun City, South Africa.

### 5.2.2 Reconfiguration of Livelihoods and the Simultaneity of War and Peace

Before the war in the DRC, cross-border women traders travelled easily to Rwanda and other neighbouring countries to purchase goods to resell in the markets and earn an income. It was this income they used to feed their children, pay their children's school fees, and support their family. These women highlighted that while the war affected their trade, they have been able to navigate the war-peace situation to continue procuring goods from Rwanda to fend for their children, especially because many of them have now become breadwinners of their families. During the focus group conversation with the market women at the DRC-Rwandan border in Ruzizi, Kitumaini said:

Wars began in the DRC since 1996. And this war had started in Rwanda, so Rwandans came to our country and created rebellions. After that, everything had changed, the population abandoned houses, fields in the village and we all came to the city. When we arrived in town, everything changed starting with food prices. Everything changed and the francs were no longer valuable because the (US) dollar took the lead, the dollar dominated while we only used the francs. Today, even to buy vegetables, we have to pay the dollars and the rising dollar rate from day to day.

Buttressing Kitumaini's point, Balibuno Blangeti said:

Since the war, the lives of small cross-border traders have really changed. It is women who bear the burden of their families. Children must be educated; medical care and various other burdens must be borne. The war made us suffer because we sell now but we don't have much profit anymore. Before the war, we would cross the border with tokens and go to Rwanda to buy our goods. But today to cross the border we need to have the CEPGL<sup>31</sup> and we have to pay 12 dollars to have this document...

From our conversations with cross-border market women, it became evident that peace to them simply meant the ability to trade freely, sell their goods without fear of violence, and most importantly provide for their families. For example, Kungwa Mazambi said:

---

<sup>31</sup> CEPGL is a travel document. The full meaning is Communauté économique des pays des grands lacs. In English it means Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries.

Our husbands have no jobs, they are unemployed, and it is we who have to fight for our respective families. That is, if you want to talk about peace, really, we don't have any.

Shami Kapami also said:

There is insecurity and a lot of killings and even in our work that we do here, we are not in a good situation because Rwandans are starting to cross and come with the goods themselves. After sending us the goods we asked them for, they still come here to our home and become our competitors in our own market. This complicates the market price, and we do not have peace that way.

This conversation leads to the following section on how Congolese women define peace amidst war.

### **5.2.3 Congolese Women Conceptualising Peace**

As aforementioned, the context of the DRC is characterised by a complex continuum wherein peacebuilding efforts co-exist with ongoing conflict, of which women have actively been engaged in working for peace since the inception of the conflict. Regardless of their socio-economic standing, the women we engaged with uniformly conveyed the absence of peace in the DRC. As articulated by Florence Nguomoja, 'As you know, given that the period of war has just lasted a long time, we are confusing normal time and wartime, we are confused, and it seems that it is the same thing'. This statement about confusing normal time with wartime encapsulates the notion of simultaneity in the DRC. It reflects the blurred distinction between periods of peace and conflict, suggesting that the conditions of war have become so ingrained in daily life that they are perceived as the norm. This further stimulated my interest in understanding what peace means to Congolese women and what they meant by 'There is no peace in DRC' or 'We are not at peace in DRC'.

In explaining their conceptualisations of peace and peaceful community, some themes emerged, which will be expounded upon here. These include a sense of self and community satisfaction, harmony and togetherness, security and stability, absence of inequalities, and tranquillity. Additionally, discernible distinctions arose among the women based on their societal positioning, underscoring the necessity of contextualising their perspectives on peace. For instance, women traders derive their understanding of peace from the challenges encountered within familial dynamics and the constraints posed on their regular trading endeavours. It is noteworthy, however, that the association of peace with familial concerns is not exclusive to the cross-border women sellers. Rather, for some women, peace is understood as an individual sense of freedom and security, albeit one that maintains communal interconnectedness. Conversely, those with access to international institutions may conceive of peace within a broader geopolitical context. Yet communal solidarity, togetherness and shared experiences remain fundamental to their comprehension of peace.

Community satisfaction for Congolese women means living in harmony, togetherness, and tranquillity with their neighbours which in turn translates to peace. Linking this to the first sub-heading on how Congolese women sustained peace in their communities before the war, one can comprehend why harmony and togetherness are crucial elements for peace for them. When asked to explain what peace means to her, Agnes Sadiki said:

It is first of all a kind of social harmony because when we talk about peace people like to link it to weapons while we can miss peace because we have lacked food, we can miss peace because we are not on good terms with our spouse, our children, with the community. We can also miss peace because of how we live here, all these inequalities that we live in, it does not create harmony. So peace is the set of elements that create harmony in a society!

Joly Kamuntu also described peace as:

A state of mind, a sense of tranquillity, a sense of personal self-satisfaction, a sense of community satisfaction too. That is my definition of peace. It is the state of being in good condition with others, and with those around you.

To further understand what peace means to them, we also asked them to paint a picture of a peaceful community in their own words. Answering this question, Valentine Migabo said, 'A peaceful community is characterised by the love of neighbours, solidarity and sharing. In a peaceful community, people cannot kill each other, people cannot wish for the fall of others'. In her explanation, Valentine told us about her childhood in pre-war DRC where she did not even know what a gun looked like, unlike the current situation in the DRC where guns and the sound of gunshots are rampant. Buttressing Valentine's point on what a peaceful community is, Florence Nguomoja said:

It is a community in which we live in harmony, we share everything, we share life: in case of difficulties others come to sympathise with the needy, in times of war, we know how to share with the poor.

For Marie Riziki:

A peaceful community, that is, people get along. People can give each other ideas and live together without some hurting others. That is, people live together, and they agree.

To achieve community satisfaction where there is togetherness and harmony amongst members, some women alluded to the fact that security and socio-economic stability in terms of income and livelihoods are also necessary for peace. In Esperance Chaguma's words, 'peace is tranquillity, it is stability, the absence of war, socio-economic stability'. She went on to describe a peaceful community as one where, '... there is no war, there are no tribal conflicts, nor political, social, and economic conflicts'. Kavira Yeye also said:

For me, peace is the fact of living in freedom, it is the absence of war. Peace is when I work, I walk, I do what I want without any form of pressure. You can easily walk around with money without fear of a likely theft or armed attack.

Corroborating Kavira Yeye's point, Furaha Mazambi describes how peace for her is safety and security:

We don't have peace because we can't walk freely at night first. If there is peace we can go where we want and when we want without anyone insecure us. Where there is peace, we can work at any time, we can go even to remote villages, and no one is there to destabilise us or destabilise our work.

Grace Malkia also elucidates on the meaning of peace and a peaceful community:

Peace is the absence of war, in a word peace is stability. A peaceful community is a community that is not violent, it is also a community that does not use force, we make demands that do not use violence. It is a community that uses non-violence as a weapon.

For P.M, a female ex-combatant, 'Peace is freedom, peace is the absence of war, peace is peace of mind. There is no armed robbery, no scams'.

Beyond the absence of overt violence, some elite women describe peace as socio-economic stability. Claudine Kafirongo words it this way:

In my opinion, when we want to talk about peace, we want to talk about development, because there is no development without peace. Practically speaking of peace, we are talking about tranquillity, security. I cannot say that I am at peace if I am not secure physically, morally, spiritually, economically, and socially.

Isabelle Pendeza agrees with Claudine's point on peace as development. She links peace to the United Nations' sustainable development goals. According to her:

If the DRC, which has signed the Sustainable Development Goals and so far, we do not see anything, we will not have peace! Most of the conflicts are related to this: we do not have food, we do not have where to stay, roads, land, etc. Conflicts begin if we do not achieve the SDGs, there will be no peace in this region.

Putting it into specific contexts, Munyerenkana Maroy said, 'Peace is when children study without problems. Even the poorest have easy access to basic education. Peace is also the collaboration between two people'. On peace as a collaboration between people, Shami Kapama explains how collaborating with Rwandans to receive goods to trade is in fact peace to her. In her words:

For me peace is when there is this collaboration between us Congolese and Rwandans, we see that there is a little peace; when we lack goods we cross, and they give us and sometimes they even give them to us on credit.

Buttressing Shami Kapama's point, Marcelline said, 'Peace for me is when I find the goods without much difficulty, I sell without problem, and I find a little profit to provide for my family'.

Painting a picture of the kind of peace that Congolese women desire and are fighting to achieve, Solange Lwashiga said:

...What is most important is to see that woman even if she's barefoot, she does not have shoes, but she works day and night for her family! To cultivate and be sure that what she's cultivating, she will harvest and bring home, cook in her small house at night without closing the door. Cooking, and when there is the moon or there is no moon, the kids go outside, they take saucepans and small wooden sticks and begin beating, dancing, crying without bearing in mind that there will be somebody who will come and attack them. That's the peacebuilding that women are looking for. They don't ask for Mercedes Benz, no, they don't ask to fly and go to New York and so on, no.

Buttressing this point further she said:

I'm going to show you a picture. Last year, I tried to say I'm going to cultivate, I cultivated peanuts and unfortunately the season was not good, I didn't have too much. (Shows us a picture), this is me, this is my production. So, imagine if it was a woman living in the village with this, she knows that okay some of these 'kalanga' peanuts, she can have some and she can prepare for her kids, you see. This is in a traditional kitchen, this is me, this was last week. So, that is what we would like. The women, that's what they need. If she comes from the field late, she can take her mortar and cassava and begin to pound even if it's 7pm but there are places where when they get home they have to tie the house and the door because they are afraid. That's it!

From the meanings they have attributed to peace, Congolese women are also contributing to peacebuilding in their respective communities based on their socio-economic realities. They have developed structures, and projects, and also prayed for peace's sake in eastern DRC. The next sub-heading discusses this in more detail.

#### **5.2.4 'Peacebuilding is in the Head and in the Pocket': Congolese Women's Approaches and Contributions to Peace**

Echoing Kavira Yeye's words, 'but despite this war situation, women have not folded their arms!', this section highlights how the women in this study are contributing to peace in their communities. Since these women define peace from a communal perspective and a sensation of freedom from fear to trade, and be at ease, their approaches and contributions to peace reflect these meanings. These include listening clubs, monitoring in rural villages and early warning at the national level, awareness raising, skills acquisition for women and girls to address inequalities, promotion of women leadership in the villages and at the national level, advocacy, youth education and empowerment, and the use of music, theatre, and sports to promote peace in communities.

Listening clubs are typically established by urban women's organisations, predominantly those funded by international partners<sup>32</sup>, within communities to facilitate dialogue and gather information concerning issues impacting community cohesion. Subsequently, this information is conveyed to relevant national authorities by these urban women's organisations. Through our conversations, it became evident that these clubs are primarily initiated in rural villages by urban-based women's

---

<sup>32</sup> | discuss partnerships for peace in the next sub-heading.

organisations. Collette Salima elucidated her organisation's involvement in the establishment of such listening clubs. In her words:

So, we put women's listening clubs in different territories where we go, and every time we are in the field, we talk to them. Sometimes we even give practical work and they do it very well. Our work is much more in raising awareness but also in the distribution of tasks. We can raise awareness but if the distribution of tasks is not well done, there is always this imbalance. And when we give responsibilities, we share the tasks. Girls are given some responsibilities and boys are given some responsibilities. For example, a boy can now do the dishes, so the girl does something else, and it does not pose problems. These women call us from time to time to tell us how they are moving forward.

Eliane Polepole also explained how her organisation set up 62 listening clubs in different territories. These listening clubs keep them updated on the situation of things in their villages which they then transmit via the media at the national level. According to her:

We do capacity building for grassroots women's groups that we call "listening club cores". The core listening clubs are set up by L'Association des Femmes des Médias<sup>33</sup> (AFEM) so that these groups can send us the problems that are in the community. To date, we have about 62 core listening clubs that are spread over the eight territories of South Kivu province. When there is a problem at the community level e.g. an attack in Kabare or Kalehe, we receive the information directly through the members of the nuclei listening clubs. These members tell us the problem that there is at the grassroots level, and we at our level, we relay the information through the online media as well as on the radio to inform the authorities about different problems in the province. It is in this sense that we seek security at our level because we know that without security we cannot work and the members who are in the territories as well as in the city cannot develop.

Agreeing with Eliane Polepole, Agnes Sadiki talked about how her organisation works with the listening clubs formed by other international organisations. She explained that the clubs facilitate their job of monitoring and early warning. That is, when there is violence in remote villages, the listening clubs are their first point of

---

<sup>33</sup> The English translation is The Association of Media Women.

contact to enable them to monitor the situation and inform the appropriate national entities. According to her:

Our job is above all monitoring and early warning. When there are human rights violations, attacks here and there, they alert us. We work with the listening clubs of other organisations, and we have a network system at the base. We have distributed mobile phones to our focal points in the environment where we feel that insecurity is a problem in an increased way, especially in Lulingu Nyambe, Kasese, Mapimo, Mulungu, Nyalukungu in Wakabango, and also in Shabunda Centre.

Similar to Agnes' point, Isabelle Pendeza also explained how her organisation is involved in monitoring and alerting the appropriate entities on issues related to peace and stability. They also collaborate with other women's organisations to criticise laws that hinder women from participating in peace work at all levels.

Yes, we already do monitoring and making alerts; we always do projects with other women, we appeal and say women want this and that! We go to national, regional, and provincial levels to denounce the laws that prevent us from maintaining peace...

Capacity building through skills acquisition and dialogue groups to foster social cohesion was also a prominent theme that emerged when engaging with women on their approaches and contributions to peace in their communities. Some women worked with young people to teach them how to be non-violent communicators when making their plights known, others worked with women to acquire the necessary skills needed for leadership positions. For example, Judith Maroy works with both young people and women. She explained:

Personally, what I do is fight. I started the fight here in the citizen movement – Lutte Pour Le Changement<sup>34</sup> (LUCHA) which is a non-violent movement. That is to say, it is a peaceful movement and uses only peaceful methods for political, economic or social demands. And what we do to ensure that we have peace is we teach above all, the youngest how to be actors of peace in their communities, how to be non-violent communicators in their respective environments. And more particularly me, what I focus on lately are women. I try to do sessions with indigenous women. For example, Pygmy women who often have a land problem and when they want to claim their land they are always violent, and this leads to conflicts between community leaders. So

---

<sup>34</sup> The English translation is Fight for Change.

what we do, we try to teach them the non-violent and peaceful methods of being able to claim even if they feel that their rights are not respected.

In terms of acquiring communication skills, several women spoke extensively on the importance of being articulate as a woman to confidently express themselves and fight for their rights. For them, when a woman is articulate in community meetings, she tends to be taken more seriously by her male counterparts. It is for this reason that they prioritise community dialogues and speaking skills for women and young people.

Explaining this further, Joly Kamuntu said:

In relation to the promotion of peace, we are more involved in building the capacity of young people and women on their role in peacebuilding. We are also promoting citizen debate because without speaking we cannot act. Through the debate, we give a voice to young people and women, they express themselves, they give their points of view on all issues. Whether it's good governance, peace, women's leadership, young people and women have learned to speak up.

Solange Lwashiga also said:

All we do as a women's caucus is so that in the end we can have social cohesion and peace. And one who speaks of social cohesion speaks directly of peace. So, we do community dialogues that take into account peacebuilding aspects. We bring together men and women, girls and boys to discuss together on issues related to peace with different pre-established themes. Gender, women's participation, gender equality, political participation, sexual harassment. Our major strategy is that in all these groups, it is the women who lead, and among the women, there are the demobilised women.

Adding more context to the importance of dialogues and boosting women's communication skills, Jose Ekwa explained how her ability to speak fluently yielded in the resolution of a dispute in her avenue. She said:

Even here in Goma, there are many women in the political groups who have not studied, how are you going to empower them? You have to teach them how to speak! There are others who do not know French, how can they discuss with the Chiefs? One day, we had a meeting with our Mayor, and he asked the community Chiefs to ask a question, the whole audience was calm and since no one asked the question, I asked my question about a kiosk owner who was making noise all day until 10 p.m. with music. With my good French, the mayor nodded and the men who were in that meeting said, "This woman just asked a very important question!". Before, there was loud music and thieves, but now the avenue is quiet.

While community dialogue groups are a means of strengthening youth and women's capacity, they also provide a platform for women to confidently voice their concerns to the appropriate authorities in their communities for action to be taken in terms of peacebuilding and development. Eliane Polepole said:

We organise community dialogues that allow us to do a "face-to-face" with the authorities, community members, local authorities, community leaders, customary leaders, and religious leaders to discuss these issues that hinder the development of women in the community, which hinder the promotion of women's rights on issues related to peacebuilding.

Buttressing this point, Solange Lwashiga said:

We go directly to the competent authorities to criticise issues that hinder the emergence of women. I remember that in Walungu, there are pleas that have been made by women and that have good results because the women's caucus accompanies them to find a solution. In Kalehe there are tribal conflicts and now, in the dialogue groups we accompany them, and we talk about peacebuilding issues.

Lwashiga further explained that community dialogue groups are very effective in conflict resolution so much so that local authorities who happen to be mostly men refer cases to these dialogue groups. She said, 'Local authorities refer some cases to our dialogue groups, can you imagine? So, the local authorities have understood that those community dialogues have an important role'. During our discussion, she repeatedly received phone calls, which she muted. Eventually, she informed us that a community leader had been calling her for assistance in resolving a conflict. She said:

Now, there is a man who is calling me, because there is a woman who is in conflict with her husband. The husband went away for years now he has come back, and he would love to sell all their lands, can you imagine? Yes, he is coming here, that's why he's trying to recall me.

Capacity building in terms of skills acquisition for young people and women's economic independence was another approach to peace that most women talked about. According to them, when women are economically secure, they have the ability

to support not just their family but also other women and their community at large. Also, when young people are educated either formally or through entrepreneurship, cases of theft, thuggery, and violence causing instability are more likely to reduce. This point can be linked to the women's definition of peace as economic stability in the previous sub-heading. Highlighting the importance of women's economic development, Graciella Kibanja said:

We tell ourselves that a resilient woman, a woman who is economically strong, she is unlikely to be a victim of different types of violence; and so that is why we also work in the promotion of women's empowerment or women's economic resilience. We have a project, that of strengthening the economic resilience of women, and this is more in the territory of Nyiragongo.

Elucidating this point further, Joly Kamuntu said:

We do entrepreneurship because, for us, peacebuilding is in the head and in the pocket. For two people who fight for a field for example, as long as the other has not found his field, the war will continue. That is why we are working to empower women economically to create peace where they live.

On supporting women economically as a peacebuilding approach, Collette Salima also told us about her organisation's contribution to build women's economic resilience in eastern DRC. She said, 'When we started, we opened a tailoring workshop at the organisational level, to try to support vulnerable young women and girls to learn trades to support their children'. These women are also building economic resilience through the Village Savings and Loan Association where a group of 10 or 20 women come together to contribute and save some amount of money to support their business and community. Solange Lwashiga explained:

Women have grouped themselves into associations, and income associations. The 'AVEC' (Village Savings and Credit Associations). I think they are even in your country. Let me explain, they are local initiatives to allow women of low income to increase their income. So, in a group you can have the number you want, they can be 10, 20 and you say okay at the end of the week, each of us has to bring half a dollar. It is a process of maybe 9 or 10 months or a year. So, they have got two parts: the main box and the love box. In the main box, they put an amount which is for business and in the love

box, they put a small amount for festivities and social problems. That's it! They have set up those things and I tell you, I remember one of the women told me, because I have two 'VSL' that I coordinate, and said "eh at the end of the year we have the opportunity to decide how we can have our feasts, we women, we are going to enjoy".

Corroborating Lwashiga's point, female ex-combatants in Goma told us about how they divided themselves into groups to participate in the AVEC since the government did not support them. According to them:

We do small businesses, but it was not the government that gave us the money! We often meet in AVEC. We organise ourselves to find an amount that we share to work with.

Marie Riziki also said:

At our level, we don't have great power. But what we're doing is educating other women so that they understand that women have to fight for us to have peace in every way and not just do household chores. It is for this reason that women even engage in small businesses to provide for their families and first create peace at the family level.

Teaching young people conflict management, peacebuilding, and gender equality is another approach to peace that Congolese women are involved in. Some of them work with schools while others use sports and music to attract youths for peacebuilding. These women emphasised the importance of engaging young people in these issues as it transforms their minds from an early age. Graciella Kibanja said:

First of all, for young people, we focused more on schools. We created animated clubs for the promotion of gender equality and the transformation of conflicts in schools; they are mixed clubs. It was more at the level of the Masisi territory, Nyiragongo and in the city of Goma. We managed to expand the clubs in more than 20 schools, and this has made it possible for students to have a culture of peace, the promotion of gender equality and the promotion of women's rights from an early age. We have not stopped since then, we work with school officials, and we also work with parents through parents' committees in schools.

Furaha Bisimwa also explained how she is involved in working with young people through her work in the church. In her words:

What we do is raise awareness. Raise awareness especially among young people because they are the future of tomorrow. Most of the thugs are young people. So, we encourage young people to get involved in denouncing those who sow terror. Also, if young people can get involved to raise awareness among their friends, things can change. We visit neighbourhoods and train young people to sensitise their brothers and friends to get involved in conflict management and peace.

Explaining how the use of sport, music, and other cultural activities are also approaches to peacebuilding that women in DRC are exploring, Joly Kamuntu said:

We also use culture – music, and theatre, because building peace is also through leisure. In the DRC, we have evolved in a context of war and leisure is part of the remedies to heal all these wounds that we have. We, therefore, supervise the musical artists to whom we give training on peacebuilding. They then produce songs, and sketches that we publish through popular expression forums. Around this issue of peace, we make what is called "youth coffee", we bring together 3000 young people, and they exchange on the roles of young boys and girls in the fight for gender equality. And our strategy is to work first in the family because, in our country, discrimination already begins in the family. Whether it's music, sports, or culture, we integrate girls and boys to show them that they can do everything together. Society must understand that women are not an opponent of men, but they must work together to achieve good results.

Advocacy and sensitisation are other approaches to peace implemented by Congolese women. Both in rural and urban communities, women are advocating for peace and the involvement of women in leadership at the national level. For them, while working at the grassroots is paramount for peacebuilding, they also expressed how it is equally important for more women to be involved in decision-making at the formal level. To achieve this, many of the women we interacted with are actively involved in sensitising women to participate in elections. They also encourage young people and other women to vote for female representatives in government. Some are advocating for gender justice for victims of sexual violence. Claudine Kafirongo explained this point further:

Women have discovered that they are not sufficiently represented in decision-making bodies, it would be better if they did everything to be represented. Not only to be represented but also to participate. How can it be done? It has been discovered that in our country you cannot access decision-making bodies if you are not a member of a political party to participate in elections. This is why we are raising awareness in the community. We sensitize men, boys, and girls of voting age to vote for women; we also sensitize women to have confidence in themselves.

Graciella Kibanja also talked about her organisation's advocacy for women to participate in decision-making and dialogues on peace.

We do various advocacy actions so that women can participate in decision-making bodies at the local level. This allows the woman to participate when there are dialogues and peace discussions, and when there are conflicts, she is able to mediate these different conflicts.

In terms of women developing self-confidence, Florence Nguoja explained that awareness-raising and sensitisation also help some women see themselves beyond victims. This in turn encourages such women to lead an independent life and participate in the struggle for peace. According to her:

It always goes back to awareness-raising; for example, when we aim at the empowerment of women, you see that it comes back in the same context to remove them from the risks of victimisation. When we sensitize young girls around empowerment, it is so that one day they do not feel more vulnerable in society but that they feel able to lead an independent life.

Agreeing with Florence, Valentine Migabo also said:

We keep fighting for peace. We sensitize other women to no longer fold their arms but to act. We must act to ensure that people stop seeing us as victims. We are actors of peace, we expose evil, we expose suspicious people who create unrest in our community, and we take care of our security situation.

Due to the repetition of awareness-raising and sensitisation made by most of the women we talked to, we asked why they emphasised a lot on this point as well as its cruciality to their struggle for peace in eastern DRC. Answering our question, Kavira Yeye said:

We are in action, we are raising awareness because it is our children who die overnight, it is our husbands who are killed here and there, and we suffer enormously. We, as women, have advocated against the attacks and kidnappings that are regular in Goma, and God really helps us in the criticisms we make.

Esperance Chaguma described how her organisation utilises the media to raise awareness of the security situation in eastern DRC.

What we do in our organisation, for example, is raise awareness through the media. We are asking for radio broadcasts, and we are speaking out about the security situation in our country. We also believe that with advocacy we can achieve this. But the struggle is still long. We must pursue it constantly.

Beyond advocating for women to participate in politics at the national level, some women are also advocating for victims of gender-based violence. Generose Wera described her organisation's role in providing pro-bono legal services to such women.

The first and great action we provide is free judicial and legal support to survivors of sexual violence and other violations of the law and gender-based violence. With our legal clinics, you find that this is an opportunity to do the monitoring. The more cases of gender-based violence that arrive at the clinic, the more armed groups or people who commit these acts are captured because there is always monitoring. Thus, this work of legal assistance allows Congolese women to receive assistance.

From listening clubs and dialogue groups to capacity building, advocacy and sensitization, Congolese women have been at the forefront of the struggle for peace in their communities. The phrase 'we have not crossed our arms' was a mantra of most women during our conversations, which not only reveals their ardent and nurturing attitude but also their active participation in peacebuilding. Some of them, like the women traders say that their approach to peace is prayer and supporting their children's education so that they grow up to be productive citizens. Others are involved in emergency projects to support women. For example, Graciella Kibanja said:

We also do emergency projects when there are disasters, and when there are problems of any kind we try to help women directly through food assistance and psycho-social assistance. For example, I see lately the territory of Nyiragongo has been a victim of the volcanic eruption in May 2021, and we as a women's organisation

have actions there, we did not cross our arms: we assisted some women, we accompanied them and everything.

During our conversation with Solange Lwashiga, she made a profound statement about Congolese women mastering the art of survival given the precarity of their situation which makes theirs a unique story. In her words:

Congolese women are not only victims, they are actors and they've stood up, and if the war ends, I tell you, Congolese women what they can show to the face of the world, it can be a unique story of survival mechanisms.

The following subheading explores how Congolese women utilise their alliances to advance their strategies and contributions to peace.

#### **5.2.5 'A Single Finger cannot Kill a Louse': Partnerships for Peace**

'In our country, we say that a single finger cannot kill a louse' – Kavira Yeye

This proverb denotes the importance of partnership and teamwork to achieve goals. During our conversation, Kavira Yeye used this proverb to introduce her opinion on different partnerships that Congolese women engage in to achieve their peacebuilding goal. For these women, peace is for everybody, it is relational and there is no single custodian of peace; thus, challenging the notion that peacebuilding is the sole responsibility of certain authorities and institutions. From the previous sub-headings, it is evident that DRC women engage in communal and relational peacebuilding. For example, their conceptualisations of peace ranging from love and sharing to togetherness and solidarity depict this. Also, the description of listening clubs as an approach to peace partly hinted at the relationship between women's organisations in urban areas and those at the grassroots. Thus, this theme extensively discusses the relationship variations between different groups of women in the DRC and international organisations in their quest for peace. The collaboration for peace is

divided into two: intra-partnership between different groups of women and inter-partnership between Congolese women and international organisations.

Congolese women are not a homogenous group and the relationship dynamic for their work on peacebuilding and development reflects this. Based on our interactions, it became evident that women at the grassroots tend to implement projects for women in urban areas as will be reflected in some quotes from these women. In some cases, they are the beneficiaries of projects sponsored by international organisations but implemented by those in urban areas. Nevertheless, they agree on a single goal – the involvement of women in the promotion of peace in eastern DRC. Esperance Chaguma explained it this way:

We all work with the goal of seeing our society in peace. We also work on justice and respect for women's rights. We really have the same goals because we all talk about women's rights, and we do it together. But we have differences of opinion, and it comes from the fact that we live in different environments and work in such different contexts. They may want us to work on the basis of their context when it is practically different.

Buttressing Esperance Chaguma's point, Furaha Bisimwa said:

First of all, we are fighting for peacemaking. We all have the goal of putting an end to the violence that continues in eastern DRC and also to put an end to the tribal wars that make our society not move forward. That is the point that binds us. But there are still differences of opinion. For example, there are those who opt for politics, they rely on the government and forget the base. While we, we focus on all levels starting with the base. Because there will be no restoration of peace if in the community there the reign of problems is always. There must always be this connection between the lower level and the higher level.

Some other women also highlighted the fact that women's organisations in urban areas expect them to implement projects in villages based on their urban context. Meanwhile, others have nothing to complain about in terms of their collaboration with women in urban areas. For example, Marie Riziki said:

So far so good, we don't complain. On both sides, we are all winners because the partners give us a little means in terms of money, and we carry out the work locally. What comes out is really something to encourage.

Valentine Migabo also said:

We work with women in Bukavu and throughout South Kivu province, but we have not yet worked with women at the national level. And speaking of our relationships, they are very good. We work together and nothing negative has been recorded yet.

Women working in the cities also attested to the fact that they have similar goals with those in the villages and consider them as partners, not subordinates. Some of them admitted that while those in the villages serve as informants, they implement projects together and work as a team. Providing more insight into the relationship dynamic of rural and urban women in eastern DRC, Joly Kamuntu said:

Yes, we work with women at the grassroots level, and we have a partnership relationship. They are not only our people, but they are our partners, our equals. We have the nuclei with which we work at the village level, and these nuclei participate in all our general assemblies, and they have a say. When we do the strategic planning, they also give us the strategies. We work as partners. It is not a relationship of leader and subordinates. When I am with this woman in the village, I dress like them, I eat with them by hand, and we give them confidence like that. They tell us about their difficulties, their dreams and we feel good like that.

For Marie Riziki, her organisation partners with women at the grassroots through the establishment of peace huts to serve as a space for information gathering and sharing. In her words:

In the villages, we have set up what we call peace huts. So, when there are problems whether it is essentially for peace or other problems, we hold meetings there for exchange, etc.

There are also platforms like Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani and CAFED where women's organisations in rural and urban areas are members. These platforms are essential to foster partnerships with different groups of women working on peace, development, and gender equality projects. In some cases, members of these platforms have access to international funding while others do not. Thus, the platforms assist in merging organisations to work together on a project based on the available funding. Some of the women we engaged with mentioned that it is through these

platforms that they partner with those domiciled in villages. When asked about their collaboration with grassroots women's organisations, Generose Wera said:

Indeed, this collaboration is manifested through the DFJ's membership in the networks and platforms. The DFJ is a member of the Sauti Ya Mama Mukongomani platform which contains many members.

Isabelle Pendeza also said:

In CAFED we have 34 organisations, and in our meetings, each organisation identifies a problem and if we realise that it is a problem common to many organisations, we take it into account and plan an action to solve it together.

Speaking of 'solving problems together', some women also collaborate with international organisations on projects targeted at peacebuilding, development, and women's empowerment, to mention but a few. However, these women explained that most international organisations go to the DRC with a preconceived mindset about Congolese women being solely victims of sexual violence which in turn informs the kind of projects they initiate and sponsor. For example, Isabelle Pendeza said:

They always come with the projects like "Fight against GBV". While the beneficiaries need either water, energy, or peace. We do not need everything they bring to us, if we have peace, the country will develop on its own! They pour a lot of money into the execution of projects to fight against GBV. It is true that GBV is a reality, but we are tackling the consequences instead of tackling the causes. We must fight the cause of violence.

The dominant narrative about Congolese women being solely victims of sexual violence also informs the assumption that they lack the capacity to execute projects on their own without taking instructions from their international 'partners'. According to Generose Wera:

We are on the journey, but it is the international organizations that say that we have no capacity. We have capabilities but the problem is money! Even international organisations don't have the money, they ask donors. If we access the donors, with the funds we will carry out projects on the ground and build the experience. That's my thought.

Adding more context to the Generose's point, Isabelle Pendeza said:

For example, a partner comes with a project whose hazards and challenges we know on the ground. They tell us how to execute the project, we tell them how we would like to execute it because we know the land and the needs of the community. It happens sometimes that the partners refuse to let us execute the project in the sense that we believe is favourable to our community. Sometimes because of the financial and social difficulties that the community is going through, we are forced to accept certain projects.

For these women, funding is the major reason why they partner with international organisations irrespective of the nature and effectiveness of a project in the community. Some of them further highlighted that even if they understand the needs of the communities better than their international partners, they have to be strategic to avoid losing the funding completely. In most cases, they succumb to the wishes of their funding partners since they are the ones with the funds. Agnes Sadiki explains it this way:

We know the real needs of the population, the strategies that can reverse the situation for the interest of the population, but it is they who have the means and their policy. Certainly, the hand that gives is always superior to the one who receives!

Buttressing this point, Collette Salima also said:

Sometimes there is this little concern because internationals have means while those at the local level do not have enough means. But in the end, the one who has the means, it is he who leads. When you have nothing, you don't say anything too. That's usually it!

Joly Kamuntu disagreed with the above-mentioned points by explaining that she only partners with organisations that are willing to support projects initiated and implemented by her organisation. According to her, the irresponsibility of the State has forced local organisations to seek support elsewhere which leads to the relationship dynamic between international and local organisations. In her words:

Faced with this irresponsibility of the state, we have not crossed our arms! This is why we look for support everywhere. When an international organisation comes to the field,

it will not be accepted as I am accepted. I speak the local language; I know the customs and more while an international organisation can't do it like I do. That is why we build relationships with international organisations that support the activities we do. You can't come to help people and turn yourself into an actor on the ground!

Nevertheless, most women agreed that for peace to be achieved in eastern DRC, collaborations are crucial, and all parties must be focused on the same goal. Many of them alluded to the complexity of the situation in eastern DRC and the fact that only local organisations cannot solve the problems especially when they do not receive support from the government. Some elite women revealed that on several occasions, they have been invited to work with the government at the national level. However, they declined such offers due to concerns about potential constraints and co-optation by the government. According to their explanations, they perceive such invitations as mere attempts by the government to enhance its public image and credibility by associating with well-known women activists as a check box exercise, rather than genuine efforts toward collaboration. Joly Kamuntu explained it this way:

We analysed the lists presented in the elections in 2006, in 2011 and in 2018, the women hardly existed. They were ashamed at the last minute because the women were absent, and some came to tell me that they wanted to have my name on their lists. I said “No” because I'm not just anyone! They couldn't take me like that when they don't know my ambitions. So, I have never seen this structure that respects women's rights or acts in favour of women. I went to Kinshasa for advocacy, but they told me, “Mom Joly, women are not competent” and I asked them what? But you see their skills when it comes to dancing for you or keeping the money? I told them they are cheating us by saying that they support women! There is no structure that supports women. Don't be fooled! It is a struggle that is still long, and we have to work a lot to get there.

With agency on the ground and failed state responsibility in mind, the next sub-heading discusses Congolese women's perspectives and experiences on the United Nations Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programme in eastern DRC.

## **5.2.6 'In the Bush, We Ate like Kings': Congolese Women Critiquing the DDR**

### **Programme**

At the time of the field research in eastern DRC, we realised that ex-combatants were classified into different groups viz, those who had participated in the formal DDR process and had been reintegrated into the national army or civilian life, those who were disarmed and awaiting demobilisation and reintegration, and those who self-reintegrated into the community without participating in the formal DDR process also known as 'cartons rouge' (red cards). According to the military official we talked to, participation in the formal DDR process is compulsory for all ex-soldiers and the 'red cards' are usually punished for eluding the process. Still, we had the opportunity to discuss with female ex-combatants who belonged to all three classifications to have a more nuanced understanding of the DDR process. Here, the perspectives and experiences of these women will also be juxtaposed with those of non-combatant women in their communities.

Conversations with female ex-combatants ranged from their disappointment with the entire DDR process to dehumanising living conditions and community stigmatisation. From those who participated in the formal DDR process to those who self-reintegrated into communities, it turned out that most of their experiences were similar. As a matter of fact, the 'red cards' told us that when they compare their lives with those who participated in the formal DDR process, they see no difference and do not regret evading the process. S.L, a young woman who participated in the formal DDR process shared her experience with us:

Yes, I really have an idea about this programme. Myself that you see here, I participated in this programme. There were the sensitisers who came to sensitise us. They had shown us that our place is not in the army, especially since we are women.

Personally, I found important what these sensitizers like CONADER<sup>35</sup> were saying. And then they told us to leave the army for civilian life and promised to give us something so that we could get by in civilian life.

She further explained that the DDR was a voluntary process and there were no conditions or requirements for participating other than the fact that the person was part of an armed group. When asked about her experience upon returning to her community, she said:

When I entered the community, people discriminated against me, they treated me like a dangerous woman. People said, "This woman who comes from the army, she's a bandit..." Really, I was not accepted, people were moving away from me. But what I can say is that my family welcomed me and accepted me. I had not experienced discrimination in the family. I decided to put up with discrimination because I knew it could happen. It is not at all easy for a person who has lived in the army to be accepted into the community. I knew it will take time. Also, in the face of everything people were doing against me, I remained calm and positive. It hurt my heart a lot, but I told myself that a woman must be strong. That's how I got over it.

Given the discrimination she encountered in her community, we asked if she was offered anything during the DDR process to facilitate her reintegration into the community. She asserted:

Oh well! When you are given a small 100 dollar, what will it do for you? They had given me only 100 dollars and I couldn't trade with that. It was too little! I was the one who chose to trade, and they gave me 100 dollars. You can't trade with 100 dollars!

The point of being unable to trade with only 100 dollars has been corroborated by market women in 5.2.2 who also highlighted inflation in the current war economy. Due to the difficulties associated with civilian life, S.L expressed her dissatisfaction with the DDR process and how she prefers life in the army which according to her is much easier than being reintegrated into the community she said:

I wasn't satisfied because after I left the army, I didn't see a big change in my life. And yet they told us that our life would be better after leaving the army. But after we demobilised, things got complicated. People do not accept us, they humiliate us, they

---

<sup>35</sup> Commission Nationale de Démobilisation et Reinsertion. This is the National Commission responsible for the Demobilisation and Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in DRC.

discriminate against us, they consider us as "worthless", it makes me envy the army over civilian life. Sometimes, I tell myself that I should have stayed in the army instead of civilian life which has become more complicated.

She further explained how they lived like a family in the army and always had access to money. In her words:

In the army, I was leading a good life compared to my current life. There, we lived like in a family, we loved each other, we had the spirit of sharing and we easily found money. We ransacked the population for money... without getting tired...

Contrary to S.L's experience, P.M expressed her positive experience from participating in the formal DDR process.

The initiators of the DDR programme came to raise our awareness. They were asking those who wanted to leave the army to do so officially through this DDR programme. That's how we went to CONADER and CONADER had asked us to lay down our arms. After that, CONADER had done training for our integration. Everyone had chosen what they wanted, and I had chosen the cut and sewing. So, from that moment on, I learned sewing. I remain grateful to CONADER because so far I am a seamstress, and it helps me to earn a living.

Nevertheless, like S.L and other female ex-combatants we engaged with, she described how she was initially marginalised in the community but due to the skill she learned in tailoring, it has fostered her integration and community members are beginning to trust her. In her words:

This is where I experienced difficulties because I was not accepted. The other civilians did not consider me as a civilian but as a "difficult" woman because I came from the army. The problem of a demobilised woman is above all acceptance in the community. People see us as dangerous people when we are also like them. We are not dangerous because we have voluntarily abandoned the army. We also want people to trust us. I am naturally humble. When people are reluctant towards me, I would try to approach them and talk with them. Also, my work has allowed me a lot to integrate into the community. Because when someone comes to my house to have their clothes sewn, I arrange to do it well and soon he comes back with another client. That's how I behaved to integrate into the community.

Giving a more detailed explanation of the process of participating in the formal DDR, one of the women from the focus group conversation said:

When I saw that the suffering was increasing, I asked to be demobilised. After accepting my request, I was given my documents proving that I was a soldier and that I had just been demobilised. The steps are as follows: You ask for demobilisation; you are taken to a transit site for training. Then those who are responsible for demobilising ask, 'who are those who want to stay in the army?', and you are reintegrated into the FARDC<sup>36</sup>. Those who want civilian life are demobilised. So, they look at what they will give you after choosing the job you prefer to do to allow you to reintegrate into social life.

She further explained that she was accepted in her community because she had fallen very ill while in the army and this made community members treat her with kindness.

During the focus group conversation with the 'red cards' who eluded the DDR process, one of the women explained why she refused to participate in the programme:

I had left the job without going through the official channel because of the disappointment following the promises not fulfilled by the authorities. When I saw what they had promised to those before without fulfilling it, I was disappointed. In addition, I had asked for demobilisation, but I have not yet been given the document and the social reintegration kit!

Another woman said:

For my case, I was harassed by the Chief and it had traumatised me a lot. There was no way to continue working and if I asked for official demobilisation, he could be the brake (obstacle)! I have a 7-year-old daughter who was born from this harassment.

One of the women explained that she was discouraged by the multiple processes associated with the DDR programme, so she preferred not to participate. Another woman said, 'I had heard about this programme, but I had not participated. I had been demobilised by my leaders without going through DDR'. We asked her to elaborate on how she managed to do this without getting caught and she said:

Life had become complicated and very difficult. I had fallen ill and no longer had to work. So I saw fit to leave instead of dying in the army. Yes, those who leave the army without demobilisation are deserters and they are wanted for punishment. I had left

---

<sup>36</sup> FARDC stands for Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo. It is the official armed forces of the DRC.

under the cover of some of my bosses and I hid so as not to be found. I was in Orientale province, but I had come directly to South Kivu.

In terms of community acceptance and reintegration, and survival, they all asserted that they were not welcomed into the community. More so, the fact that they are 'red cards' makes it worse because some of them had to conceal their identities while others still experienced discrimination. One of them said, 'I told you that I had to hide first so as not to be seen. That is, I didn't have a job and I couldn't go back to school'. Another said, 'Hey! No real welcome. You know that someone from the army is not welcome in our society! That is, no one had welcomed me'. One of the women also explained that to survive in the community, she had to look for a man to marry. She said, 'Yes, I had returned home and without delay, I had found a military husband'.

The conversations with disarmed soldiers who were members of rebel armed groups namely UPDC, AFRC, Mouvement Gav, M23, UPRC Beni, Nyatura, RDC Renove, and Raia Mutomboki, awaiting demobilisation in the Mobambiro transit centre in Masisi were slightly different from the aforementioned groups. These disarmed soldiers explained how they had been waiting in the transit centre for more than 36 months without any attention from the government to be demobilised and reintegrated into their communities. They angrily lamented about the dehumanising living conditions in the camp which I can attest to based on what I saw, their inability to work and earn a productive living and some of them even issued threats of regrouping into the bush if they are not properly demobilised and reintegrated into civil society. Explaining why they decided to leave the bush and surrender their weapons to be disarmed, one of them said:

You see, when we were in our communities we welcomed our neighbours in Rwanda –the FDLR<sup>37</sup> as friends but there came a time when they turned against us. They raped women and committed many other crimes against humanity, that's what they did. We too rose up and created armed groups. When we saw that there was a little peace, we decided to respond positively to the President's call to leave the forest to contribute to the construction of peace in the Republic.

Another woman said:

We had seen that in the forest we were suffering unnecessarily. It was then that we saw fit to rejoin the loyal army to be able to access the salary regularly like other citizens. Unfortunately, this is not what we hoped to find here that we see.

One of the women also said, 'It is true we wanted to reintegrate into the community to be able to work. We have been promised to be reinstated in three months, but there is nothing concrete so far'. Another explained:

I followed the call of the Head of State. When he was here, he asked those who wanted to build the country to leave the bush and that's how we came! However, we have been in this centre since 2018. We want to build our country!

Given their initial drive for demobilisation and reintegration as well as the enthusiasm to build their country as of 2018, we were curious to find out how they would like to be reintegrated into the community and contribute to peacebuilding once they are formally demobilised. Many of them affirmed that they would prefer to be reintegrated into civilian life but only one woman said she would rather be integrated into the FARDC. Still, they emphasised that this is dependent on the government keeping its promises.

One woman said, 'If they honour what we have been promised we will contribute to building peace otherwise, ideas will change!'. Another woman said:

I would like to be given the document showing that I am demobilised, but also to be given a consistent kit for community and socio-economic reintegration. Otherwise, I will have the idea of returning to the bush.

---

<sup>37</sup> FDLR stands for Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda. This is an armed rebel group active in eastern DRC.

One of the women provided more context into why they were emphatic about being satisfied with the demobilisation and reintegration process to avoid returning to the bush to fight. She said:

I also want to contribute. You see in the programme of 2003; they gave a motorcycle to three people. How could three people who had not come from the same territory – for example, if one was from Masisi, the other from Rutchuru, and the other from Walikale – share a motorcycle? Our concern is that we are given an amount that can allow those who want to live their civilian life to have a dignified occupation so that they no longer have the idea of returning to the bush. We have done our part, and it is our contribution to building peace.

Explaining how she would react if she is not satisfied with the reintegration process one of the women asserted:

If they do not satisfy us, we will go back to the bush! If they give me for example 100000FC (50 US dollars), I will have to buy two weapons because I had taken the weapon of the armed group. I will take this sum and buy two weapons with it so that I will go and show them in the group where I came from so that they will not kill me. And if I rejoin the rebel group, I will be worse than before! But if I am satisfied with the PDDRC<sup>38</sup>, I would run my own booth and say that this is the point of demobilisation.

Another woman affirmed, 'If we are not satisfied with the PDDRC, there will never be peace!'. Considering that they had been in the transit centre for more than 3 years living in dehumanising conditions while waiting to be demobilised and reintegrated, many of them expressed their frustrations which also revealed their dwindled enthusiasm to build the country. One of them said:

By going to the government, we hoped that they would take our contribution with interest and give us what they had promised us, but they have not done so, they are violating our rights. So, I do not know if they will succeed in establishing peace!

Another woman said:

It is the President who is the head of the nation. To build or not to build peace depends on him! In the bush, we ate like kings, and here in the transit centre we eat a small spread of fofou with a few beans once a day, and all through the month we sleep on

---

<sup>38</sup> PDDRC stands for Programme Désarmement, Démobilisation, Relevement Communautaire et Stabilisation. It is the United Nations Disarmament, Demobilisation, Community Recovery and Stabilisation Programme.

the floor for years. Then, the president wants peace, is he joking? We ask that we be given our rights! The president does not want peace, he wants death!

Supporting this woman's point, one of the women said:

What the comrades tell you is true and verifiable! If you pass through the site you will see how we live here, how our children are dressed and how we sleep in tents with holes! If you see my children you will be amazed to see what their skin looks like! When they get sick I have no way to get treatment! Now when you talk to me about peace, what should I do? Go to the street and lock the passage of vehicles? When I go to the commander of this site, he has no money! All this comes from the fact that we have just spent a lot of years here when we should be here for only a few days!

Regarding access to healthcare and treatments, another woman contributed:

Something else to add, we wait all this time here because we had left the bush with a decision. The others who were not able to wait returned to the rebel groups. We managed to build our own shelters while waiting for this programme to come. Getting us treated is difficult! When we arrive in health facilities, if they hear you say that you are a returnee, they drop all their equipment saying that the returnees do not pay.

But how are they supposed to pay when they do not have any means of earning an income while in the transit centre? This led to conversations on how they survive in their current living conditions. They explained that they go into the city to work for civilians but are faced with marginalisation. One woman said, 'Sometimes we work for them and in the end, they refuse to pay us as agreed'. Another woman buttressed, 'Like me for example, I come from where I was called to wash clothes and they just refused to pay me and told me to come after!'. Another explained:

It's painful to tell you what we do to survive! Sometimes, we have to cultivate vast expanses of fields for ridiculous sums! There are two boys who lost their lives because they were simply accused of theft while they were only passing by the fields of civilians!

Others expressed similar experiences with civilians who rip them off their payments because they are former soldiers.

We were also interested in the gender dynamics of the DDR process, so we asked the three groups if or how their experiences differ from their male counterparts. Those who participated in the DDR process alluded to the fact that there was no specific difference between men and women as they were treated equally in terms of eligibility requirements to participate in the programme. When asked if her experience as a demobilised woman is different from demobilised man S.L responded:

Of course! It's different! It must be different. Women were more supported because, during the sensitisations, we were told that the place of women is not in the army. So, all the women who had decided to leave were favoured. I think it was to encourage us.

Buttressing S.L's point, P.M said, 'All women were given the hygienic strips and some other small benefits in favour of women. We were also in the best equipped and safer rooms compared to men'. For the women in the transit centre waiting to be demobilised and reintegrated, there was no difference in the living conditions for men and women. While they had separate shelters, it did not seem like women were treated better than men both from my observation and their narrations. In terms of their community reintegration experiences compared to men, both the demobilised women and 'red cards' articulated the difficulties women experienced when they returned to their communities. For example, W.A said:

Men are better than us. First, demobilised women hide but men feel a little comfortable! There are many of the bad qualifiers that are attached to demobilised women. They know you're not a worthy woman.

Given the perceived disconnection between demobilised women and the community, especially since all the categories of female ex-combatants continuously expressed difficulty in community reintegration and acceptance, we were curious to hear the perspectives of non-combatant women in the communities about this issue. During the focus group conversation with the cross-border women traders, the majority

of them claimed that they accepted demobilised women who returned to the community because they knew them before they were recruited into different warring factions. One of the women mentioned that her sister is an ex-combatant. These women also attested to the fact that most demobilised women are left unemployed and self-dependent due to the failed promises of the DDR programme. In their words:

They were happy to leave and when there was the demobilisation programme they hoped to get money from the government. The government had given them bank cards but when some went to the bank with these cards, they did not get the money and since they were already demobilised they could not claim anything; this is how most are idle; others sell small things. Some have married and others are there without activity.

The conversations with women's organisations working for peace were slightly different in that the majority of them affirmed that they do not engage with female ex-combatants. We probed further to understand why this was the case because if they are keen on building peace in their communities, surely the integration of ex-combatants is important. Some of them explained that they were only in charge of the sensitisation programme to convince female soldiers to surrender their weapons but the bulk of the work in terms of financing the DDR programme and ensuring a smooth implementation was the government's responsibility. Sandra Kavira said:

We were with them in Walikale, we were in charge of sensitising armed groups to leave the bush, we had nothing else to give them. When they went out, they were given small funds to create IGAs (income-generating activities). But these means were not enough because they were used to easily having a lot of money when they were in the bush.

Claudine Kafirongo also explained that her organisation was in charge of awareness raising and sensitisation both with ex-combatants and the communities. During the conversation, we asked about the community's reaction to her sensitisation, and she said:

In the community, at the very beginning, there was resistance: they said: "these people made us suffer a lot!", "They killed our brothers!"; "They made people flee!", etc. We

made them aware that we had an interest in welcoming them and sensitising them so that they could no longer return to the armed groups, if not we will never have peace. And there was a problem of people saying, “What about the rest of us who were going to welcome them in host families or in biological families?”, “How are we going to do it?” “We also have to be supplied economically!”, so there was a problem in the families too... The community thought they were bad.

We further asked her about the disarmed soldiers at the Mubambiro transit centre who had initially told us that they never received any support from local organisations.

In her response, she explained:

Ah! For Mubambiro, it is the government that must take care of them. That is why you will see that women's organisations no longer enter it (i.e., get involved). Women's organisations meet with them when they are still on the other side to sensitise them to leave the armed groups. You see that they had just been hanging out there in Mubambiro and they are likely to go back into the bush. It is the government that must take care of them and reintegrate them into the community. Give them certain reintegration kits that can be useful like sewing machines, and it is as if before, when we give them these things we do not take into account their specific needs. Those who were given sewing machines without having asked them before; took these machines and sold them to buy beer and they remained thugs because without a job they are harmful to the community.

Buttressing this point on the demobilisation and reintegration of those at the transit centre, Josephine Malimukono said:

If the government does not take responsibility, this new programme will fail because it is not a programme of NGOs, it is a programme of the government. Military service is a programme linked to the state; I cannot succeed in demobilising young people if the government does not want to.

Solange Lwashiga also highlighted why community acceptance and reintegration of demobilised female soldiers remain difficult to accomplish. She asserted that DDR programmes are designed without the involvement of the community hence the disconnection between demobilised women and their respective communities. To her, this complicates the successful implementation of the programme including the reintegration of demobilised women. In her words:

You should know that the DDR programmes have been critical because these are programmes that have been set up without the community and we have been criticising those programmes. There have been women assimilated into armed groups and then these women decide to reintegrate into civilian life. To achieve this, we have declared the question of peaceful coexistence. We tried to understand, what could prevent or handicap their return. And the arguments for some were to say: "We can no longer live with them; they are our children, our women but why did they agree to join the armed groups". So, you understand that the question of reintegration, we must first let the community accept it. It has been understood that this reintegration has not been completely successful. This is why the approach of community and other demobilisation is needed.

Agnes Sadiki's organisation also participated in the demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants and shared her perceptions on why the programme failed and what should be done to guarantee the successful execution of the new programme for those in Mubambiro. She stated:

The programme was not well supervised and channelled, especially since it was a project that came from abroad and when the project ended our government could not capitalise on the approach to make it much more sustainable. The reintegration was not effective, there are those who took back their weapons and returned to the bush, and others because they were abandoned, they are there idle and are involved in burglaries and other misdeeds! I believe that the challenge of this project is that it has not been internalised by the Congolese government!

When asked what should be done to guarantee a successful demobilisation of ex-combatants and community reintegration, Agness affirmed:

Let the Government not wait for the miracle solutions to come to us from outside! When the miracle solution comes from outside, it takes time, and it is for a while. They close their luggage, and they leave but the problem remains the same! The government must look into the issue with local strategies, and we will achieve results!

Francoise Mulawa who worked with CONADER also provided more insight into the nature of the DDR programme and its disconnection with the community. She stated that the programme was flawed right from the initial drafting stage which was unrealistic as it did not consider realities on the ground. It was as though the planners of the programme did not anticipate large numbers of ex-combatants which also explains why funding was a major issue. In her words:

The first difficulty was related to the very drafting of the project where we had planned 50 dollars to return ex-combatants to their communities; but we had people who came from North Kivu, in Kisangani and who were already in Bas Congo. So, with 50 dollars there was no way to pay for the plane. So, when we started evacuating the demobilised there was a lot of revolt! The second difficulty was that the funds of the programme were a donation and when you have a donation, the time to wait for the payment is problematic and the ex-combatants were always impatient.

She further explained that the economic reintegration of ex-combatants was unrealistic because the allocated funds for the number of ex-combatants were insufficient. However, for her, the major difficulty was the co-existence between ex-combatants and community members since the community was not involved in the drafting of the programme. She said:

The main difficulty was the cohabitation between the ex-combatants and the community, there are places where we had a tug-of-war. And especially in this programme, the local community was not really involved in the very design of the programme and the implementation, and it was they who had to live with the ex-combatants. In addition, ex-combatants come with nothing to a community already impoverished by war. There was a bit of jealousy!

When asked what it would require to successfully demobilise and reintegrate ex-combatants in the Mubambiro transit centre waiting for the new programme to commence, Francoise advised, 'that we involve all social strata in the communities, it is necessary that the programme is inclusive so it can give good results'. She also mentioned that for lasting peace to be achieved in eastern DRC, it is pertinent to identify and address the root causes of violence. She puts it this way, 'We must go to this part to study the causes of conflicts; we must understand them because it is on the causes that we must work much more'. As discussed in the previous sub-headings, it is on these root causes of violence that Congolese women focus on in terms of their contributions to peace. By addressing the root causes of violence in their work for sustainable peace, they also debunk the dominant victimhood narrative attributed to

them in international discourses. The next theme presents Congolese women's response to this narrative as well as their redefinition of womanhood in DRC.

### **5.2.7 'No, no, no! Not all Congolese Women are Raped!': Debunking the Sexual Violence Victimhood Narrative**

With eastern DRC labelled as the 'rape capital of the world' by the United Nations Special Representative – Margot Wallstrom, Congolese women have been reduced to only victims of sexual violence as a result of the war. Unsurprisingly, these women are aware of this narrative propagated about them globally as it is reflected in the projects that several international organisations implement. Many of these women shared their perspectives on this dominant narrative and how they are working to debunk it. Agnes Sadiki shared her experience with us:

I was one day flabbergasted when I landed in Brussels and there was a German woman with whom we had travelled and who asked me if I was Congolese, I say yes! She said to me, "Oh you too are raped?", I say not at all! She says: "But in Congo, they say that all women are raped!".

Similar to Agnes' experience, Judith Maroy also said:

I remember we were in a meeting with the Belgian Minister for Development Cooperation, and it was with Congolese women journalists in a meeting with the partners of a Belgian organisation. They wanted that afterwards they meet with women journalists as an aside to talk about rape complaints. They imagined that among the ten journalists, there could be more than six who were also raped. This is certainly the image that has been given so much attention, but it is not at all the reality. Everywhere, people know that in the DRC it is death, there are even some embassies of some countries that refuse their children to come to Congo. People talk about Goma as if in Goma it is the end, there is no more life, there is no one who lives there, etc.

I could see how enraged they were when they talked about this issue of sexual violence victimhood, but some disregarded it with sarcasm. During the focus group conversations with cross-border women traders, they mockingly alluded to the fact that all women in the DRC are raped including those who are not Congolese but just

happen to visit the DRC for several reasons. They explained that the DRC had become a country where if any woman who has never been raped visits, she automatically becomes a raped woman. One of the women said, 'Even Esther knows we are all raped in Congo. And since she is also in Congo, Esther is also raped because she is in Congo'. Another woman said:

Even this phone I have, it is called "raped woman"! ... that is to say that my phone is also a raped woman. A way to show that the raped woman is an object of lesser value.

Another woman added:

There are even clothes for raped women who are at XYZ's<sup>39</sup>. So, if by chance we also wear a garment similar to this, we directly bear the name of a raped woman. But should we refuse to wear certain clothes because of this?

Buttressing the market women's point, Valentine Migabo also asserted:

First, these wars gave us a name we could never forget! We are raped women because of these wars! Several women have been raped because of the wars in our country, but today this is widespread for all women! When you speak to me knowing that I am from the village, I know that you are saying internally, "This one too, maybe she was raped". There is nothing that differentiates between raped and unharvested (virgin) women.

Collette Salima stressed the inappropriateness of the narrative as it does not convey the entire reality on the ground. She also explained how this perception is widely propagated due to the reluctance to understand the local context and realities of these women. In her words:

I would say that this perception is bad. If at the international level, we can say that the Congolese woman is a raped woman, I think it is inappropriate! Because we live in Congo, but we cannot say that all Congolese women are raped. The image of the Congolese woman has been sold but people do not want to understand what is happening in Congo.

Marie Riziki also said:

---

<sup>39</sup> I use XYZ here to anonymise the individual being referred to here who is a prominent figure.

No, no, no! Not all Congolese women are raped! It is just a bad image that we have been able to present on women. It is this image that we have also given to our country by saying that the DRC lives only from sexual violence. But this is very wrong! Some provinces have never experienced war, how are you going to say that all women have been raped?

Generose Wera described the plurality of Congolese women as not only victims of sexual violence but also audacious and resilient. She emphasised the fact that this dominant narrative not only keeps women in the DRC on the spot but also hinders the communities from progressing. For her, the narrative does not only negatively affect women but also presents Congolese internationally as rapists. She explained how the narrative affects both genders globally. According to her:

The Congolese woman is plural if I can say that. Congolese women in their plurality as in their singularity are not only victims! They are also fighters, courageous, intellectuals... There is interest in presenting the Congolese woman as a raped woman because as much this woman is presented as a victim, the men are also devils! Because she is not raped by beasts, it is by men! By presenting women as victims of sexual violence, in reality, we are also talking about these men. Also, this way of presenting the woman is a strategy to prevent her from going beyond because easily when she wants to claim something, we can say that she has psychological problems!

She further explained:

Also, by presenting Congolese women as victims each time, what help is being given to them? Because it is not enough to say that she is a victim without substantial help being given to her! Calling someone a victim for about 20 years is a problem! As long as women, who are the backbone of the community, are treated in this way, we prevent communities from moving forward!

Isabelle Pendeza also lamented about the unending victimhood narrative about Congolese women, and how their international partners channel a lot of funds to support projects for so-called victims of sexual violence. She said:

How many years have we been talking about sexual violence? But the more we talk about it, the more the number of victims increases! ... they come up with projects such as: "capacity building of GBV victims "; and we do workshops with a lot of money that could be used for something else! But is the expected result for these victims achieved?

Speaking of the continuous 'increase' in the number of victims of sexual violence, the majority of the women we interacted with attested that the dominant sexual victimhood narrative is used as a fundraising tool by the government and certain individuals including women. It is also an avenue for international organisations to troop in en masse. Elucidating this point, Isabelle Pendeza said:

If our government gives itself a strategy of not relaying what is negative in our country, no partner will come. All the information is centred at the level of the Ministry of Gender and Justice, and it is this Ministry that must give the real situation of women! But when they are there only to sell a bad image of women, it repels us at the grassroots because we are not only victims of violence, we are actors in reconciliation, conflict resolution, the environment and other things of development!

In the same vein, Judith Maroy said:

Who sells the bad image between me who disapproves and the government who does not know how to assume its authority on the spot and ensure the safety of people? I believe that it is at their level! Organisations must also not exaggerate too much and generalise in their report to get the sympathy of the donors for funds. So, I would say that the big burden falls on the authorities. They have this heavy burden of acting to put an end to all these atrocities because we have this image of a dead country full of violators.

According to Valentine Migabo:

Ill-intentioned people preferred to call us raped women so that they would enrich themselves in our name. Now, we are forced to live with this name, but I would like the world to know that not all Congolese women are raped, not even 2%.

Some women further explained how certain people take advantage of the narrative to enrich themselves. During the discussion with market women, one of them said:

Also, there is XYZ who goes to Europe and says that all Congolese women are raped. This individual says it in order to have funding and that is why they cannot wish for this name to end. Their wish is that we are always treated as raped so that they have money. If I am sick now and am taken to Panzi Hospital, XYZ will write my name down on the list of raped women. So they cannot accept that this name is deleted or changed because they live because of it!

Kungwa Mazambi also supported this point and explained how some women are complicit in the agenda to make money. She affirmed:

To say that all Congolese women are raped? That I will never accept! The raped women are at XYZ's house; and besides, they are not all! The majority of these women lie just for money. Even XYZ also lies; they always talk about raped women so that they can receive funding. That is, there are several people who live on the backs of these raped women. They use violence as a way for them to have money.

Collette Salima added:

When you see, for example, what XYZ is doing, you see that women are being raped all over the territories. We cannot be silent, but we must also tell the truth and not the lie. Faced with those who sell a bad image of the Congo, we show the truth.

Indeed, Congolese women have not been silent and neither have they 'crossed their arms'. As revealed in the previous subheadings, these women have evolved over the years from the pre-war era to their involvement in the fight for peace amidst violence. For Agnes Sadiki who was immediately stereotyped for being Congolese in Brussels:

The Congolese woman is a strong woman, she still deserves praise, not only from Congolese men but also from the international world – those who tend to say that the Congolese woman is a miserable woman, a victim! I have the experience that I have beyond being Congolese, I know that she is a competent woman! If we had peace in this country at a certain time, it is because the women stood up to go to Sun City, to Maputo, to go here and there to claim peace! I cannot say that the Congolese woman is only a victim, she is also an actor of peace!

One of the cross-border women traders said:

All Congolese women work hard for their survival and that of their families. She knows how to take charge of her family with the little she earns. And if there are lazy women, that is, they are not intelligent, they are weak!

Valentine Migabo also stated, 'The Congolese woman is a courageous woman, she sacrifices herself for the well-being of her family and the whole community. She is a woman who deserves flowers for the work she does!'. According to these women, the work they do for peace in their communities is an attempt to not only debunk the victimhood narrative but also display their activism. In the words of Valentine Migabo:

We keep fighting for peace. Also, we encourage other women to no longer fold their arms but to act. We must act to ensure that people stop seeing us as victims. We are actors of peace, we denounce evil, we denounce suspicious people who can create unrest in our community, and we take care of our security situation.

### **5.2.8 Congolese Women: Feminists? Women's Activists?**

Taking into account the evolution of Congolese women and their involvement in building and maintaining peace in their communities, does it mean that they are automatically feminists? Do they identify with the term 'feminist' or another term of their choosing? While some identified as feminists and even explained how the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace, and security informs the work they do, others preferred to be described as women's rights activists or simply women. For the latter, feminism is a rather restrictive term that does not fully capture the work that they do in the context they live. Isabelle Pendeza explained:

We remain in the right measure of the context of our community. There is no point in coming up with a term that is not adequate in the community and start talking about it! Feminism is a new theme that is not yet very well mastered by the community.

Isabelle further explained that while she understands the concept of feminism, she cannot call herself a feminist because she has a husband and son who support her. She also mentioned that those who identify as feminists are regarded as lesbians in their communities. In her words:

The word feminism is not bad. It is just that people do not understand the word feminism. I can be ashamed to say that I am a feminist even though I defend women's rights, I fight for the cause of women, all I do is first and foremost in favour of women's rights. But, behind me there are boy children, there is my husband, and he is a man. So this is not to say that it is not myself who benefits from the activities, I do, but there is an addition to those who are behind me.

She also talked about how they do not identify with the term 'feminist' as an organisation when they attend community meetings. According to her:

We cannot go to a meeting and say that CAFED is feminist! No, because we know that we are in a patriarchal system. This word cannot pass and so we remain at the level of saying that CAFED is a women's organisation. They will not understand us if we say feminists, they will say that we are lesbians.

Collette Salima also explained how Congolese women are divided on the issue of feminism based on the generation they belong to. According to her:

Feminism is a bit of an exaggerated love of issues that particularly affect women. Women are divided on this issue, and this is why the struggle has not yet borne fruit. And this is not the fault of these women, because our mothers, our grandmothers were educated differently from us. Today, we learn these terms and the one who feels touched tries to rally others. But our mothers were not educated in this way. For our mothers, it is the man who leads, it is the man who decides, it is the man who does everything. That is, for some, when we talk about feminists, we are talking about difficult women.

Joly Kamuntu, on the other hand, outrightly rejects the term because she believes it is important to include men in the work they do. She asserted:

'No, no, no! Feminism is discrimination! We stand up for women's rights. But the logic is that we have to do it with men because gender equity is between men and women'. I tell you that I supervise a group of husbands who are beaten by their wives! When we talk about gender-based violence, we tend to believe that it is only women who are victims. But beware! There are also men who are victims of violence. There are men who are also abused and who need to be accompanied in the same way as women! So for me, feminism is seeing that men and women have equal opportunity.

However, Eliane Polepole, believes her organisation is feminist because they work for women's rights. She said:

We are feminists because we want all these forms of discrimination against women to stop in our community. We work to fight against all this discrimination, this violence, and these harmful practices linked to retrograde mentalities so that women are respected so that their voice is heard so that they are considered in the same way as men at the community level.

While Solange Lwashiga believes her organisation is guided by feminist principles in the work they do, she also agrees with Isabelle Pendeza that the term restricts their work in the local context. She explained:

The Women's Caucus is a feminist organisation. Everything we say is a concept around feminism. For us, peacebuilding with Resolution 1325 is our main tool but you know what complicates things a little bit, it is the concepts. I think that for us as women's rights activists, we have to try to bring words which will make us understood easily instead of bringing concepts which will block our work.

### **5.3 Women in Liberia**

It has always been like that because women stand for the country like Mama Liberia. So, you have to act like a mother and bring peace, this is why they call us Mama Liberia

- Market Women, Paynesville, Montserrado County, Liberia

#### **5.3.1 Liberian Women Before and After the War**

All the women we encountered highlighted how Liberian women were involved in maintaining peace and togetherness in their communities before the war. Some of these women explained that while their mothers and grandmothers were not always involved in community gatherings mostly coordinated by men, their nurturing and motherly nature preserved the harmony and togetherness they experienced in their communities. According to these women, the proverb that says 'it takes a village to raise a child' was indeed their reality in pre-war Liberian communities which further strengthened the communal living and unity they revelled in. Marie Williams elaborated on this:

I remember when I was a little girl coming up and living in Central Monrovia, Central Street for that matter, my mother and other women had this group of women where they were basically from two different tribal groups, the Kru and the Bassa people and they would interact. And there was this concern for children, there was this concern for families. So the peace was like that, family relationship was established whether you were biologically related or not. If I did something as a child that was wrong, another mother could discipline me... okay. The women were always together. So whether they were Muslims or they were Christians. But at that time, there was this bond, okay. That is family bonding. That is what we had.

Buttressing the point that Liberian women were mostly involved in domestic activities prior to the war albeit with different claims, Ruth Sirleaf said:

Actually, women were not active in anything. Women were not recognised. Women were behind their husbands. Everything used to be men. Most of the work was done by men. It was only after the war that women started having positions like town chief, community chair etc. Before that, women were only at home. They were looking after children and even children of their neighbours. My mother used to leave me with neighbours to even travel. In the community where I lived, that's how it was because my father was in the army. Where we lived, we lived like sisters and brothers. Like I said, my mother used to travel but the neighbours used to do everything for me.

While some women were concerned with mainly domestic affairs in pre-war Liberia, it appears that some did take on leadership positions in their communities. When asked about women's involvement in sustaining peace before the war, Rebecca Tenneh said:

Before the war, before Charles Taylor's regime, my aunt was a paramount chief (i.e., a traditional leader). So, women have been making peace before even this day. Yeah, and even in crisis she was in that position as a paramount chief. Because when you are there with the intention of making peace, people will listen to you...

Nevertheless, the war changed the position of women in their communities as many became breadwinners to provide for their families and started occupying leadership positions. The majority of the women explained how the war made them bolder and more outspoken. Justina Gbatu said:

During the regime of President Doe, women were nothing but during the time of Charles Taylor, the war opened the eyes of women. Because it is in his regime, women started going out because they became breadwinners. Women were running in competition with men. During Taylor's time, we got more ideas. The war taught us lessons although it brought destruction. Things were very hard after the war. Men were not working, they usually stayed home. We the women were the ones working, making farms (cultivating). We had to come together to encourage women on how to take care of their families. We used to meet together; we tell you how to live with your family in the home.

Reinforcing this point, Marie Williams admitted that while the war had its negative effects, it was positive for women because they began to advocate for peace on a larger scale. According to her:

The war was both negative and positive. Like I said, it affected us in one way, and it came as positive for us as women. So it was during that time women were able to voice out. Women were very outspoken and very focused on talking about their rights most of the time. We spoke against the war because our husbands were dying, our sons, innocent young girls and what have you. So during that time, at least women were able to stand because I remember at one point I have my oldest cousin who also is a pastor. She was one of those spearheading some of these prayer groups and that was actually the godly part of it and nonviolence was the approach.

Losing their husbands, children, and relatives to the violence of war was also a motivating factor for these women to operate en masse in their quest for peace. Ruth Sirleaf shared her experience with us.

What motivated me is that during the heat of the war, women were marginalised in this country and girls were taken as sex slaves. Sometimes they just come into the town and just take girls and carry them. It happened to me too, my husband was killed, my mother-in-law, and some other people were. They put them in a big house and put the house on fire (set the house ablaze). My son was at the age of 9 and the rebels took him. I lost contact with my daughter. She was seven and she got missing. I started talking to women. Those that were affected like myself. I got some women together; I told them we can't just sit here and do nothing when things that affect us are happening.

Olivia Steward narrated how Liberian women leveraged their motherly and nurturing nature in their fight for peace during the war. In her words:

Sometimes, if the rebels come around and when they see more women, the women can easily quickly convince them, and talk to them. If they came into that community to do harm and the women are around, the way our mothers used to talk to them..., like for my house, my mother used to always call them her children. So when they come around like that, she says "Oh my children, what you want?", sometimes they will say "Oh, old ma we just want to eat mehn, we want food". Maybe they came with bad intentions but because of the way she will talk to them, they will calm down. If they came with arms, she will say "I don't like to see that thing, I got my small small children around and I don't want to see that thing". They will put their arms somewhere and walk in.

Considering the fact that Liberian women have experienced different cycles ranging from pre-war to post-war era, we were curious to listen and learn from their experiences in conceptualising and contributing to peace in their communities. This is what the succeeding theme discusses in more detail.

### **5.3.2 'We are not Firing Guns, but We are not at Peace': Liberian Women**

#### **Conceptualising Peace**

It has two been decades since the Liberian civil wars ended, armed groups have been disbanded, and guns have been silenced, which means that the country enjoys relative peace. However, we decided to engage Liberian women's perspectives on this issue. We asked different groups of women about the peace situation in their communities, if their communities were peaceful, and how they conceptualise peace in their terms. While some claimed that their communities were peaceful, others asserted that even though the overt wars were over, they are still not experiencing peace as there are new menaces like youth thuggery, theft, domestic violence, etc., that they are dealing with. Nevertheless, some of the meanings that these women attributed to peace included harmony and togetherness, stability and absence of violence, and freedom from want which incorporates economic stability, access to basic amenities, and gender equality.

Peace as harmony and togetherness for Liberian women encompasses solidarity, fellowship, and conviviality. According to these women, a peaceful community exhibits the 'one for all, all for one' mantra. One of the market women described a peaceful community as a place where there is communal sharing and understanding, and members care for each other, which in turn makes the community impermeable to thieves. In her words:

From my understanding, for our environment right now, when you say the community is peaceful, then it means people that are living there, they understand each other, they live in the community, they have love for each other, they share things together and then the “Zogos” (thieves), for them to just enter the community is hard, so nobody in that community can harm anybody. Everybody there shares things, loves each other and then they keep eyes on each other things, so like that I consider it to be a peaceful community.

Adding more context, another market woman explained why looking out for each other is necessary for a community to be peaceful. According to her:

Because when a person's material or goods destroy, it also destroys my life. Because maybe somehow, she or he will be able to help me in another way when I am stranded another way. So, when I sit down and see that things are going out of the way, then it is harming every one of us. So, I don't call that one peace, I call that one bad behaviour. So, I should go and help that person whether in that person's presence or absence. I should help them because we are a community.

In explaining peace as harmony and togetherness, Mameeke Sarnoh uses her community as a reference point. She said:

In the Nigerian Shop Community in New Georgia, we love one another. Anything we do, we do it together. If something happens to somebody, you can't say oh, this is not my problem. We all join together to help that person. Whether Christians or Muslims, when Muslims have their thing (event), the Christians join and when Christians have their thing (event), we Muslims join them too. We all move together. We do things together. We love each other.

For these women, harmony and togetherness also incorporate raising and training each other's children in the community, respecting each other, and listening to each other, to mention but a few. Nevertheless, for this to be feasible, violence of any kind must be extinct. It is therefore unsurprising that some women define peace as the absence of violence.

Peace as the absence of violence for some women means the ability to move freely without fear of attack. Putting this into context, Yee Dahn narrated the situation in her community. According to her:

The things that are happening here in Ganta, it's a war. It's not just a killing war that's all, but it definitely is a war. You are lying down at your house sleeping and someone comes to your house with their face covered to put you under gunpoint and take away everything that belongs to you, is that not a war? Sometimes when you come from buying goods in Monrovia and you arrive midnight, you cannot even go home. You have to stay in the vehicle until day breaks before you can go home. Is that peace?

Beatrice Slogan also agrees that peace is the absence of violence. She stated, 'Peace in my own understanding is where as someone, you are free to move about, no threat to you'. In the same vein, Olivia Steward defined peace as stability and the absence of conflict. To buttress her definition, she asserted that, unlike other communities, hers is peaceful because members rarely cause problems, and even if they do, they are subjected to community fines. In her words:

Like for me, I give example of my own community. My community is one of the very peaceful communities – the New Georgia community, and to be precise, Old Estate. So, for us here we are peaceful, we hardly go to the police station, even though they get the saying that teeth and tongue can make 'palava'<sup>40</sup> (conflict). Unlike other communities, you go there you will hear people causing noise, making 'palava', cursing, abusing each other, but for my community, it is very difficult because if you do it, we will fine you.

For some women, peace is defined in terms of economic stability and access to basic necessities. According to these women, when people are economically empowered, cases of violence will be reduced. For example, Denise Johnson explained how there are several cases of domestic violence, and this is largely due to the fact that some women are not economically stable. Hence why she defined peace as women's empowerment. She explicated:

In my opinion, peace is when women are empowered and have the freedom to speak, they have the freedom to make a choice. Because when there is a culture of silence, there is no peace, because someone will be burning and be dying inside. And you think the person has peace, but they don't have peace. So, peace within yourself is

---

<sup>40</sup> This is an African proverb that means the teeth and tongue fight, but they still live in the same mouth. It also indicates the notion of forgiveness, togetherness, and adaptability, in that no matter how much the teeth bites the tongue, they must learn to live together in the same mouth. Thus, the teeth and tongue can fight but they will never stop working together to eat.

based on what you do, what you believe, and the freedom to do it. Also, you should be able to participate in decision-making concerning your health, your own self...

Supporting this point, Ophelia Karn said, 'In my mind, peace is when a woman or children can find daily bread on the table, go to bed, work and find something to do'.

Emphasising the importance of socio-economic stability in relation to peace, Marie Williams shared her experience with us:

We may have the silence of guns, but you may find relatives or friends who are working but it's difficult that they cannot even assist family members. So, the stressful situation we go through, you look at it, it's not really peace, but we're only striving. I'll be very frank with you; I'm a professional person and I don't have a job. I could create one for myself by opening a medicine store or something like that but sometimes the money is not there even to open it. So where do you go? So, peace is relative. What you will call peace, I will not call it peace.

Joanna Ballah also said, 'So back in the days we used to define peace as when we are not firing a gun. But right now, we are not firing guns, but we are not at peace'.

Adding more context to this assertion, Dorothy Dunkor expatiated:

We can say now that we not firing guns, but the communities are far from being peaceful because economically the country is dangerously draining, people hardly find food to put it on the table, job employment is not that easy to find and here a lot of young people are unemployed. Look at the number of motorcyclists we have across the country, I mean it's giving them quick money but exposing them to a lot of health issues. Security issues here and there, the political space that we have is challenging and you know the agricultural sector, we import literally everything. Look at the bank, they are not investing properly, and our priorities are different from what we need. Our hospitals, no medication, no equipment! This is far from peace! It is far from being peaceful!

Despite these political and socio-economic discrepancies, Liberian women continue to work for the vision of peace they want to experience in their communities. They have formed partnerships amongst themselves and with external bodies to achieve this goal. It is this resilience and dedication to peace work based on their lived socio-economic realities that the succeeding sub-headings discuss in detail.

### **5.3.3 Liberian Women's Approaches and Contributions to Peace**

Conversations with different groups of Liberian women unveiled several approaches and contributions to peace including dialogue and mediation geared by motherwork; women's empowerment which incorporates education, loan allocation, village savings, skills training, etc.; advocacy and awareness; and prayers.

In terms of dialogue and mediation, some women stated that when there are disagreements between individuals in their communities, they usually mediate between the disputing parties through dialogue. They also expressed how their position as mothers makes it easy for them to achieve this. According to them, there is a culture of respect for mothers in Liberia where women tend to be regarded because of their birthing abilities. Consequently, women leverage this to maintain peace in their communities. Olivia Steward puts it this way:

For me, I think because we are mothers, and we all know what a lady passes through to bear children. Because of that, you will not want to see somebody, even if it is not your child, to be left behind.

She further explained that when there are disputes in the community, people tend to bring these issues to her instead of the community chairman because they see her as the mother of the community. She said:

When they are having problems in the community, usually they don't go to my chairman, they will come to me. They call me either rescue mother or our ma (mother). So, the first thing they will say is "Let's go to our ma".

During the focus group conversation with the market women, some of them explained how they mediate disputes between couples, amongst themselves and even armed robbers disturbing the peace of their community. One of the women said, 'Yes, I settle between couples, and I even settle between married people', another asserted,

'For me, I settle dispute between "zogos", the armed robbers dem. I take zogos from the street'. When asked how she manages to do this, she explained that she has to level with them by falsely acknowledging being a former street thug, and by sharing her experience with them including how she managed to leave the streets, she is able to convince them to do the same. In her words:

We all interact when they come like that, they give us their problem, I will talk to them and act like I was in it before, and I will even lie against myself. You know to settle palava sometimes, you have to lie. They say lying is not good, but some lies can make peace. Sometimes, I will say I was on the street for seventeen years and will be explaining all I was doing. I will say, I was there but the prayer takes me from there, my brother you can do that too, you can move from there. Oh, they listen to me because every time when I come, I will give them a peaceful word and I will talk to them nicely, anything I get, I will give to them.

Buttressing this point, Yee Dahn explained that they also charge mothers with the responsibility to monitor their children to reduce the cases of armed robbery. According to her:

Before Kolakeh women came together, zogo business was very high in Ganta. We made rules because we all have our children in the community. If your child steals, we fine you and take your child to jail. Now, we can leave our things outside, and no one steals the things from outside.

Maria Nelson emphasised the importance of mothers talking to their children to avoid youth thuggery in their communities. According to her, young people in Liberia are becoming a nuisance due to armed robbery and drug addiction, and if it is not taken seriously, it could degenerate into a bigger threat to the nation. She expatiated:

We can say today my son is not there, but we cannot promise that tomorrow my son will not be there. So, as the one who carries the child for nine months, if you want to see another child on the street, you should know that your child is a potential candidate for what is going on. So what's best is to work together now and try to see how we solve this huge Liberian problem. No one is really looking at it from that perspective. But on a daily basis, the number of these young people is increasing and now they are spreading all over the nation. They are a nuisance to us now. Tomorrow, they will organise themselves in a way that will become a bigger problem for the nation.

Economic empowerment for women through education, skills training, village savings and loan allocation is also one of the Liberian women's contributions to peace. Some of these women asserted that when women are educated and are involved in income-generating activities, the cases of domestic violence will most likely reduce. Also, they would be able to provide for their children which also contributes to the reduction of youth thuggery. Denise Johnson talked about how they organise seminars and training workshops to educate women on domestic and inheritance laws so that they can claim property and not be at the mercy of their husbands. She explained:

I saw that women would need education, they needed funding. Finance was a problem for them. They couldn't make decisions and they couldn't do anything. I decided first of all to work with their mind to be able to change, to know that they can do something to help their husband because that brings a lot of abuse in the home. So, most of them came to the seminar and learned how to do something. So, sometimes we bring medical people to talk to us about our health, and how we should take care of ourselves as women. I bring lawyers to talk about the laws, the domestic value law, the inheritance law, the property law and it is very interesting here. So people are opening up, people who didn't know that they were supposed to go and fight for their property now know.

Buttressing the point on the importance of education and economic empowerment for peacebuilding and why they focus on these issues in their approaches to peace, Maria Nelson asserted that to eliminate rape and other forms of gender-based violence occurring in Liberia, they emphasise women's education and economic well-being. She said:

The issue of gender-based violence is something that we speak out against because it kind of breaks a woman down. And they cannot use their full potential when they are depressed, when they are being abused, or when they are being marginalised, all of that. So speaking of all these social justice issues has been some of what we do. And we believe too, that economic empowerment for women is very huge in this process of peacebuilding and reconciliation, because when people don't have jobs, what other alternatives do they have? They will get on the street and beg, or they will become criminals or be involved in all of these things. So providing basic survival skills for women can help them, and put them in a position where they become a whole person to function in their society, starting with the family, to the community, and throughout the nation.

She also explained that they work to keep young girls in school by building hostels closer to the school environment to enable them to commute easily. According to her:

So, we have built hostels for girls to stay. For example, we have hostel in Ganta where girls came from other areas of Liberia to stay in order to attend school. We also have a hostel that is in Bangor, and girls come from all over to live there and go to school.

Joanna Ballah also argued that for peace to be achieved, domestic violence and femicide must be eliminated, jobs must be available, and women must feel safe. For this reason, her tactic is to work with young girls teaching them to know their rights and be assertive. To achieve this, she set up girls' clubs in public schools in slum communities. In her words:

If we can stop the domestic violence, there will be peace. We are living in fear as women. Most of the time when we go into the village, most of our women say, oh, there was a killing or there was a rape. So, where I get my strength is in public schools in these slum communities. So, we got clubs there where we talk to our girls. So, most Wednesdays we get the community leaders involved and every Friday we get the women leaders involved. So, we tell them that we should not wait for conflict before we know how to handle this.

Likewise, Idole Kaiser works with young boys and girls in schools teaching them sex education and the importance of body autonomy. According to her, they observed that at the beginning of the school year, the number of registered female students is high but at a certain period during the school year, the number of girls participation begins to diminish. Therefore, they work with schoolteachers and local authorities to ensure that girls remain in school. Indeed, during our interactions, other women also alluded to the fact that they are dealing with the plague of teenage pregnancies and female school dropouts in Liberia. Idole Kaiser said:

So, for health and rights in a rural area like this, it is very difficult. It was like a problem for us to speak with young people to discuss sex and how can we work along with them to create that enabled environment where they can sit with us and discuss it, looking at their own body autonomy. They have not made a decision over their own bodies; how to say yes and how to say no and how they want sex and at what age they should get married. So, we had to start working with them to discuss. And all

along I think we started with five schools, now we are in ten schools. And then also we also have a focus group discussion where we talk about sex with just girls, just boys, and fathers and mothers group. Those small groups will sit and discuss it and looking at why at the beginning of the year, the girls' enrolment will be high and at a certain time of the year it begins to drop...

For Liberian women, female education plays an important role in their work for peace because according to most of the women we interacted with, when women are educated, they know their rights and can compete alongside men in politics and other decision-making bodies. Mayanda Kromah put it this way:

In the House of Representatives, there are more men than women. Sometimes women are shy. They are not able to campaign the way men do. Sometimes, men use statements such as "You uneducated woman" many times on women. So women get frustrated and just walk away. And obviously, the education level of women is still low compared to men. Only few women have higher level of education.

For women interested in skills training and income-generating activities, they have the option of village savings and loan allocation to support them. Some of the women we interacted with emphasised the importance of women's independence to contribute to peacebuilding in their respective communities. Anna Noah asserted:

I just felt that women can do things by themselves, they can organise and do things by themselves and advocate for themselves so that they will be able to be counted in society. This is why we decided as women from different denominations, different tribal backgrounds, we decided now to take the lead as a woman in society. We mobilise these women to make their own money through village savings so that they can do something for themselves for businesses and other things. Like now, the 72 women I am dealing with, they do things by themselves. We even go to the urban area now to make our cassava farm and ship it to the various markets; this is how we are sustaining ourselves as women in the society.

In the same vein, Justina Gbatu said, 'We put our ideas together and we had little money so, we used the money to give loans to people who were in need. This is how we empowered our people'. Beatrice Slogan also said:

We organise women in village savings loans where we have weekly meetings. So, we are meeting every Thursday to go over our issues. You know, women share their

issues and things, their experiences from their various communities and we do our farming, we do our agriculture project where we gather as women and meet also.

Awareness raising and advocacy for more women in politics are other ways that Liberian women contribute to peace. During our conversations, most of them stated that having a female president boosted the confidence of women in Liberia because they saw someone like them partake in politics. They also alluded to the fact that during President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's tenure, issues like gender-based violence and oppression of women were non-existent because women had jobs. Beatrice Slogan said:

When Ellen got in power, most women started building their self-confidence to say oh, if this woman makes it, then I myself can make it. But time came, it turned around again, women started going behind.

Yee Dahn also asserted:

You see when Ellen was in power, we had so many women in so many good positions. There were more women even in the House of Representatives, in the House of Senate, there were more United Nations (UN) jobs. Women were empowered and could do a lot for one another. There were so many UN organisations here, but you no longer see them. Since men are there now, we have lost everything. Why do you think that number has reduced today? Women's representation has gone down. What is wrong? Why have all the opportunities disappeared since men came to power?

Based on their previous experience with a female President, these women advocate for and encourage increased female participation in politics. Olivia Steward said:

For me, I am one of those that really want to see women in that position. So, that is what I am advocating for where I go to teach. Because mainly I go to the rural areas to go to talk to the community women there, right now we are so far in Bomi, now I just came back. I went to encourage them because I feel the women know what we need, mainly in our communities and in our country. So, I feel when women are in power, women will bring changes.

Speaking of women bringing changes, Liberian women's contribution to peace in their communities also includes advocating against rape and other forms of gender-based violence. Margaret Menyon talked about how her organisation raises

awareness against gender-based violence and develops sensitisation programmes for men and women. They also inform women about how and where they can receive help. She explained that one of the programmes focuses on storytelling and shared experiences with survivors of gender-based violence. Similarly, Ophelia Karn said, 'We advocate for women that have been abused. So, we manage to go in, talk and counsel them and make sure that they have their right'. Mayanda Kromah also explained:

I found out that women are suffering. Most of the women were vulnerable in the community. So, I decided to put them together in order to have some counselling groups for them. Those who are suffering and those that are victimised by men. Also, I advocate on their behalf to do referral to other areas for them to receive help.

Prayers and religious evangelism especially regarding the issue of juvenile delinquency are also approaches to peace that some women utilise. According to these women, while the overt violence might be over, they are left with a new menace i.e., hardened youths who are now more difficult to handle. Thus, they incorporate prayers and evangelism to address this issue. Marie Williams said:

We have prayer meetings where we meet once a month. We also have these many crusades where we meet all sorts of young people. Sometimes we invite them to the church. We have counsellors at the church who can counsel people. Sometimes it is one-on-one that we visit their homes.

Rebecca Tenneh also said:

You see, our children these days, the way they used to behave in the past, that is not how they behave now. To deal with them is hard (difficult). So, we preach again and again. For some of them that will come, you will talk about the gospel.

Emphasising the importance of prayers as an approach to peace, Maria Nelson said:

So, one of the first places that we start with is prayers because we know that anything we do if we do not pray for God to give us direction, we cannot move forward. We have to pray for all issues, we have to pray for our country, our leaders, the young people, and the Church. So prayer is a key tool that we use.

These contributions to peace made by Liberian women have neither occurred in a vacuum nor been a solo project. These women have worked in groups and collaborated on projects locally and internationally in their quest for peace. The next sub-heading discusses this in more detail.

#### **5.3.4 'No One is a Hero when it Comes to this Work': Partnerships for Peace**

Speaking on how they contribute to peacebuilding in their communities, Maria Nelson emphasised the importance of partnership. She said, 'What we realise is that we cannot work on our own. So, we have to work through collaborative work. So, the work of peace of women in Liberia has been collaborative'. During our conversations, we discovered that there is an order of collaboration in that they have a platform for women's organisations called the Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL) located in Monrovia. Through WONGOSOL, different women's groups can collaborate on peace and development projects. Beatrice Slogan explained that some donors tend to pass through WONGOSOL to other organisations within their network. According to her:

WONGOSOL will get the project and then they contact network members to work along with them. We were able to get project, WONGOSOL give us project, we were doing vocational school, where we open tailoring, catering, tie, and dye, yeah.

Anna Noah also said, 'We have been called many at times to WONGOSOL. Many at times, we go for workshops and things. So, that is where we are, when they are ready, they can call us'. She further explained that WONGOSOL receives yearly dues from its affiliate organisations. In her words, 'We pay dues to WONGOSOL over the year but since last year we have not paid our dues because things was tough for us'. This perhaps explains the tension between women's organisations in rural and urban areas. Elucidating this further, Idole Kaiser said:

Those in the urban area sometimes they work like we are competing, but it's not about competing. It's about complementing each other in the work that we do. Whether you are in the urban or the rural area, know that we are addressing issues that will better our lives for tomorrow. But sometimes, the urban organisation feels that they are at the top.

When asked why urban organisations feel like they are at the top, she affirmed that it is because they tend to have direct access to donors and international partners. This makes them feel like the bridge between women's organisations in rural areas and donors. In her words:

Even before coming to us, you have to go to them. So, they feel that they are the gateway, but they are not there to solve the problem all alone. They still need us. They still come to also hear our side of the stage and to learn from us.

Joannah Ballah also asserted that donors prefer to work with bigger organisations who in fact rely on smaller organisations to implement projects on their behalf in remote communities. She said:

But many big donors continue to deal with one institution, one big institution. And they see big institutions are coming to us to do the advocacy for them. So, donors are making mistakes seriously'.

She further explained that the direct access some urban organisations have to donors makes them pompous in their relationship with smaller organisations. In her words:

No one is a hero when it comes to this work. People should bring down their egos. We need to work together when it comes to advocacy and when it comes to peacebuilding.

Still, this tension and rivalry do not apply to all organisations in rural areas because Yee Dahn, for example, affirmed that her organisation received direct support from the UN to build a school in her community. According to her:

We even have our own school for our children to go to school. We do not want people taking advantage of us. Our children are now going to our own school that was built for ourselves. Before we completed our school, the UN came in to help us complete it. They said, if women can take initiative on their own, we have to provide them support. They help us build our schools and support our activities.

It also became apparent that funding goes to organisations able to submit compelling grant applications. This might explain why bigger organisations are more likely to receive donor funding. Nevertheless, some organisations have built structures to make them self-sufficient without donor funding. Some women asserted that they work irrespective of funding because the vision of lasting peace is theirs, not the donors'. Idole Kaiser described it this way:

We had the passion for the work. Having the passion for the work is just different from lost funding. And then we also look at sustainability whatsoever. We will still be here because the issues are our issues. We will take responsibility for this issue to make sure that they are corrected to make sure that our dream will not die because the dream is not for the donor, the vision is for us. And we must live up to the vision.

Supporting this point, Ophelia Karn said:

We got sustainability plan, okay. So, we still get the organisation going. The grant competition is very heavy so if you got a project, you consider it even though funding is not there. A lot of times we lack funding, but we will raise money for the project.

These women explained that they are able to raise money through micro-credit loans to implement projects. Joanna Ballah also explained that she set up a business to support her organisation because she does not have access to donor funding. According to her, the work for peace must continue whether there is international support or not. In her words:

Because whether funding or not, we still do the work in the community. We are still working, and people still know us. So, I don't want to say to others that it was because of funding we couldn't work. We could just sit and say whenever funding comes, we work, but we are working.

In terms of the vision of lasting peace being theirs, these women asserted that the reason they enjoy relative peace in Liberia today is that women laid the groundwork for peace to flourish before international organisations arrived. According to them, they were the ones pacifying their husbands and sons to relinquish their weapons and choose peace. Rebecca Tenneh said:

Because when you get your husband in the home, is it not us women that can talk to our husbands? You are able to convince your husband. So, that is one the roles women played.

Buttressing the point on how Liberian women laid the foundation for peace and paved the way for international organisations, Olivia Steward also said:

When we talk to our people, they have to agree before you can come from outside. Because the two of us must decide to leave the conflict. I don't care what you talk, but the two of us have to understand, make up our minds, and because of that, we were able to maintain the peace.

In the same vein, Idole Kaiser explained that while international partners provide funding, they are the ones dwelling in the communities and understand how to address their issues better. According to her:

They provide the funding, but we are in direct contact with the participants. Yes, we live with them, sleep with them, wake up with them. We know the issue. And some of these issues, we are also survivors. Most of us women here, we have our own story that we can tell as a woman, especially for someone like me who went through the war, I have my own story. And so I know what women can go through. So, it's not just about sitting up there, but at the community level with the issue. You might have all your degrees but when you put the degree on the table, it will not perform to bring the solution. I do not have any degrees, but I have the influence. You understand what I'm saying? You have the degree I don't have. But I have influence over my people, the people that I live with.

### **5.3.5 'Everybody wanted to be Experts': Liberian Women Critiquing the DDR**

#### **Programme**

Some of the women we interacted with participated in the demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants during the official DDR process in Liberia in 2003. They shared their knowledge of the programme's design, implementation, and results. Dorothy Dunkor who worked with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) during the DDR process highlighted that they were involved in raising awareness through songs, drama, and educational messages to encourage combatants to disarm and participate in the peace process. She said:

We were helping to talk to the fighters then to disarm. We have a theatre programme for Popular education. We were doing awareness and also letting them know that the war is over. They needed to be willing to disarm. We did peace, development, health, and education messages. We just put them into songs and drama and present them to the wider public. Some of the bids we were doing, we were also doing peace consolidation training between tribal groups – the Mandingo, the Lorma, the Gios, and the Krahn.

She further explained that the design of the programme was unrealistic in terms of the duration. That is, they had 6 months to disarm, demobilise, reintegrate and rehabilitate ex-combatants. In her words:

We were not frank about the terms of the programme. The timing was something, everything had been rushed in the space of time and once that time ends, the programme is over. You know the programme went over a period of like six months and when that is exhausted that programme is done. So, it is not like 3 years straight programme or 5 years programme.

Maria Nelson also added:

The way the whole programme was set up, nothing was perfect. We had a lot of international intervention and being the first time of anything, everybody wanted to be experts, all right. The design and everything was put in place with high expectations. But when the reality set in, the reality was different from what they anticipated.

It is difficult to reckon what was anticipated for a hasty six-month DDR programme in a rather fragile context at the time. In addition to the insufficient time frame, Dorothy Dunkor asserted that the needs of female ex-combatants were not addressed as all ex-combatants received the same kits irrespective of sex. More so, non-combatants benefitted from the programme because there were cases of individuals lying about their participation in the war. She summarised:

Some of the needs of the women who were involved was not handled. Some of the women had children, like mothers you know. Initially, they will just keep all of them in the same place and all that. So, we keep having different conversations before they came to see the need to have them to be separated. Some of them had special needs, but generally, it was perceived that once you are just a combatant, you are a combatant. The same set of kits that were been provided to the males was the same set of kits provided to females. The programmes were not quite gender sensitive. There were gender issues.

Expounding on the point of non-combatants participating in the DDR programme to receive benefits, Marie Williams said:

Some of them were not combatants! I am being very frank with you. Some young women who took advantage of the programme were not combatants. But because they had this shortfall, they needed education and took advantage of it. Also, some of those ex-combatants didn't even want to participate in the reintegration skill training opportunities, so they sold out their posts to people who were never combatants.

These women also affirmed that there were no follow-up programmes to monitor the progress of ex-combatants to see if they had successfully reintegrated into their respective communities. Maria Nelson said:

So, there were a lot of things that actually happened, and a lot of follow-ups was not attached to the programme after this. You want to follow up to see where the beneficiaries are, whether they have resettled in their communities or if they excel in the programme that they graduated from. We did not have follow-ups to be able to get the feedback. Right now, if you ask me, 'where are all of the ex-combatants?', we don't have that kind of record to show that John Brown is there, Mary is there, Esther is over there. So, all of these things are because it was not placed within the process.

Regarding the location and current activities of ex-combatants in communities, Mameke Sarnoh said, 'Really, the ex-combatants are very hard to deal with. Also, some have become Zogos'. This point was discussed in 5.3.3 on how women are dealing with a new menace – Liberian youths because of the war and insufficient DDR programme. Indeed, Dorothy Dunkor attested to the fact that many ex-combatants were on drugs, of which this issue was not addressed during the DDR. According to her:

There were key things that were not handled properly. The issue of drugs, the issue about ensuring that the actual affected people benefit from the different capacity-building opportunities that came. You know the reintegration process was very rapid and there were challenges along the way. I am telling you the issue of drugs was not handled at all, and it came out! We heard the news that most of the guys were living on drugs and fighting. It was not handled, up till now we are still struggling with it. So, if a DDRR process is to be done again, I think they should learn a lot from the Liberian experience, because there are challenges we are still struggling with, and there are still fighters struggling to develop skills.

### **5.3.6 Liberian Women: Feminists? Women's Activists?**

The conversation on feminism with Liberian women sparked different reactions. Some viewed feminism as extremist and preferred the term 'women', some also refused to be regarded as feminists because they are supported by their husbands. Others embraced the concept because they work for and with only women. For example, Beatrice Slogan said, 'I am feminist because my target mostly is based on women. We support women'. Similarly, Ruth Sirleaf said, 'Yes, because I deal with women and children'. Whereas, for Maria Nelson, feminism is an extremist term, and she believes in balance. She said:

No, I don't want to use the word feminist because people have different interpretations of the word feminist. When I hear the word, feminist, there is some extremist in the word feminist, all right. And I believe in life, the extreme of anything is not good. Right. So, while we empower women, we also need to remember that we have to stay on track. We cannot go in the extreme. Because there are some people who say God is a woman, I don't ascribe to that.

Anna Noah insisted that while they work for peace and the empowerment of women, they are supported by their husbands. She explained:

We are promoting men, because all the women you see, their husbands are there supporting us on a daily basis, so it is not only for women. The men are at the background there, anytime we need their support, they are with us. Everything we do they know about it. So, it's like it's only dominated by women but supported by men also, because all of us, our husbands are supporting us.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I aimed to foreground the experiences of the women I encountered in the DRC and Liberia. Their voices are the heart of this chapter, telling their stories in their own way. Moving forward into the next chapter, I will be taking a closer look at these women's stories through the lens of a feminist-decolonial framework, which I discussed in Chapter Three. This will help me not only to understand and analyse their

experiences more deeply but shed light on the nuances and complexities of the challenges these women face, as well as the resilience and strength they demonstrate in navigating these circumstances to nurture communal peace.

## **Chapter Six | Re-imagining Peace: From Women's Perspectives and Experiences in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Liberia**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I foregrounded the lessons derived from the lived experiences of women in the DRC and Liberia. These lessons encapsulated a spectrum of challenges and aspirations, ranging from navigating the complexities of war and peace to redefining womanhood. While Congolese women grapple with the simultaneous realities of war and peace in their work, Liberian women confront the paradox of persistent unrest despite being a 'postconflict' society. Amidst these complexities, these women understand what peace means to them and are continuously working towards their own visions of peace in their communities. My aim in this chapter is to delve deeper into these stories, analysing them through the lens of a feminist-decolonial framework as discussed in Chapter 3. This analytical approach seeks to discuss the intricate layers of meaning embedded within the women's accounts, offering a more nuanced understanding of peace as envisioned by them, and ultimately, fostering a reimagining of peace that resonates with their lived realities.

This chapter is organised around analytical themes that emerged from the stories shared in the previous chapter. These include 'debunking single stories', 'continuities and resistance', 'tensions and contradictions', and 'multifaceted understanding of peace as a continuous communal practice'. These themes will also be situated within broader discourses on peace, colonial tropes, agency, resistance, and decoloniality. Engaging with this analysis also prompts critical questions about the nature of peace and the challenges inherent in its realisation within contexts like the DRC and Liberia shaped by historical and contemporary power dynamics.

## 6.2 Debunking Single Stories

In her discourse titled 'The danger of a single story', Chimamanda Adiche expounds on the repercussions of persistently portraying an individual through a singular narrative in literature. Such portrayal inevitably leads to the unimaginable consequence of construing the person solely from that limited perspective, effectively erasing the richness and complexity of their other narratives. Building upon this notion, I aim to delve into the prevalence of single stories as propagated about Congolese and Liberian women, examining the impacts it has on the perception and endeavours of these women in the context of peacebuilding.

Furthermore, this section shall elucidate the active resistance demonstrated by these women as they strive to dismantle and refute these restrictive, one-dimensional accounts that have been ascribed to them. The overarching objective of this section is to accentuate the existence of multifaceted narratives surrounding women in these contexts. By doing so, I aspire to lay the essential groundwork for envisioning peace in a manner that transcends the confines of dominant perspectives. By furthering the multiplicity of stories, it becomes possible to bring about a collective re-imagination of peace, one that appreciates the vast spectrum of experiences, aspirations, and agency of women in this region. I begin with the single story about Congolese women before turning to Liberian women.

The dominant story about Congolese women is that they are merely sexualised victims of the war. The effect of this single story is that it has created a global stereotype about Congolese women, and the problem with stereotypes as Adiche (2009) highlights, is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story of these women. I also reflect on how stereotypes mirror

an arrogant ignorance that is uninformed of plurality but pretends to 'know' 'the' reality of certain experiences and peoples (Icaza, 2022). Similarly, Boateng (2016) describes the categorisation of African women and their lived experiences as arenas where power operates. This power involves naming and claiming to 'know' African women. We saw this in the previous chapter when Agnes Sadiki talked about how she was immediately stereotyped as a rape victim simply because she is Congolese. In her words:

I was one day flabbergasted when I landed in Brussels and there was a German woman with whom we had travelled and who asked me if I was Congolese, I say yes! She said to me, "Oh you too are raped?", I say not at all! She says: "But in Congo, they say that all women are raped!".

Judith Maroy also shared:

I remember we were in a meeting with the Belgian Minister for Development Cooperation, and it was with women journalists in a meeting with the partners of a Belgian organisation. They wanted that afterwards they meet with women journalists as an aside to talk about rape complaints. They imagined that among the ten journalists, there could be more than six who were also raped. This is certainly the image that has been given so much attention, but it is not at all the reality.

The narrative regarding Congolese women, as encountered ('known') by the German woman and Belgian partners, has likely been presented in varied forms, inducing a sense of sympathy even before their actual interaction. This sentiment evokes what Adiche (2009) characterised as 'a patronising well-meaning pity'. This patronising well-meaning pity is steeped in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). As already discussed in Chapter 2, this Resolution advocates for a gender-sensitive approach within peace processes, primarily influenced by White feminist ideologies. Upon closer examination of the four pillars of the WPS agenda - participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery - it becomes apparent that non-White women residing in conflict-ridden

areas are depicted as victims devoid of agency and positioned as beneficiaries in need of protection. It is important to acknowledge that while the pillars hold significance, they tend to perpetuate a singular narrative concerning women within these contexts.

To illustrate, let us consider the 'participation' pillar which seems to disregard the fact that these women were engaged in peacebuilding endeavours in their capacities before external interventions occurred. Similarly, the 'protection' pillar implies that all women residing in regions affected by conflict require 'saving' from instances of sexual and gender-based violence. Furthermore, the pillars of 'prevention' and 'relief and recovery' also suggest that these women are primarily seen as victims of catastrophic events. The viewpoints expressed by Shepherd (2011) also emphasise that the WPS agenda portrays specific women as victims while assuming that most women speak for all women. Shepherd contends that this agenda places an additional responsibility on certain women to rescue those who are depicted as victims. It is as though only certain types of women are deemed to require WPS intervention and invariably, these women reside in the Global South. Elucidating further on the notion of global racialised hierarchies, Haastrup and Hagen (2020) assert that the WPS agenda inherently incorporates persistent presumptions about the 'Other'.

These scholars contend that within the scope of WPS programmes, there exists a prevailing issue of inadequate funding – a point that the Congolese and Liberian women also alluded to in the previous chapter. Moreover, it is observed that the allocation of funds often inclines towards 'protection' measures, particularly focused on addressing instances of sexual violence, as opposed to other facets of the WPS policy. According to these scholars, a noteworthy aspect is the absence of a historical and contemporary understanding of how colonialism and racism manifest within the

structure of the WPS agenda. This absence, in turn, renders marginalised groups, often referred to as the 'Other', susceptible to needing the interventions outlined within this framework. In essence, the rather convenient portrayal of the 'Other' as fragile and in need of protection is attributed to the oversight of colonial continuities and historical legacies in the WPS agenda. As a matter of fact, the WPS agenda perpetuates the coloniality of gender by characterising women in conflict-affected regions as victims and men as perpetrators of less-than-humane sexual violence. Hence the imperative to rescue these women from the clutches of their male counterparts. This phenomenon is unsurprisingly manifested in initiatives for liberal peacebuilding that have been formulated and financially supported by international collaborators, with a focus on eradicating gender-based violence and saving so-called victims of sexual violence in the DRC. Isabelle Pendeza expressed her frustration regarding this matter:

How many years have we been talking about sexual violence? But the more we talk about it, the more the number of victims increases! ... they come up with projects such as: "capacity building of GBV victims"; and we do workshops with a lot of money that could be used for something else! But is the expected result for these victims achieved?

Following Mohanty's (1988) line of argument, the act of categorising women subject to sexual oppression within specific contexts in Third World countries warrants scrutiny. This not only shapes the perception of Third World women before they engage in social interactions, as exemplified by Agnes Sadiki's experience in Brussels, but it also overlooks the defiant experiences of these groups of women. This Western feminist analytical approach, by attempting to categorise and generalise the plural experiences of various groups of women, tends to eliminate resistant forms of experiences like motherwork for example, as embodied by the women in this study. Mohanty goes on to suggest that this particular feminist perspective upholds and

reinforces the dominance of Western superiority. This, in turn, inadvertently triggers a narrative reminiscent of colonialism, which wields a distinct influence in shaping, interpreting, and upholding the relationships between the so-called first and third-world nations. The focal assertion I am trying to highlight pertains to the observation that the single story depicting Congolese women exclusively as sexualised victims of war is not an unintended consequence. This trend is also discernible in the marketisation of the misrepresentation of these women. A case in point is illuminated by Valentine Migabo's assertion:

Ill-intentioned people preferred to call us raped women so that they would enrich themselves in our name. Now, we are forced to live with this name, but I would like the world to know that not all Congolese women are raped, not even 2%.

Recall one of the cross-border women sellers also said:

Also, there is XYZ who goes to Europe and says that all Congolese women are raped. This individual says it in order to have funding and that is why they cannot wish for this name to end. Their wish is that we are always treated as raped so that they have money. If I am sick now and am taken to Panzi Hospital, XYZ will write my name down on the list of raped women. So they cannot accept that this name is deleted or changed because they live because of it!

Another said:

...Even XYZ also lies; they always talk about raped women so that they can receive funding. That is, *there are several people who live on the backs of these raped women*. They use violence as a way for them to have money.

Talking about 'living on the backs of these raped women', one is compelled to interrogate why the bodies of certain women are often in view. What is this fixation on certain bodies? This fixation is not about recognising the intellectual capabilities and knowledges cultivated by these bodies; rather, it centres the sexualisation and victimisation of these bodies. Boateng (2016) also stresses that despite their transnational mobility that locates them in cities around the world (like Agnes Sadiki in

this study), African women remain largely invisible in mainstream Western scholarship and popular culture. When they are acknowledged, it is often only within narratives of victimhood, which many in Europe and North America 'know' to be their primary condition. This also reminds me of Tuck and Yang's (2014, p.226) assertion that, 'the subaltern can speak, but is only invited to speak her/our pain'. It appears that certain individuals, organisations, and others have noticed this fixation and exploit it to secure funding. Buttressing this point, Isabelle Pendeza said, 'If our government gives itself a strategy of not relaying what is negative in our country, no partner will come'. Judith Maroy also asserted that 'Organisations must also not exaggerate too much and generalise in their report to have the sympathy of the donors for funds'. This points back to Haastrup and Hagen's (2020) observation regarding the disproportionate allocation of WPS funding towards addressing sexual violence. This tendency reduces the multifaceted experiences and agency of women in non-Western conflict contexts to the singular narrative of victimhood, thus perpetuating a skewed understanding of their plural realities.

Beyond the marketisation of misrepresentation is the fact that this single story objectifies the bodies of these women and undermines their peacebuilding efforts in communities. In terms of the objectification of these women's bodies, I link this to Oyewumi's (1997) argument on the entanglement between colonialism and African women's bodies as already discussed in Chapter 3. The fact that during the colonial encounter, African women were at the bottom of the radar, an unidentified category of the 'Other'. As Lugones (2010) also tells us, enslaved Africans were assumed to be uncontrollably sexual and wild. These representations have long informed and continue to inform the myths of 'savagery' and sexual danger that legitimise the peacebuilding and humanitarian-cum-colonial project in (post)colonial African contexts

(Magubane, 2007; Medie, 2019; Tamale, 2011). The coloniality of gender shows how these historical dynamics continue to impact the understanding of gender today. In essence, it highlights how gender is perceived and treated, particularly in ways that perpetuate the marginalisation, sexualisation, and objectification of African women's bodies. The prevailing narrative concerning Congolese women serves to perpetuate the notion that all Congolese men are perpetrators of sexual violence unable to control their 'sexual wildness', while simultaneously portraying all Congolese women as potential victims of such acts.

This narrative can be identified as a remnant of colonialist frameworks that revolve around the dominance and manipulation of formerly colonised peoples' bodies. Meanwhile, Kyamusugulwa and Mwenebyake (2023) reveal the sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in the humanitarian sector in the DRC and how many male humanitarian actors have condoms in their offices or while travelling for fieldwork. According to these scholars, it is very common that victims are invited into hotel rooms. These aid workers deceive women with promises of marriage, or these women are compelled to consent if they want to keep their jobs. Tasker's (2023) research with Congolese women regarding SEA by aid workers contributes to this. One of the women in her study said:

He forced me to do sex intercourse; unfortunately it was a moment that I was able to conceive. He strongly grabbed me and raped me. I asked him why such sexual violence, he replied he loved me very much and he promised to leave a worthy present to me before his return to his country (p.89).

Another woman said:

There is a girl in our quarter who had a peace-baby with a MONUSCO agent. We were surprised to see her having a child with a foreigner. She was left without any support. My regret is that MONUSCO agents are destroying our sisters in here (p.100).

The narratives elucidate instances of sexual violence perpetrated by male agents affiliated with liberal peacebuilding and humanitarian organisations ostensibly dedicated to 'protecting' and 'saving' so-called victims of sexual violence in the DRC. These revelations prompt a critical examination of the inherent double standards at play. How can those 'deeply invested' in the 'rescue' and 'protection' of sexual violence victims concurrently perpetrate such egregious acts?

As Adiche (2009) also flags out, it is impossible to talk about a single story without talking about power. According to her, single stories are created by the principle of 'Nkali', a word associated with the Igbo tribe of Nigeria that means 'to be greater than another'. How single stories are told, who tells them, when they are told, and how many stories are told, are fundamentally hinged on the dynamics of power. Power herein denotes the capacity to not just tell the story of another person but make it the definitive story of that person i.e., 'All Congolese men are rapists, all Congolese women are raped'. The cross-border market women described this brilliantly albeit sarcastically when they said, 'Even Esther knows we are all raped in Congo and since she is also in Congo, Esther is also raped because she is in Congo'. This was an intelligent and powerful way of teaching me about the danger of the single story and their active resistance. One of them further explained the effect of this single story attached to their identity. She said:

Even this phone I have, it is called "raped woman"! ... That is to say that my phone is also a raped woman. A way to show that the raped woman is an object of lesser value.

This woman was explaining that because Congolese women are globally misrepresented as only raped women, anything owned by them or affiliated with them automatically adopts the same label. Thus, inferring that they are simply objects with no value. Generose Wera further substantiated this assertion, affirming that the

inaccurate portrayal of Congolese women confines them to a marginalised position, impeding the advancement of their communities. She highlighted the influence of this narrative, impacting both Congolese men and women. In her words:

The Congolese woman is plural if I can say that. Congolese women in their plurality as in their singularity are not only victims! They are also fighters, courageous, intellectuals... There is interest in presenting the Congolese woman as a raped woman because as much this woman is presented as a victim, the men are also devils! *Because she is not raped by beasts, it is by men!* By presenting us as victims of sexual violence, in reality, we are also talking about these men. Also, this way of presenting the woman as a victim is a strategy to prevent her from progressing because easily when she wants to claim something, we can say that she has psychological problems!

She further stated:

Also by presenting Congolese women as victims each time, what help is being given to them? Because it is not enough to say that she is a victim without substantial help being given to her! Calling someone a victim for about 20 years is a problem! As long as women, who are the backbone of the community are treated in this way, we prevent communities from moving forward!

In the first quote, the italicised part where she says, ‘...Because she is not raped by beasts, it is by men!’, I would like to reflect on this following Lugones’ argument that only the coloniser i.e., the civilised is truly ‘man’ or ‘woman’. In contrast, the colonised ones are depicted as ‘sexualised beasts’, wildly sexual and hence not human who need transformation. These imposed dichotomies and hierarchies were deeply embedded in the historical context of relations. Lugones maintains that the goal of colonialism was not to turn the colonised into human beings but to turn the colonised against themselves. This internalised dehumanisation was part of the civilising mission’s repertoire of justifications for their abuse. Again, I think about how the coloniality of gender is reproduced here as international donors and implementers, etc., sustain the single story of ‘raped’ colonised women and the idea of Congolese men as sexually wild beasts. Yet, Generose Wera calls them ‘men’ and not ‘sexually wild beasts’. This might also explain why they refuse the label of ‘feminist’ because as

many of alluded, they have their husbands, brothers, and sons supporting them. This point is important in the sense that by denying being feminists – in the white liberal Western sense of the term – they are also challenging the dehumanisation and stereotyping of Congolese men as animalistic. As Isabelle Pendeza says it:

...Behind me there are boy children, there is my husband, and he is a man. So, this is not to say that it is not myself who benefits from the activities, I do, but there is an addition to those who are behind me.

To consistently insist on only negative stories is to dwarf and erase the plural experiences of these women and overlook their numerous multifaceted stories. For instance, by refusing the label 'feminist', they are not only reshaping the perception of men's humanity in their communities but also affirming their important role as the 'backbone of the community', which demonstrates their power and agency. Isabelle Pendeza also corroborates this point:

...But when they are there only to sell a bad image of women, it repels us at the grassroots because we are not only victims of violence, we are actors in reconciliation, conflict resolution, the environment and other things of development!

These narrations reveal an aspect of Congolese women's resistance and rejection of the single story about them. This is the active subjectivity and resistant agency that Lugones (2005) talks about as already discussed in Chapter 3. It explains the simultaneity of everyday oppression and everyday resistance that connotes the multiple nature of Congolese women as both oppressed and resistant. The fact that one is oppressed does not mean that they are not also resisting in their own way. For example, the women in this study assert that while Congolese women are tagged as mere victims of sexual violence and treated as such in projects designed and funded by international partners, they have not 'crossed their arms'; they describe the

Congolese women as resilient, nurturing, courageous, wise, enterprising, etc. For example, Agnes Sadiki said:

The Congolese woman is a strong woman, she still deserves praise, not only from Congolese men but also from the international world – those who tend to say that the Congolese woman is a miserable woman, a victim! I have the experience that I have beyond being Congolese, I know that she is a competent woman! If we had peace in this country at a certain time, it is because the women stood up to go to Sun City, to Maputo, to go here and there to claim peace! I cannot say that the Congolese woman is only a victim, she is also an actor of peace!

Valentine Migabo seconded:

The Congolese woman is a courageous woman, she sacrifices herself for the well-being of her family and the whole community. She is a woman who deserves flowers for the work she does!

These women display active subjectivity and resistant agency by constructing themselves differently than what the hegemon makes them to be. Instead of conforming to preconceived roles or stereotypes, by practising active subjectivity, Congolese women assert their own perspectives, beliefs, and ways of being. It is a way of pushing back and asserting their resistant agency. This resistance involves not only confronting colonial continuities and patriarchy (which is further discussed in the succeeding sub-heading) but also critically examining how these dynamics have been internalised and perpetuated within communities. Therefore, debunking the single story about Congolese women is relevant to peacebuilding discourse and praxis. Failing to address this issue could result in the continued exclusion of these women as nurturers of communal peace and knowledge cultivators. Reconfiguring and reshaping how these women are read and represented is crucial in establishing the fact that they possess an understanding of, engage in, and emotively resonate with the pursuit of peace.

The single story about Liberian women stands in stark contrast to that of Congolese women as Liberian women are often depicted as emblematic figures of women's activism in the process of peacebuilding. This perception has been so pervasive that Martin de Almagro's research (2018, p.326) highlighted how Congolese women have challenged this portrayal by voicing:

We were a group of African women leaders that were taken to Sweden. The first thing they do is to show us a film on Liberian women as peacemakers and a second one on the Congolese women raped as a result of war. But we were also in Sun City, we also participated to the Inter-Congolese dialogue, we are also here, fighting.

Liberian women have been globally recognised as courageous agents who fought for peace during the country's tumultuous civil wars, as detailed in Chapter 2. However, this portrayal often sensationalises their actions, as if it is surprising that African women can exhibit agency and effect change. I draw on what Yee Dahn said to explain this point. In her words:

We even have our own school for our children to go to school. We do not want people taking advantage of us. Our children are now going to our own school that was built for ourselves. Before we completed our school, the UN came in to help us complete it. They said, *if women can take initiative on their own*, we have to provide them support.

The phrase 'If women can take initiative on their own' suggests an underlying assumption that African women are generally incapable of taking initiative independently and therefore require external assistance. However, the actions of Liberian women, who demonstrated their ability to 'take initiative on their own', challenged this stereotype. Their success was then sensationalised, creating a narrative of surprise and admiration. This narrative reflects a broader issue in the perception of African women where this perspective is rooted in colonial and patriarchal views that underestimate their agency and capabilities as already discussed above. By analysing the case of Liberian women, we see a clear example

of how these women defied these assumptions, taking control of their own destinies and demonstrating leadership and initiative.

We also see how the glamorisation of their story highlights the surprise and impressiveness elicited when these stereotypes are challenged. Yet, the acknowledgement of Liberian women's initiative serves not only as a testament to their strength and resilience but also as a critique of the assumptions that have constrained the perception of African women. Feminist-decoloniality recognises that African women have always possessed the ability to 'take initiative on their own' and act on it. This research particularly reveals that Liberian women have long demonstrated agency within their families and communities, a reality that predates the civil wars. This indicates that their agency is not a recent development but a continuation of pre-existing social dynamics. Rebecca Tenneh's testimony exemplifies this point and illustrates this continuity of active subjectivity and agency:

Before the war, before Charles Taylor's regime, my aunt was a paramount chief (i.e., a traditional leader). *So, women have been making peace before even this day.* Yeah, and even in crisis she was in that position as a paramount chief. Because when you are there with the intention of making peace, people will listen to you...

Marie Williams elaborated on this:

I remember when I was a little girl coming up and living in Central Monrovia, Central Street for that matter, my mother and other women had this group of women where they were basically from two different tribal groups, the Kru and the Bassa people and they would interact. And there was this concern for children, there was this concern for families. So the peace was like that, family relationship was established whether you were biologically related or not. If I did something as a child that was wrong, another mother could discipline me... okay. The women were always together. So whether they were Muslims or they were Christians. But at that time, there was this bond, okay. That is family bonding. That is what we had.

The spotlighting of Liberian women's agency and activism predominantly in the context of the civil war prompts critical reflection on the coloniality of gender and the portrayal of certain women as inherently oppressed, subordinated, and in need of rescue. When these women defy such portrayals, their actions are often overstated, suggesting a perception that their capabilities are extraordinary and rare. This raises the question: if the war had not occurred, would Liberian women still be recognised and celebrated globally for their agency and resilience? I link this with Oyewumi's (1997) argument concerning the Western preoccupation with visibility, suggesting that if something is not visible, it is considered non-existent. This perspective perpetuates single stories, reinforcing the belief that the wars endowed Liberian women with 'new' identities as breadwinners, leaders, and peacemakers (Fuest, 2008; Lawson & Flomo, 2020).

However, the quotes above suggest that Liberian women have always been actively engaged in their communities. Thus, it is plausible that the war simply expanded their roles, allowing them to operate on a larger scale, rather than bestowing upon them entirely new identities. This interpretation challenges the simplistic narrative that the conflicts were the genesis of Liberian women's empowerment. Instead, it posits that these women have long exhibited resilience and leadership, with the war merely highlighting and expanding the visibility of their roles. Acknowledging this historical continuity is crucial for a more nuanced understanding of Liberian women's contributions and their enduring agency.

Despite the prevailing narrative that glamorises Liberian women as peacemakers, there are numerous untold stories about how these women are coping with domestic and sexual violence, and femicide in the aftermath of the wars. The women in this

study provided insights into their personal struggles and strategies for addressing these issues. For instance, Maria Nelson said:

The issue of gender-based violence is something that we speak out against because it kind of breaks a woman down. And they cannot use their full potential when they are depressed, when they are being abused, or when they are being marginalised, all of that.

Joanna Ballah also explained:

If we can stop the domestic violence, there will be peace. We are living in fear as women. Most of the time when we go into the village, most of our women say, oh, there was a killing or there was a rape.

These narratives are crucial as they shed light on the broader spectrum of challenges faced by Liberian women, which is often overshadowed by the singular portrayal of them as peacemakers. In analysing Liberia's 'postconflict' landscape, some scholars posit that despite women's fundamental role in advocating for the end of wars, violence against women persists and may even intensify in the aftermath (Gallo-Cruz & Remsberg, 2021). This persistence is attributed to the entrenched nature of wartime sexual violence, which becomes ingrained as a normalised behaviour post-conflict. The women in this study attest to this. Far from experiencing peace as they know it, they still grapple with ongoing challenges such as violence against women that stem from the lingering effects of past conflicts. Their experiences challenge conventional Western liberal ideals of peace and underscore a nuanced understanding of peace as understood by these women. Additionally, it prompts a critical analysis of the simplistic dichotomy between war and peace, which I will delve into further in subsequent sections.

Even while facing the torment of rape and other forms of violence, the women in this study 'have not crossed their arms'. They actively engage in efforts to combat these issues, showcasing their agency and active subjectivity amidst difficulties. For example, Margaret Menyon explained that her organisation raises awareness against gender-based violence and develops sensitisation programmes for men and women. They also inform women about how and where they can receive help. She elucidated that one of the programmes focuses on storytelling and shared experiences with survivors of gender-based violence. Similarly, Ophelia Karn said, 'We advocate for women that have been abused. So, we manage to go in, talk and counsel them and make sure that they have their right'. Mayanda Kromah also explained:

I found out that women are suffering. Most of the women were vulnerable in the community. So, I decided to put them together in order to have some counselling groups for them. Those who are suffering and those who are victimised by men. Also, I advocate on their behalf to do referrals to other areas for them to receive help.

In highlighting these experiences, this research challenges the oversimplified hero single narrative and calls for a deeper examination of the lived realities of women in so-called postconflict zones. Recognising these multifaceted experiences is essential for a fuller understanding of their lives and the ongoing impact of the conflicts on their well-being.

Therefore, if Liberian women are also dealing with rape and other forms of violence in their 'postconflict' context; and Congolese women are also working for peace in their simultaneous war-peace context, why are the stories about these women unidimensional and selective? Why is there a lack of recognition of the plurality of their experiences? This oversight can be attributed to a failure to acknowledge the simultaneity of oppression and resistance, as elucidated by Lugones (2010). Lugones emphasises the multiplicity of identities inherent within individuals, which are often

obscured by the gender roles and norms imposed by colonial legacies. The colonial legacy has entrenched rigid gender norms that constrain how women's agency and resistance are perceived. When women challenge these norms, their acts of resistance may not be readily recognised, as they do not fit neatly into the predefined categories of victim or aggressor. Liberian and Congolese women are not simply passive victims of conflict or peacemakers; they actively resist oppression while embodying multiple identities that transcend simplistic categorisation. By overlooking the plurality of women's experiences, there is a risk of perpetuating stereotypes as Adiche already established and denying agency to those who defy societal expectations. Recognising the complexity of women's identities is crucial for understanding their contributions to peacebuilding efforts in their communities. It is within the context of their plural identities that these women cultivate their visions of communal peace.

### **6.3 Continuities and Resistance: Echoes of the Past in the Present**

In this theme, the focus revolves around the perpetuation of prevailing colonial and patriarchal norms within the context of peacebuilding efforts in the DRC and Liberia. Concurrently, the discourse delves into the strategies adopted by the women in this study to navigate and resist these complex dynamics. My argument on colonial continuities resonates with scholars who draw parallels between peacebuilding and a new form of hegemonic control alongside neo-imperialistic undertones, as discussed in Chapter 2. Sabaratnam (2017) advances the perspective that the methods inherent in liberal peacebuilding exhibit a persistent alignment with the colonial gaze. This gaze characterises individuals within post-conflict societies as passive beneficiaries of peace, effectively subduing diversity and imposing a hierarchical framework of

knowledge, knowers, societies, and cultural entities, ultimately stifling plurality. Hudson (2012) also asserts that in liberal peacebuilding, 'Others' are always the problem to be solved which puts the responsibility on the Western 'Self' to produce peace since the non-Western 'Other' is assumed to be unable to sustain it.

This perspective, where individuals within conflict-affected areas are seen as passive beneficiaries of peace efforts or as a welfare project, became evident in the dialogues with women in the DRC. In these conversations, some women described their organisations' interactions with international partners. Case in point, Isabelle Pendeza said:

For example, a partner comes with a project whose hazards and challenges we know on the ground. They tell us how to execute the project, we tell them how we would like to execute it because we know the land and the needs of the community. It happens sometimes that the partners refuse to let us execute the project in the sense that we believe is favourable to our community. Sometimes, because of the financial and social difficulties that the community is going through, we are forced to accept certain projects.

Generose Wera also explained:

*We are on the journey, but it is the international organisations that say that we have no capacity. We have capabilities but the problem is money!* Even international organisations don't have the money, they ask donors. If we access the donors, with the funds we will carry out projects on the ground and build the experience. That's my thought.

Agnes Sadiki affirmed:

We know the real needs of the population, the strategies that can reverse the situation for the interest of the population, *but it is they who have the means and their policy. Certainly, the hand that gives is always superior to the one who receives!*

For Collette Salima:

Sometimes there is this little concern because internationals have means while those at the local level do not have enough means. But in the end, the one who has the means, it is he who leads. *When you have nothing, you don't say anything too.* That's usually it!

The provided excerpts elucidate how international peacebuilders or 'partners' control authority in their work for peace in the DRC. This is the nuanced complex operation of coloniality of power i.e., the control of active subjectivity through racialised/capitalist norms that subjects people to believe they have nothing and are nobody (Tamale, 2020; Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012). It also becomes apparent that authority is exerted not only in the peace projects they 'bring', but also in the methods employed in executing these projects. First, with regards to 'bringing' projects for peace, it can be argued that international partners perceive themselves as the custodians of peace, possessing a profound understanding of peace and the necessary projects required for its realisation. This reflects the coloniality of knowledge as explained in Chapter 3 which outlines how colonialism created a power hierarchy that subjugated non-Western cultures and ways of knowing, elevating Western knowledge systems as the gold standard. This power dynamic fundamentally influences liberal peacebuilding, where Western epistemologies are often taken as the normative basis for understanding conflicts and designing interventions.

Also, the assumption that peace needs to be 'brought' or transported from one location to another suggests a perspective where peace is linked exclusively to a specific geopolitical region. Peacebuilding, founded on Western liberal principles, is often enacted by individuals who embody and execute these Western ideologies and praxis. Consequently, this perspective reinforces the connection between peace and the West. Abu-Assab et al. (2022) also discuss how capitalism plays a crucial role in commodifying peace. They argue that within the liberal framework, peace is treated as a marketable and consumable product, serving as an indicator of economic development. This perspective views peace as something that can be exported, akin to a commodity. This elucidates the rationale behind international partners' inclination

to prescribe peace initiatives to their recipients, as they position themselves as authoritative figures in matters of peace. Their perceived expertise grants them not only a sense of superiority but also the financial capability to back their professed knowledge. This dynamic aligns with Sabaratnam's contention regarding how liberal peacebuilding stifles diversity and institutes a hierarchical structure encompassing authorities, knowledge, individuals, and cultures.

The provided excerpts also suggest that certain women have embraced the notion that their financial limitations render them subordinate to their counterparts from abroad. This perception seems to compel them to act cautiously or minimise their presence, possibly to ensure continued financial support from their international partners. Alternatively, one might contemplate whether this is a deliberate tactic employed by international partners to establish dominance over those they assist. Given their understanding of the economic challenges within these specific regions, it raises the question of whether their approach is centred around the premise of utilising their financial resources to both initiate projects and dictate their execution. This perspective could elucidate the underlying reasoning behind the assumption that indigenous women lack the capacity to lead, as evidenced by Generose Wera's account above.

Is it then appropriate to characterise the dynamic between international partners and local organisations as a partnership, particularly when this dynamic is influenced by a colonial gaze, where the international partners perceive the local organisations merely as beneficiaries who are neither knowers nor cultivators of peace? This inquiry holds significance for advocates of hybrid peace, as proposed by Mac Ginty (2010), who posits that sustainable peace is nurtured through the interplay of both local and

international norms, rights, interests, and so forth. However as already discussed in Chapter 2, this 'interplay' does not exist in a vacuum such that, instead of engendering sustainable peace, the outcome appears to perpetuate colonial norms geared by the dominance of White supremacy culture within the realm of peacebuilding.

It is this sense of superiority that deters international partners from listening to the ideas and strategies proposed by indigenous women regarding project implementation. Collaborative endeavours in which international partners assume the leading role in shaping and directing project execution can inadvertently perpetuate the marginalisation and erasure of indigenous women's knowledges and approaches to peace. This dynamic renders the perspectives and strategies of these women inferior. Worst still, this inferiority of knowledge is pedalled with financial complications. For example, Collette Salima said, '...When you have nothing, you don't say anything too'. However, the question arises whether their apparent lack of substantial contributions is a result of their limited knowledge or primarily a consequence of the imbalanced power dynamics driven by financial factors. It appears that certain women have to immolate their knowledges and experiences for financial aid, a measure undertaken to bolster the well-being of the very communities they are engaged with. This situation necessitates a strategic approach since certain international peacebuilding partnerships do not necessarily recognise the multiplicity of knowledge. Despite the colonial gaze and unequal relationship, certain women strive to alter the existing state of affairs regarding collaborations with international organisations. They do so by actively shaping the 'what' and 'how' of peace initiatives. Case in point, Joly Kamuntu explained that she only partners with organisations that are willing to support projects initiated and implemented by her organisation. In her words:

Faced with this irresponsibility of the state, *we have not crossed our arms!* This is why we look for support everywhere. When an international organisation comes to the field, it will not be accepted as I am accepted. I speak the local language; I know the customs and more while an international organisation can't do it like I do. That is why we build relationships with international organisations that support the activities we do. You can't come to help people and turn yourself into an actor on the ground!

This underscores the possibility of resistance even amid challenging circumstances. This is the active subjectivity that Lugones (2010) refers to as a pathway towards resistance agency. This resistance agency is not the end, but the beginning, a possibility. Moreover, there are other groups of women, such as cross-border traders, who may not actively engage with international partners but play a role in fostering peace within their communities, drawing from their personal insights and socio-economic circumstances. To exemplify, one of the women in a focused group dialogue involving cross-border traders in Ruzizi, South Kivu, articulated the following point:

We have our Association and there is a person in charge. Every day we contribute 2000 francs and after every two days, we give the sum to one person. It helps us find the money to get our children into school. That is how we create peace with our work.

Analysing the Liberian context reveals a distinct inclination towards active resistance concerning the acceptance of international assistance for the financing of peacebuilding efforts. This phenomenon appears to stem from disparities in the timelines of conflicts. Liberia's civil wars ended in 2003, whereas the DRC continues to engage in peacebuilding amidst ongoing conflicts across various regions. During my encounters in both countries, I observed that international organisations exert a more substantial presence within the DRC compared to Liberia. Nevertheless, the absence of flagrant violence in Liberia should not be misconstrued as the presence of genuine peace, a perspective stressed by the assertions of Liberian women in this study. Thus, these women persistently channel their efforts into the construction and

nurturing of peace within their communities. This point is also linked to the notion that peacebuilding is a continuous process rather than a mechanical one-time effort. In light of this, some women implied that regardless of external funding, their commitment to fostering peace within their communities persists because the vision is theirs. Additionally, a number of them have formulated approaches to ensure sustainable financial viability. For example, Idole Kaiser asserted:

We have the passion for the work. Having the passion for the work is just different from lost funding. And then, we also look at sustainability whatsoever. We will still be here because the issues are our issues. We will take responsibility for this issue to make sure that they are corrected to make sure that our dream will not die because the dream is not for the donor, the vision is for us. And we must live up to the vision.

Joanna Ballah reiterated:

Because whether funding or not, we still do the work in the community. We are still working, and people still know us. So, I don't want to say to others that it was because of funding we couldn't work. We could just sit and say whenever funding comes we work, but we are working!

Affirming that the vision of peace is theirs and devising ways to achieve this not only counteracts the expertism of international peacebuilders who embody western liberal ideas of peace, but also introduces plural visions, understandings, meanings, and approaches to peace discourse<sup>41</sup>. It depicts an active resistance to indigenous knowledge subordination embedded in liberal peacebuilding. More so, they possess the autonomy to formulate and execute peace-oriented projects. This situation does not entail the imposition of peace upon them, nor does it involve a passive reliance on financial assistance from international donors. Instead, the initiative belongs to them, granting them the authority to determine its execution approach.

---

<sup>41</sup> This multifaceted understandings of peace is discussed in another theme.

Nonetheless, this does not translate in the absence of colonial continuities in this context. While some women are autonomous in their work for peace, others implement projects dictated and funded by their international partners. Worse is the urban-rural hierarchies reproduced by international partners leading to tensions amongst Liberian women. As revealed in the previous chapter, projects are usually assigned to organisations in urban areas to be implemented at the grassroots level, leading to a sense of superiority displayed by women's organisations in urban areas. Through conversations with these women, the dynamics of their partnership with international organisations became clearer, highlighting the necessity for them to seek project approval prior to fund allocation. It is such that their proposals must be tailored to align with the requirements and standards of donors. Therefore, it was unsurprising to hear some of them quote the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) as their yardstick in terms of the projects they execute.

This aligns with Kunz's (2016) argument on the 'NGOization' of feminist movements as outlined in Chapter 2, where local organisations need to reformulate their objectives and activities in line with the WPS agenda to remain relevant and receive funding from the international community. Obradovic-Wochnik (2020) also maintains that some local NGOs, especially those funded internationally tend to be local gatekeepers for the 'Higher-ups' who speak on behalf of those at the grassroots. Consequently, these gatekeepers may superimpose their funders' perspectives on matters of gender and peacebuilding, potentially overshadowing the viewpoints of grassroots participants.

This phenomenon applies to the Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL), elucidated in the previous chapter. Situated in Monrovia, this secretariat functions as an intermediary between the higher-ups and women at the

grassroots. It is through them that Western liberal ideals are exported to those at the grassroots through workshops amongst other things. Buttressing this point, Beatrice Slogan said:

WONGOSOL will get the project and then they contact network members to work along with them. We were able to get project, WONGOSOL give us project, we were doing vocational school, where we open tailoring, catering, tie, and dye, yeah.

Anna Noah also affirmed:

We have been called many at times to WONGOSOL. Many at times, we go for workshops and things. So, that is where we are, when they are ready, they can call us.

Speaking of workshops, it is utterly important to unpack the workshop and capacity-building culture often associated with liberal peacebuilding. It can be argued that these so-called workshops and capacity-building programmes reproduce colonial norms and power dynamics by prioritising Western theories, approaches, and expertise, neglecting and undermining indigenous knowledges and practices. As earlier stated, this perpetuates the notion that the West knows what is best for the 'Rest', in this case, Liberian women. It is often shrouded in the tokenistic involvement of local NGOs in urban regions as the 'executors' of these initiatives while those at the grassroots are expected to passively 'receive' knowledge and training. For clarity, this critique of the workshop culture in peacebuilding is not a blanket condemnation of all workshops but rather a call for more self-reflection, plurality, and sensitivity to local contexts and power dynamics.

In addition to colonial continuities, women in the DRC and Liberia also encounter the persistence of patriarchal norms within the context of peacebuilding efforts. The conversations with Congolese women illustrate their trajectory from the period before the war to the phases of conflict in the DRC. Their accounts of women's involvement

in upholding peace within their communities before the war represent the relegation of women to colonial gender norms sustained by patriarchy. For example, women primarily engaged in the preservation of peace and harmony within the household and with neighbours through communal meal-sharing and caregiving activities. As explained by Kavira Yeye:

It is the woman who fights for her to be at peace with her neighbours. We grew up in peace and our neighbours were considered our brothers and this is the fruit of the peace that our mothers maintained in our communities. The woman creates peace even without saying anything. She can just cook a meal and give it to two men who are in conflict; when they eat together, they will speak the same language and get along easily...

Esperance Chaguma also talked about how women were not involved in 'big' issues like attending and speaking at the 'Kihanda' (local assembly) and 'Baraza' (local council) chaired my men prior to the war. In her words:

Before, the woman just had to look after the children and manage the household but not sit with the men where they meet. The woman was really not involved in big issues.

The notion of 'big' and 'small' issues in this context reiterates the arguments made in Chapter 3, regarding the distinction between the private and public spheres and how it relates to the colonial encounter in inventing gender norms. The argument is that the rigid binary notion of public (i.e., male-dominated) and private (i.e., women-dominated) spheres reinforces and perpetuates colonial patriarchal power structures (Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997; Sudarkasa, 1986). The public sphere is associated with broader community, politics, formal decision-making processes, and issues concerning the state and global politics. Whereas, the private sphere is associated with the home, family, and personal life. It encompasses domestic responsibilities, childcare, emotional support, etc. However, it is important to emphasise that the public-private dichotomy is not a clear-cut binary; rather, it is

interconnected. The so-called private or 'small' issues are not detached from national and global 'big' issues. Women in the DRC affirmed that the 'small' issues they were responsible for, were in fact preconditions for 'big' issues like conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Butressing the point, Solange Lwashiga said:

When people talk about peace negotiation what they are looking for is power, political position, they don't care about that woman who fought with her neighbour because the cow or the goat or the pig of the neighbour has destroyed one single plant of cassava. Do you know that such conflict can put fire on the whole province?

Analysing this quote, one could initially perceive that before the war, Congolese women succumbed to patriarchal norms. However, it can also be interpreted as negotiating and navigating these patriarchal norms to uphold communal social unity. Dosekun (2021) has postulated this concept concerning the nature of African feminisms. She underscores that African feminisms exhibits a proactive rather than a reactive quality and that their uniqueness stems from the distinctive needs and goals that arise from the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies. The proactive rather than reactive nature of African feminisms speaks to how African women navigate norms and traditions while advocating for their goals. They actively engage with cultural contexts to promote change from within, challenging harmful practices and promoting positive aspects of culture.

Thus, for Congolese women, the roles of motherhood, nurturer, caregiver, etc., were not necessarily seen as oppressive or burdensome, but as powerful assets that could be leveraged to address the immediate needs of their communities. Nzegwu (2006) also argues that African women tend to be African and family-centred with the welfare of their entire family as their top priority. Hence, it can be observed that Congolese women were not solely subjected to the dominance of patriarchy; instead, they wielded a certain degree of implicit power. However, it is important to note that

even during times of conflict, patriarchal norms are not suspended but manifest in various roles, including sex slaves, messengers, cooks, and more. Illustrating the phenomenon of women engaging in double roles in contrast to their male counterparts within armed factions, a former female combatant expressed the following viewpoint:

I had joined the army by force, and it was in the armed group PARECO in 2004 and then I had rejoined the national army. Because of motherhood and sexual harassment, work had become difficult! *I worked more than a man because I was exploited as a sex slave and as a soldier.*

Another asserted:

*I too was not forced but what pushed me to enter was because I had been imprisoned at the small barrier while I was going to get goods. I was angry and when I knew that there was recruitment into the armed groups, I joined!*

The provided excerpts support the initial assertion that Congolese women challenge prevailing misconceptions, which primarily depict them as merely sexualised victims. While the quotes confirm the continuities of patriarchal norms in wars particularly regarding the exploitation of sex in wars, it can also be understood as a defiance of entrenched patriarchal norms seeing as the second woman enlisted voluntarily into the armed groups because she was angry. More so, some women who joined armed groups took on leadership roles. For example, one of the women from the focus group conversation with female ex-combatants said, 'I was second in command of the 21st Battalion'. Two other women said, 'I was head of the women fighters' and 'I was a platoon leader of 36 people'. This prompts a re-evaluation of the perceptions surrounding militarism during times of conflict and peace. Re-assessing militarism in conflicts will challenge the conventional Western perspective that dichotomises masculinity as violent and militaristic, and femininity as peaceful. I say Western perspective because as already discussed in Chapter 2, historical evidence indicates that women fighting and participating in wars is not a recent phenomenon in

Africa. Their military involvement encompassed a spectrum of activities, from stripping naked to nullify traditional 'juju' (voodoo) used by men and making their plights known, to launching conquests alongside men (see Oluwaniyi, 2019). That is, the use of women's bodies has for a long time been regarded as a weapon of war. This perhaps explains why the female ex-combatant asserted that she worked more than a man because she understood that her body was also exploited albeit involuntarily.

Furthermore, a reconsideration of the concept of militarism holds the potential to disrupt entrenched patriarchal norms not only within the context of warfare but also in times of peace. By subjecting militarism to a fresh evaluation during periods of peace, the persisting marginalisation experienced by female ex-combatants within peacebuilding initiatives such as Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes, stemming from their masculinist framework, could be alleviated. It is the Western masculinist design of these programmes that necessitates ex-soldiers to either present a sophisticated weapon to prove their involvement in an armed group, or secure endorsements from commanders confirming their participation within said armed group. Only then are they deemed eligible to access the benefits offered by DDR programmes. Now, how does a woman whose body was exploited as a weapon of war prove that she was a soldier? Even worse, these programmes reproduce patriarchal norms by endorsing narratives that suggest that a woman's place is not in the army, instead urging them to leave their respective armed groups and embrace conventional 'feminine' skills such as tailoring, hairdressing, and the like. In the words of one of the female ex-combatants:

Yes, I really have an idea about this programme. Myself that you see here, I participated in this programme. *There were the sensitisers who came to sensitise us. They had shown us that our place is not in the army, especially since we are women.*

Personally, I found important what these sensitisers like CONADER<sup>42</sup> were saying. And then they told us to leave the army for civilian life and promised to give us something so that we could get by in civilian life.

Buttressing this point, another said:

The initiators of the DDR programme came to raise our awareness. They were asking those who wanted to leave the army to do so officially through this DDR programme. That's how we went to CONADER and CONADER had asked us to lay down our arms. After that, CONADER had done training for our integration. Everyone had chosen what they wanted, and I had chosen the cut and sewing. So, from that moment on, I learned sewing. I remain grateful to CONADER because so far I am a seamstress and it helps me to earn a living.

In addition to the perpetuation of patriarchal norms within the framework of liberal peacebuilding, the cited excerpts also underline the notion that adherence to these norms is synonymous with ensuring one's survival. This interplay of factors renders the task of challenging these norms within this context even more complex. For certain women who were once combatants, this translates to the situation where the abilities they acquired during their involvement with warring factions lose their significance. This is due to the fact that they undergo training in acquiring conventionally 'suitable feminine' skills as part of the DDR process, which is deemed essential for their reintegration into civilian life. This point reflects Sa'ar's (2005) argument on the effects of liberalism on marginalised groups. This scholar posits that for marginalised individuals to benefit from liberalism, they need to conform to its mode of thinking and behaving. This assertion becomes evident through an examination of the situation in the DRC. In this context, female ex-combatants who engaged in the DDR process were required to internalise the belief that military involvement contrasted with femininity, characterised by non-aggressive and non-fierce attributes. Consequently,

---

<sup>42</sup> Commission Nationale de Demobilisation et Reinsertion. This is the National Commission responsible for the Demobilisation and Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in DRC.

they transformed by acquiring skills conducive to exhibiting more conventionally 'feminine' traits.

Liberal peacebuilding through liberal feminism propagates a distinct conception of womanhood and socially acceptable feminine conduct, often characterised as 'civilised' and 'modernised'. However, this approach neither questions nor confronts underlying patriarchal structures. Instead, it inadvertently perpetuates the geopolitical classification of women: those from the Global South, commonly oppressed and submissive, versus those from the Global North, presumed universally liberated and modernised (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2010). Furthermore, DDR sensitisers claiming that a woman's place is not in the army contributes to the persistence of colonial gender norms. As evidenced by the testimonials of former female combatants presented earlier, as well as those in the preceding chapter, these women perceived themselves as on par with their male counterparts during their active involvement in armed factions. However, during the subsequent peacebuilding processes, they encounter a portrayal of themselves as subordinate and are confined to domestic spheres by so-called peacebuilders.

Olonisakin et al. (2015) have equally questioned whether the motives of those responsible for peacebuilding in African countries are aligned with the principles of 'gender equality'. They contemplate whether these actors assume the role of custodians nurturing equality or inadvertently become custodians or enablers of systems that sustain gender disparities. Hudson (2012) contends that the lack of sensitivity by liberal peace approaches towards the portrayal of the 'Other' can reinforce unequal gender dynamics and feelings of vulnerability. This inconsistency occurs in a phase that is hypothetically intended to usher in a fresh start. However, it

is observable that these scholars are working within a gender framework considering how they are concerned with 'gender equality', failing to problematise the category of 'gender'. As already argued in Chapter 2 following Oyewumi (1997) and Lugones (2007), when scholars analyse liberal peacebuilding through a gendered lens, they reinforce gender categories and do not see how liberal peacebuilding perpetuates the coloniality of gender. Peacebuilding efforts should aim to address historical and structural injustices by challenging oppressive discriminatory gender norms and ensuring access to justice for all individuals. Yet, when patriarchal norms are reproduced in peacebuilding, it threatens the possibility of peaceful co-existence in communities. For example, Claudine Kafirongo who was one of the DDR sensitisers said:

...It is as if before when we give them these things, we do not take into account their specific needs. Those who were given sewing machines without having asked them before; took these machines and sold them to buy beer and they remained thugs because without a job they are harmful to the community.

The statement suggests that these women are challenging patriarchal values by choosing not to conform to expected behaviours, such as selling machines to buy beer and staying as thugs instead of adhering to 'appropriate feminine' roles. Their actions can be seen as a form of resistance against societal expectations that might limit their agency and independence. By refusing to settle into colonial gender norms, they are asserting their autonomy and redefining womanhood on their terms. This kind of behaviour highlights the transformative potential of women's agency in shaping postconflict societies and challenging deeply ingrained power dynamics.

On the other hand, non-combatant women in this study who occupy roles like community leaders, breadwinners, mediators, activists, etc., concur that peacebuilding necessitates a transformation of patriarchal norms. However, it is crucial to recognise

that some of these women have internalised coloniality. This colonial influence is evident in their approaches to building peace in communities. Case in point, Solange Lwashiga said:

All we do as a women's caucus is so that in the end we can have social cohesion. And one who speaks of social cohesion speaks directly of peace. So we do community dialogues that take into account different peacebuilding aspects. *We bring together men and women, girls and boys to discuss together on issues related to peace with different pre-established themes – gender, women's participation, gender equality, political participation, sexual harassment.* Our major strategy is that in all these groups, it is the women who lead, and among the women, there are the demobilised women.

Jose Ekwa also talked about how women must be equipped with communication skills to enable them to speak confidently with their male counterparts at public meetings:

Even here in Goma, there are many women in the political groups who have not studied. How are you going to empower them? *You have to teach them how to speak! There are others who do not know French, how can they discuss with the Chiefs?* One day, we had a meeting with our Mayor and he asked the community Chiefs to ask a question, the whole audience was calm and since no one asked the question, I asked my question about a kiosk owner who was making noise all day until 10 p.m. with the music. With my good French, the mayor nodded and the men who were in that meeting said, "This woman just asked a very important question!". Before, there was loud music and thieves, but now the avenue is quiet.

Marie Riziki also said:

At our level, we don't have great power. But what we're doing is educating other women so that they understand that women have to fight for us to have peace in every way and not just do household chores. It is for this reason that women even engage in small businesses to provide for their families and first create peace at the family level.

Analysing these quotes from the coloniality of gender perspective highlights that the concept of gender equality is, in fact, a colonial construct that some women have internalised. As already discussed in Chapter 3, before the colonial encounter, people were 'equal' or different not on the basis of their genitalia or 'gender norms'. Amadiume (1987); Musisi (2021); Nzegwu (2006); Oyewumi (1997), and other African feminists argue that pre-colonial African societies often did not organise themselves along

gendered lines as understood today. Instead, social roles were more fluid and not strictly determined by one's biological sex. Therefore, the aspirations for gender equality as expressed some of the women in this study are deeply intertwined with the colonial legacy. These aspirations often stem from the interventions of NGOs and peacebuilding initiatives originating from former colonial metropolises. As a matter of fact, the aspiration for gender equality in contemporary peacebuilding efforts, while addressing entrenched gendered violence, must be interrogated for its colonial origins.

The significance of this critique is not in estimating the pursuit for gender equality as inherently good or bad but in challenging and understanding its colonial roots. By challenging the origins of gender equality, we recognise that the racialisation and subsequent dehumanisation of non-white bodies are intertwined with these claims. Thus, while gender equality remains a critical goal due to the pervasive gendered violence women face, it is essential to question and understand its colonial underpinnings. This reflection allows for a deeper, more nuanced approach to gender equality in peacebuilding, one that acknowledges and addresses its complex historical context.

Also, to Jose Ekwa's point on teaching women in political groups how to speak. These women know how to speak, but not in the colonial language perhaps. They speak Swahili, Lingala, and other languages. Here, Ekwa's words speak to how coloniality operates to the extent that someone is considered ignorant for not speaking French. But at the same time, she uses the colonisers' tools (in this case the French language) to be recognised and taken seriously by men who have also internalised coloniality (i.e., they as African men have learnt to obey and respect the coloniser's language). Thus, one can posit that these women's actions in fostering peace give rise

to interpretations of femininity that transcend the conventional presumptions of womanhood in the context of the DRC. Through the initiation of projects that extend physical, psychosocial, and material sustenance to their families and the wider community, they engage in a process of navigating and resisting the entrenched colonial gender norms.

The situation in Liberia shares similarities with the DRC regarding patriarchal continuities in the context of peacebuilding. However, understanding the enduring patriarchal norms during the 'postconflict' phase in Liberia necessitates examining its historical context. According to insights provided by some women in this study, the societal structure of Liberia before the conflict upheld male dominance. Liberia's unique case of settler colonialism established by freed African American slaves is crucial to understand this. Unlike other African countries colonised by European powers, Liberia's colonisation involved African Americans who brought with them the social, political, and gender norms prevalent in the United States at the time (Sawyer, 1992). These norms were heavily influenced by Western patriarchal structures emphasising male dominance in both public and private spheres. These norms were also reinforced through legal and educational systems that prioritised male leadership and authority (Holsoe, 1971). For example, men held the majority of political positions and had greater access to education and economic opportunities. This order of male dominance laid the foundation that persisted even after Liberia's independence from the American Colonisation Society (ACS) in 1847 (Holsoe, 1971; Sawyer, 1992). This resulted in constraining women's ability to partake in education, economic opportunities, and political involvement. Explaining women's position before the civil wars in Liberia, Ruth Sirleaf said:

Actually, women were not active in anything. Women were not recognised. Women were behind their husbands. Everything used to be men. Most of the work was done by men. It was only after the war that women started having positions like town chief, community chair etc. Before that, women were only at home. They were looking after children and even children of their neighbours. My mother used to leave me with neighbours to even travel. In the community where I lived, that's how it was because my father was in the army. Where we lived, we lived like sisters and brothers. Like I said, my mother used to travel but the neighbours used to do everything for me.

Affirming that women were not active in anything before the war reflects Sirleaf's internalised coloniality, indicating her potential underestimation of traits such as empathy, compassion, care, and emotional expression. She equates activism and functionality with the public sphere, focusing on what is visible and publicised. Her upbringing in a society that adheres to patriarchal structures exposed her to certain beliefs and expectations about colonial gender roles and behaviours. Unconsciously, she has imbibed the notion that roles perceived as 'masculine', primarily domiciled in public spheres, are more important. Whereas, it is these 'invisible'/'inactive' roles of women that sustained communities in pre-war Liberia. Recounting the importance of these roles in fostering harmony, unity, and communal living before the war, Marie Williams shared:

I remember when I was a little girl coming up and living in Central Monrovia, Central Street for that matter, my mother and other women had this group of women where they were basically from two different tribal groups, the Kru and the Bassa people and they would interact. And there was this concern for children, there was this concern for families. So, the peace was like that, family relationship was established whether you were biologically related or not. If I did something as a child that was wrong, another mother could discipline me... okay. The women were always together. So, whether they were Muslims or they were Christians. But at that time, there was this bond, okay. That is, family bonding. That is what we had.

The provided statements illustrate Liberian women's nuanced roles between patriarchal norms and community preservation before the outbreak of conflicts. That is, they were cultivating their communities as a foundation for peace and harmony in the face of patriarchal standards without necessarily confronting these norms. The

prevalence of patriarchal structures within their societies did not equate to a lack of agency and power, a typical example of active subjectivity and resistant agency. However, the onset of conflicts led to certain changes in the perpetuation of patriarchal traditions, as women began to transform their colonial gender roles. According to the accounts of these women, the conflicts acted as a catalyst, prompting them to adopt bigger responsibilities within their families and communities. Explaining this point, Justina Gbatu said:

During the regime of President Doe, women were nothing but during the time of Charles Taylor, the war opened the eyes of women. Because it is in his regime, women started going out because they became breadwinners. Women were running in competition with men. During Taylor's time, we got more ideas. The war taught us lessons although it brought destruction. Things were very hard after the war. Men were not working, they usually stayed home. We the women were the ones working, making farms (cultivating). We had to come together to encourage women on how to take care of their families. We used to meet together; we tell you how to live with your family in the home.

As argued in the previous section, the wars presented women with an avenue to fully harness their inherent power and agency. This stands in contrast to the perception that before the conflicts, they were 'nobodies' and that the wars transformed them into 'somebodies'. In actuality, the conflicts merely broadened the spaces within which they could exercise their pre-existing power. Despite the shifts in colonial gender dynamics prompted by the conflicts, these women remained anchored in their identities as mothers, throughout their endeavours to nurture peace. A substantial portion of the women in this study stressed the significance of 'motherism' or 'motherwork' in their initiatives to foster peace. To illustrate, Olivia Steward elucidated how women leveraged their position as mothers to quell rebels:

Sometimes if the rebel come around and when they see more women, the women can easily quickly convince them, and talk to them. If they came into that community to do harm and the women are around, the way our mothers used to talk to them..., like for my house, my mother used to always call them her children. So when they come around like that, she says "Oh my children, what your want?", sometimes they will say

“Oh, old ma we just want to eat, we want food”. Maybe they came with bad intentions but because of the way she will talk to them, they will calm down. If they came with arms (weapons), she will say “I don’t like to see that thing, I got my small small (little) children around and I don’t want to see that thing”. They will put their arms somewhere and walk in.

Yee Dahn also described how mothers rally together to halt violence in their communities. According to her, mothers are charged with the responsibility of checking their children in order to reduce cases of armed robbery:

Before Kolakeh women came together, zogo (theft) business was very high in Ganta. We made rules because we all have our children in the community. If your child steals, we fine you and take your child to jail. Now, we can leave our things outside, and no one steals the things from outside.

The narrative provided by Yee Dahn highlights a significant and often under-appreciated dimension of motherhood that transcends conventional domestic roles. According to Dahn, mothers in Ganta have organised themselves to combat community violence, demonstrating that motherhood encompasses responsibilities that extend far beyond the private sphere of cleaning and cooking. This collective action by mothers reveals a communal role of motherhood that challenges colonial gender norms and expectations. In this context, it is crucial to consider the concept of the coloniality of gender. By examining the actions of these mothers through the lens of the coloniality of gender, one can understand how gender roles are constructed and contested within (post)colonial settings. The intervention of mothers in Ganta illustrates that motherhood is not merely a private, domestic endeavour but a public, communal duty that involves enforcing justice and maintaining social order.

This communal role of motherhood is significant because it disrupts the colonial gender binary that traditionally relegates women to the private sphere and men to the public sphere. By taking on roles that involve communal policing and justice, these women are actively participating in and reshaping the social fabric of their community.

Furthermore, the mothers' actions highlight the fluidity and complexity of gender roles in (post)colonial contexts. The enforcement of community rules by mothers, such as fining parents and incarcerating children for theft, positions them as key agents of social control and justice. This role challenges the colonial legacy of gendered power dynamics that typically exclude women from positions of authority and public influence.

As already discussed in Chapter 3, Oyewumi's (2016) conceptualisation of 'motherwork' or 'motherhood' as she phrased it, is largely reflected in Liberian women's work for peace in nurturing their children and community. As a matter of fact, the concept of *Ōmọ̀yá* is deeply ingrained in their definitions of peace which in turn guides their praxis. To reiterate, *Ōmọ̀yá* is a term for solidarity that is invoked in spheres beyond the family; it symbolises unconditional love, togetherness, unity, solidarity, and loyalty. These women's power, agency, and activism are constructed from their relational identity as mothers. As explained by the market women:

It has always been like that because women stand for the country like Mama Liberia. So, you have to act like a mother and bring peace, this is why they call us Mama Liberia.

Oyewumi (2016) maintains that being a mother is perceived as an attractive and desirable goal to achieve in most African societies. Therefore, in terms of patriarchal continuities and resistance in peacebuilding in Liberia, I contend that Liberian women employ both adherence and defiance strategies against patriarchal norms, aiming to realise their visions of communal peace. That is, they conform to resist patriarchal principles to build peace. They conform by embodying their nurturing, caring, and empathetic abilities as mothers to actively resist patriarchal norms that result in gender-based violence, unequal representation of women in politics, feminization of poverty, etc., in 'postconflict' Liberia. It is within the intricacies of these multifaceted

dynamics and paradoxes that Liberian women contribute to the construction of peaceful conditions in their context.

#### **6.4 Tensions and Contradictions: A Clash of Peace(s)**

The collision of colonial continuities entrenched in liberal peacebuilding with indigenous women's visions of communal peace uncovers certain tensions and paradoxes in these contexts. These tensions span across ideology, practice, and partnerships, all of which will be explored here.

Conversations with women in the DRC exposed a noteworthy aspect regarding the impact of liberal peacebuilding endeavours. Specifically, these efforts appear to prioritise individualisation over the promotion of social cohesion and communal well-being – values that hold crucial significance within their initiatives for peace. This trend becomes apparent in how DDR programmes for former combatants, tend to overlook the imperative of community healing and reconciliation. This oversight subsequently poses a significant impediment to the attainment of peace. Addressing the divergence between these programmes and community dynamics, Solange Lwashiga elaborated:

You should know that the DDR programmes have been critical because these are programmes that have been set up without the community and we have been criticising those programmes. There have been women assimilated into armed groups and then these women decide to reintegrate into civilian life. To achieve this, we have declared the question of peaceful coexistence. We tried to understand, what could prevent or handicap their return. And the arguments for some were to say: "We can no longer live with them; they are our children, our women but why did they agree to join the armed groups". So, you understand that the question of reintegration, we must first let the community accept it. It has been understood that this reintegration has not been completely successful. This is why the approach of community and other demobilisation is needed.

Francoise Mulawa also highlighted:

The main difficulty was the cohabitation between the ex-combatants and the community, there are places where we had a tug-of-war. And especially in this programme, the local community was not really involved in the very design of the

programme and the implementation, and it was they who had to live with the ex-combatants. In addition, ex-combatants come with nothing to a community already impoverished by war. There was a bit of jealousy!

The difference between liberal peacebuilding's promotion of individualisation and indigenous women's prioritisation of communal well-being in building peace stems from their underlying philosophical and cultural perspectives. As previously stated, liberal peacebuilding is grounded in Western liberal democratic principles that emphasise individual rights, freedom, autonomy, etc. These principles are reflected in the DDR of ex-combatants. As explained in Chapter 2, the fundamental components of liberal peacebuilding encompass three pillars: security, governance, and economic reform. Within this framework, the DDR process pertains to the security pillar. This process establishes a foundation upon which the subsequent progress of governance and economic reform thrives. Ball and Van der Goor (2006, p.3) define DDR as:

The process of demilitarising official and unofficial armed groups by controlling and reducing the possession and use of arms, disbanding non-state armed groups and rightsizing state security services, and by assisting former combatants to reintegrate into civilian life.

Rhetorically, DDR is supposed to set the foundation for protecting and sustaining the communities in which ex-combatants return while building the nation's capacity for long-term peace (Beckley 2021). Yet, from the conversations with female ex-combatants in the DRC, the results of these programmes are debatable. For example, one of the female ex-combatants who participated in the programme expressed her disappointment:

I wasn't satisfied because after I left the army, I didn't see a big change in my life. And yet they told us that our life would be better after leaving the army. But after we demobilised, things got complicated. People do not accept us, they humiliate us, they discriminate against us, they consider us as "worthless", it makes me envy the army over civilian life. Sometimes, I tell myself that I should have stayed in the army instead of civilian life which has become more complicated.

Comparing her life in the armed group with her civilian life now, she further said:

In the army, I was leading a good life compared to my current life. There, we lived like in a family, we loved each other, we had the spirit of sharing, and we easily found the money. We ransomed the population for money... without getting tired...

Another woman asserted:

I also want to contribute. You see in the programme of 2003; they gave a motorcycle to three people. How could three people who had not come from the same territory – for example, if one was from Masisi, the other from Rutchuru, and the other from Walikale – share a motorcycle? Our concern is that we are given an amount that can allow those who want to live their civilian life to have a dignified occupation so that they no longer have the idea of returning to the bush. We have done our part, and it is our contribution to building peace.

Several scholars (see Mazurana and Carlson, 2004, Annan and Blattman, 2006, Berrio, 2013, Honwana, 2017, Oluwaniyi, 2019) have raised concerns about DDR programmes in different contexts. These critiques encompass a range of perspectives, including the design of these programmes, duration, limited funding, misinformation and misappropriation of resources, and challenges tied to unsuccessful community reintegration, among others. While these points are valid and evident in the DRC context, these scholars have yet to question the underlying reasons for these issues. In this regard, I argue that the coloniality underpinning these programmes must be unravelled to fully comprehend their shortcomings when applied in conflict-affected countries. That is, the tools used to build the peace 'brought' from outside into these countries must be examined.

Reflecting on the notion of peace as a commodity i.e., the peace imported from the West to conflict-affected regions, prompts an investigation into the nature of this peace. It becomes imperative to discern the form of peace that has been embraced as the gold standard in peacebuilding interventions. Abu-Assab et al. (2022) contend that this peace is West-centric and positioned as an alternative to overt violence. As

per the analysis provided by these scholars, the core objective of this specific peace initiative is the realisation of a world without war, wherein structural violence is secondary. This perspective potentially elucidates the DDR programmes in the DRC, which primarily prioritise the reintegration of ex-combatants while excluding the broader communities since they are the perpetrators of violence that hampers the 'peace' of the country. However, an 'unintended consequence' of these programmes is the fissure created between ex-combatants and their communities, quite similar to a boomerang effect.

To elaborate on the significance of communal values in contrast to individualism within the African context, I reiterate the viewpoints of Goduka (2000), which encapsulate fundamental African philosophies, spiritual insights, and overarching perspectives. Goduka explained that while Africa is immensely diverse, there is a unity that is rooted in our shared worldview and cultural practices. That is, in our context as Africans, existence is fundamentally tied to others: 'I am we; I am because we are, we are because I am'. In other words, communality, collectivity, plurality, and multidimensionalism are inherent values in the African context. To echo Oyewumi (2016), the notion of *Ọmọyá* (mother's child/ren) which connotes togetherness, love, and solidarity encapsulates the African paradigm of life and reality. However, these programmes contradict the sense of belonging, camaraderie, and family that even ex-combatants themselves hold with utmost importance.

In the provided quotations, one of the female ex-combatants reflected upon the cohesive familial bonds, communal spirit of sharing, and genuine affection that characterised their interactions while serving in the armed forces. However, the transition to civilian life via DDR programmes introduces a transformative process that

undermines these collective attributes, giving rise to a pronounced culture of individualisation. This deviation from the ingrained values of mutual sharing, communal unity, and harmonious coexistence within the Congolese society becomes evident. Consequently, some of them encounter rejection when reintegrating into their communities due to the void generated by the implementation of these programmes.

As explained by one of the ex-combatants:

This is where I experienced difficulties because I was not accepted. The other civilians did not consider me as a civilian but as a "difficult" woman because I came from the army. The problem of a demobilised woman is above all acceptance in the community. People see us as dangerous people when we are also like them. We are not dangerous because we have voluntarily abandoned the army. We also want people to trust us. I am naturally humble. When people are reluctant towards me, I would try to approach them and talk with them...

For the demobilised soldiers at the Mobambiro transit centre, who have been awaiting reintegration into their respective communities since 2018, it is worth considering whether the lethargic pace of their reintegration might be attributed to a perception of peace primarily as the absence of explicit acts of violence. This perspective arises from the notion that since their weapons have been collected and they have officially been separated from their armed groups, they no longer pose a threat to the country's security. Consequently, the apparent efficacy of DDR programmes tends to be only in terms of retrieval of arms from former combatants, while the subsequent phases involving reintegration and rehabilitation remain subject to deliberation (Beckley, 2021). Oluwaniyi (2018) also argues that while disarmament and demobilisation encompass immediate security measures, the aspect of reintegration tends to be overlooked in DDR programmes. This oversight pertains to the broader societal and economic transformation of former combatants and their communities.

Even when some ex-combatants are given reintegration kits, as was the case with one of the women in this study, the focus remains primarily on individual assistance rather than fostering communal support. One cannot help but ponder upon how this notion of 'support' is anticipated to materialise, particularly when these women encounter rejection upon their return to their communities. Consequently, for this group of women, the implementation of liberal peace often comes as a disappointment because it is inconsistent with their everyday realities. The repercussion of this is a rejuvenated interest in war and violence since most of them attested that their life in the bush was better than their current civilian life. I take a detour here, to reflect on the lack of victimhood narrative in these women's stories. Evidently, these women benefitted from the war, recounting instances of communal living and resource sharing during their time in the bush. It was therefore not surprising to hear some of them express their frustration and threats. For example, one of the women said:

If they do not satisfy us, we will go back to the bush! If they give me for example 100000FC (50 US dollars), I will have to buy two weapons because I had taken the weapon of the armed group. I will take this sum and buy two weapons with it so that I will go and show them in the group where I came from so that they will not kill me. And if I rejoin the rebel group, I will be worse than before! But if I am satisfied with the PDDRC<sup>43</sup>, I would run my own booth and say that this is the point of demobilisation.

Another declared:

It is the President who is the head of the nation. To build or not to build peace depends on him! In the bush, we ate like kings, and here in the transit centre we eat a small spread of fofou with a few beans once a day, and throughout the month we sleep on the floor for years. Then, the President wants peace, is he joking? We ask that we be given our rights! The President does not want peace, he wants death!

---

<sup>43</sup> PDDRC stands for Programme Désarmement, Démobilisation, Relevement Communautaire et Stabilisation. It is the United Nations Disarmament, Demobilisation, Community Recovery and Stabilisation Programme.

In the words of another woman:

By going to the government, we hoped that they would take our contribution with interest and give us what they had promised us. But they have not done so, they are violating our rights. So, I do not know if they will succeed in establishing peace!

The individualism propagated by DDR programmes is mirrored in how these women are audacious in demanding their 'rights' even as they are perpetrators of violence. This version of 'peace' that starts at the top, promotes individual interests and assumes that it will miraculously trickle down to the communities only reproduces violent, colonial, and patriarchal continuities. In short, this version of 'peace' is war and coloniality disguised. Referred to as the 'coloniality of peace' by Maldonado-Torres (2020), it generates a universalised version of peace that delegitimises other meanings while pushing economic, social, and political transformations that are harmful to the communities' ways of knowing, being and doing. Perera (2024) also argues that there is a strong rationale to question whether external peacebuilding efforts genuinely aim to build peace. This scepticism is based on a historical context where humanitarianism have previously been a guise for extraction, plus there is no evidence to suggest that current peacebuilding initiatives are any different. As a matter of fact, one of the Congolese people in her study said, 'conflict is just another resource in the DRC for outsiders to extract' (p.10).

Stavrevska et al. (2022) also considered how this version of peace is interpreted by the people living amid violence, and how the term 'peace' itself causes discomfort because it feels like an imposition. Does this 'peace' even make sense to individuals in the community? This is not the case in the DRC context, given how communities resist the return of ex-combatants. These scholars also highlight the hypocrisy of the 'bringers of peace', in that while they import their version of peace to conflict-affected

countries, they turn a blind eye to the violence that persists in their own supposedly 'peaceful' context. Citing the example of the Black communities in the United States, they ask if it can be said that these communities are indeed 'peaceful'. This, according to these scholars, also speaks to the racial and colonial assumptions embedded into the term violence/war as something that happens 'over there', not 'here'. As a result, there is a need to intervene and 'save' 'them'.

This is consistent with the binary understanding of peace as the polar opposite of war. This binary thinking once again reflects the West's fixation on what can be seen (Oyewumi, 1997). That is, if no overt war exists, it is 'peaceful'. Whereas, in the DRC, many of the women affirmed that they are building their visions of peace amidst violence. As outlined in the previous chapter, peace for Congolese women transcends the absence of violence, it incorporates harmony, solidarity, sharing, love, safety, economic independence, and identity reconstruction, to mention but a few. Therefore, understanding peace in plural terms opens up the possibility of building versions of peace(s) that are meaningful to the community. This stands in contrast to a notion of peace that clashes with the reality of the community. To rephrase, Azarmandi (2018) maintains that if coloniality is not addressed, peace will remain unattainable.

To achieve their visions of communal peace, the women in this study underlined the importance of international and local partnerships. However, these partnerships are hierarchical and are not devoid of tensions. Partnerships with international organisations were mostly found at the level of women's organisations in urban areas. The educational background of these women, extending up to the university level, positions them amongst the privileged, thereby somewhat disconnecting them from the realities experienced by the individuals they aim to assist at the grassroots level.

It is such that these women have direct access to funding from their international partners and then implement projects targeted at women residing in rural areas. Yet, tensions abound within these international partnerships.

These tensions stem from most international partners' preconceived notion of Congolese women being solely victims of sexual violence as a result of the war who lack capacity. Autesserre (2012) also highlighted that sexual violence is in fact, a required topic of expertise for people who work in the DRC. This perspective influences the types of peace initiatives that donors are willing to sponsor and how such projects should be implemented. As explained by Isabelle Pendeza:

They always come with the projects like "Fight against GBV". While the beneficiaries need either water, energy, or peace. We do not need everything they give us, if we have peace, the country will develop on its own! They pour a lot of money into the execution of projects to fight against GBV. It is true that GBV is a reality, but we are tackling the consequences instead of tackling the causes. We must fight the cause of violence.

Graciella Kibanja also talked about the relationship dynamic between her organisation and their international partners.

You know that every funder reassures himself that those who will manage the funds have at least the necessary capacity to achieve the expected result and the indicators. *That is why there are capacity building sessions and everything that allows us to have almost the same approaches because they come with their policies.* So, most organisations work a lot, twice as much as international organisations, we are on the front line of everything that happens in our country, and we are always in contact with the communities.

These quotes reveal how coloniality is manifested in peacebuilding through international organisations' perception of third-world women as a singular entity – victims lacking capacity. Applying the coloniality of gender to the DRC context reveals the saviour politics that guide the relationship between Congolese women and their international partners. By enforcing capacity-building programmes to ensure that these women's approaches are similar to theirs, international organisations enact the

ideology that Congolese women are not knowledge holders. That is, their intelligence and strategies cannot be trusted. To reiterate Isabelle Pendeza's point:

For example, a partner comes with a project whose hazards and challenges we know on the ground. They tell us how to execute the project, we tell them how we would like to execute it because we know the land and the needs of the community. It happens sometimes that the partners refuse to let us execute the project in the sense that we believe is favourable to our community. Sometimes because of the financial and social difficulties that the community is going through, we are forced to accept certain projects.

Refusing to let them execute projects based on their experience also reflects the racial gender hierarchy where international partners view these women as inferior to them, hence the need to train them. Whetstone and K.C. (2023) also assert that this process gives rise to a universal portrayal of a 'brown' female participant from the Global South, who is perceived as needing external knowledge acquired through 'white training' to attain 'competence'. This phenomenon further elucidates the predominant focus of projects on gender-based violence, implying that these women are merely helpless victims in need of saving. Consequently, these women are caught in the limbo of doing what is best for their community based on their experiences and doing what their international partners 'know' is best for them. Expressing that they are sometimes forced to accept certain peace projects due to tensions between both parties also echoes Svarevska et al.'s (2022) argument on how liberal peace could be seen as a burden by those living amid violence.

Nevertheless, while the knowledges and approaches of these women have been undermined by some of their international partners, one can also argue that these privileged women reproduce saviourism in their relationship with women at the grassroots. Whetstone and K.C (2023) posit that this is an internal North-South divide where privileged women's organisations in urban areas follow the behavioural pattern

of some Global North feminists wanting to 'save' their less privileged 'sister' in the Global South. In this case, some of these privileged women serve as gatekeepers, assuming they know what is best for grassroots women. The conversations with some grassroots women in the DRC revealed that while they have a similar agenda with those in urban areas to rebuild peace, tensions erupt in terms of project implementation. For instance, Esperance Chaguma explains:

We all work with the goal of seeing our society in peace. We also work on justice and respect for women's rights. We really have the same goals because we all talk about women's rights, and we do it together. But we have differences of opinion, and it comes from the fact that we live in different environments and work in such different contexts. They may want us to work on the basis of their context when it is practically different.

Whereas, when asked about her organisation's relationship dynamic with grassroots women, Joly Kamuntu claimed:

Yes, we work with women at the grassroots level, and we have a partnership relationship. They are not only our people, but they are our partners, our equals. We have the nuclei with which we work at the village level, and these nuclei participate in all our general assemblies, and they have a say. When we do the strategic planning, they also give us the strategies. We work as partners. It is not a relationship of leader and subordinates. When I am with this woman in the village, I dress like them, I eat with them by hand, and we give them confidence like that. They tell us about their difficulties, their dreams and we feel good like that.

Eliane Polepole also shared how her organisation works with those at the grassroots:

We do capacity building for grassroots women's groups that we call "listening club cores." The core listening clubs are set up by AFEM so that these groups can send us the problems that are in the community...

Collette Salima also said:

So, we put women's listening clubs in different territories where we go, and every time we are in the field, we talk to them. Sometimes we even give practical work and they do it very well. These women call us from time to time to tell us how they are moving forward.

These narratives demonstrate not only the hierarchy among Congolese women but also the infiltration of international lingo such as 'gender equality' as we saw in the previous section and 'capacity building' in their peacebuilding activities, of which these are not mutually exclusive. In terms of hierarchy, Whetstone and K.C (2023) argue that some privileged local women's organisations tend to leverage their privilege in terms of direct access to donor funding, to 'save' those at the grassroots whom they perceive as lacking the 'right' kind of knowledge. This argument is reflected in both Collette Salima and Eliane Polepole's narratives on capacity building for grassroots women's groups and assigning tasks to these women. First, the capacity building point is rather problematic in that it implies that these women lack capacity i.e., the 'right' kind of knowledge so they need to be trained. Speaking of the 'right' kind of knowledge and the need to build capacity, it is conceivable that these elite women are simply regurgitating what they learnt from their international partners.

Capacity building is a term mostly affiliated with international organisations, and as Kunz (2016) argues, it is one of the avenues in which Western liberal norms are propagated in conflict-affected contexts during the process of peacebuilding. Recall Generose Wera's statement, as cited in the previous sub-heading: 'We are on the journey, but it is the international organisations that say that we have no capacity'. Clearly, some of these elite women are merely repeating what they have presumably heard multiple times from their international partners and projecting these perspectives onto their grassroots counterparts. Reflecting on this point with Tamale (2020), the majority are not consciously aware of the subtle, nuanced, and diverse ways that coloniality shapes their understanding of several aspects of their lives. This nuanced operation of coloniality conditions people to believe that they have nothing and are 'inferior'.

Nevertheless, these tensions have not hindered the women in this study from striving to achieve their visions of communal peace. Amidst these tensions and paradoxes lies their resilience, i.e., their active subjectivity and resistant agency. That is, there is no need to prove that their knowledge and actions are 'right' and reliable by juxtaposing them with already existing dominant frameworks. Rather, these women can create goals and meanings that go beyond the dominant trend, which is something that is done from within their plurality. The plurality of the women in this study enables them to be strategic in their interactions with international partners while also demonstrating resistance agency by asserting that they have their strategies and knowledges. After all, in their partnership with international organisations, they are essentially executors of projects that are externally developed for a set time frame. However, the conversations with these women indicated that, while projects are important, peacebuilding transcends projects, and when the international partners depart, they are left with the problem of peace. Therefore, the strategies and knowledges they possess are not dormant because these women utilise them to achieve what they can in their communities without relying on external parties to solve their problems. This will be covered further in the chapter.

The Liberian context provides evidence of what transpires when peace is perceived simplistically at the inverse of war, as well as when coloniality is not addressed in peacebuilding. The Liberian DDR processes were critical components of postconflict reconstruction efforts aimed at addressing the complex challenges that resulted from the country's prolonged civil wars. It sought to facilitate the transition from wars to 'peace'. However, similar to the DRC case, tensions and contradictions emerged in the implementation of these programmes, particularly concerning the relationship between DDR and communities. One of the fundamental tensions in the DDR

processes was the timing and pace of reintegration. Speaking of the unrealistic time frame set to disarm, demobilise, and reintegrate hundreds of thousands of ex-combatants<sup>44</sup>, Dorothy Dunkor said:

The timing was something, everything had been rushed in the space of time and once that time ends, the programme is over. You know the programme went over a period of like six months and when that is exhausted that programme is done. So, it is not like 3 years straight programme or 5 years programme.

Often, the process of disarming and demobilising combatants occurs relatively quickly compared to the more gradual and complex reintegration phase. As expounded by Jennings (2007), disarmament and demobilisation are viewed through a security lens focusing on the public and military benefits of arms collection and the dissolution of warring factions. Reintegration, on the other hand, is often portrayed as a reconstruction and development initiative. Ex-combatants were expected to reintegrate into their communities, but the communities were not adequately prepared to receive them resulting in tensions. Here, it is crucial to question DDR implementers' presumption that ex-combatants will be reintegrated into coherent and functioning communities despite the fact that the nation suffered massive damage as a result of the conflicts. It begs the question, 'Reintegration into what?', especially when certain societal structures have yet to be rebuilt to absorb and support the returning soldiers. To reiterate the points made earlier, DDR processes tend to disrupt the social fabric of communities, particularly when ex-combatants are reintegrated without addressing the underlying grievances that led to the conflict.

---

<sup>44</sup> Over 101,000 combatants and their associated members were disarmed and demobilised during phases I, II and III of the Liberian DDDR Programme, including 22,300 women, 8,500 boys and 2,400 girls (McMullin 2020).

An earlier study of the Liberian DDR processes by Jennings (2007) exposed the entitlement displayed by some ex-combatants over the demand to be 'satisfied' even though they were violent offenders. According to this scholar, DDR programmes are heavily influenced by the need to keep former combatants satisfied and safe, at least throughout the duration of international presence. That is, the goal was to advance the interests of those who pose a danger to the nation's peace, to prevent conflict. In addition to the favouritism, individualism, and disregard for social cohesiveness ingrained in internationally orchestrated DDR programmes, the communities are left to pick up the pieces of the alien peace that was brought to them once the internationals depart. Despite the emphasis on satisfying ex-combatants, it seems that these programmes continue to fall short of meeting their demands. In a recent assessment of the Liberian DDR programmes by McMullin (2020, p.11), one of the ex-combatants lamented:

At that time, United Nations told our leader that they were going to come back to him for him to be able to send all to a vocational school, those who want to go to a vocational school to go there. Those who want to go, those that want to attend a grade school to go there. But our leader [did] not come back to us to give us anything, information or anything. That's what happen[ed] for me, what I see. After the war, I disarmed my gun, I disarmed everything that I was having on me and I felt that UN were coming to help me with my school, with my education side that I will be able to help my family for tomorrow. But all the big-big people feel that we were so smaller, so they were not able to help us. They feel that we were small soldier, and they were not able to help us with what they are helping the other big-big people. They only take our particular down, take our name down, they say they were coming come back to help us, but since that time they have not come back to help.

In another post-DDR evaluation of ex-combatants in Liberia by Wollie (2016, p.106), one of the ex-combatants said:

Everything they promised was not fulfilled. They promised us money, job placement, counselling, and equipment to start our own business if we wanted to. They did not care for us. They lied to us. Nobody at MVTC follow-up with us to see how well we were doing. Whether we got job or place to live. If they had check on us, they were going to see things are not working out for us.

Another complained:

Actually, I am not totally back into society yet because I do not feel a part of society yet, because I need a place to live and work. I am very disappointed right now. I decided to go back to school to help rebuild this country and now I am not working. They broke their promise to us. Some of us have to beg just to get something to eat. I don't like begging people for money, but I have no other way to earn money to take care of myself.

While conversing with the women in this study, some of them alluded that the DDR programmes did not address the needs of female ex-combatants. For example,

Dorothy Dunkor stated:

Some of the needs of the women who were involved was not handled. Some of the women had children, like mothers you know. Initially, they will just keep all of them in the same place and all that. So, we keep having different conversations before they came to see the need to have them to be separated. Some of them had special needs, but generally, it was perceived that once you are just a combatant, you are a combatant. The same set of kits that were been provided to the males was the same set of kits provided to females. The programmes were not quite gender sensitive. There were gender issues.

These quotes exhibit notable resemblances to the DRC case, as previously discussed. However, it is imperative to thoroughly examine the persisting patterns within international DDR programmes, particularly in relation to their recurrent failure to fulfil promises and achieve the successful reintegration of ex-combatants. The essence of my assertion lies in the observation that the DDR programmes implemented in Liberia took place in the past and concluded over a decade ago. Despite this temporal gap, a striking similarity emerges in the adoption of the same approach within a more recent and ongoing DDR initiative in the DRC. This continuity in methodology persists even in light of extensive scholarly works and reports (e.g., Awodola, 2009; Beckley, 2021; Honwana, 2017; Jennings, 2007) that have consistently underscored the inadequacies of these programmes.

In light of this information, one might question whether the designers and implementers of these DDR programmes are genuinely oblivious to the inconsistencies between their prescribed strategies and the complex realities of the contexts in which they are implemented. Perera (2024) contends that a lot of programming mistakes are periodically repeated every few years because institutional memory about what has been tried before in other contexts is supposedly 'poor'. This institutional 'memory loss' explains why UN workers often repeat impractical ideas that have failed in the past. Furthermore, the central focus of these programmes warrants scrutiny; namely, does the term 'peacebuilding' encapsulate the primary objective of these initiatives, and if so, for whom is this 'peace' intended? These critical inquiries prompt us to reconsider the underlying assumptions and motivations driving the persistent usage of DDR programmes, especially when confronted with evident shortcomings and a growing body of scholarly critique.

The current reality faced by Liberian women, as highlighted in this study, revolves around the arduous task of dismantling the peace that was imported into the country and building their visions of communal peace. Despite concerted efforts in the 'postconflict' era, numerous challenges persist in the ongoing reconstruction process. While overt violence may have subsided, these women express reservations about confidently labelling the country as peaceful, indicating that their experiences diverge from conventional understandings of wars and peace in the realm of traditional International Relations. For example, Yee Dahn asserted:

The things that are happening here in Ganta, it's a war! It's not just a killing war, but it definitely is a war. You are lying down at your house sleeping and someone comes to your house with their face covered to put you under gunpoint and take away everything that belongs to you, is that not a war? Sometimes when you come from buying goods in Monrovia and you arrive midnight, you cannot even go home. You have to stay in the vehicle until day breaks before you can go home. Is that peace?

Contrary to the claims of some observers, who assert that Liberia is now a peaceful nation with the cessation of wars, the women in this study emphatically refute this notion. Their narrations and experiences reveal a new menace in the form of hardened Liberian youths engaging in armed robbery, commonly referred to as the 'zogo' business, and drug abuse, a consequence of the war. A considerable number of these youths are ex-combatants who were inadequately reintegrated into society. As noted by Mameke Sarnoh, 'Really, the ex-combatants are very hard to deal with. Also, they have become Zogos (criminals)'. Dorothy Dunkor buttressed this point:

There were key things that were not handled properly. The issue of drugs, the issue about ensuring that the actual affected people benefit from the different capacity-building opportunities that came. You know the reintegration process was very rapid and there were challenges along the way. I am telling you the issue of drugs was not handled at all, and it came out! We heard the news that most of the guys were living on drugs and fighting. It was not handled, up till now we are still struggling with it. So, if a DDR process is to be done again, I think they should learn a lot from the Liberian experience, because there are challenges, we are still struggling with, and there are still fighters struggling to develop skills.

In the face of this national crisis, it is women who are recognising the gravity of the situation and have stepped up to address these pressing issues. In the words of Maria Nelson:

We can say today my son is not there, but we cannot promise that tomorrow my son will not be there. So, as the one who carries the child for nine months, if you want to see another child on the street, you should know that your child is a potential candidate for what is going on. So what's best is to work together now and try to see how do we solve this huge Liberian problem. No one is really looking at it from that perspective. But on a daily basis, the number of these young people is increasing and now they are spreading all over the nation. They are a nuisance to us now. Tomorrow, they will organise themselves in a way that will become a bigger problem for the nation.

Research by Gallo-Cruz and Remsberg (2021) highlights the readiness of women to organise and lead in the post-war context due to their crucial roles in sustaining domestic life and the economy. They now bear the responsibility of picking up the pieces of a shattered society, tending to the needs of their families and communities.

As discussed in the previous sub-heading, these women simultaneously succumb to and resist patriarchal norms in their pursuit of peace. While laudable, it is essential to avoid overburdening women with additional responsibilities as they endeavour to rebuild harmony and social cohesion within their communities while grappling with the repercussions of a flawed international peace process.

Thus, it becomes imperative to reimagine the very notion of peace and adopt a different approach – one that accounts for the perspectives and strategies of those who possess an embodied knowledge of violence and peace in territory and place. This means an emphasis on a knowing and practice of peace that sits in bodies and territories and their local histories (Icaza, 2017). Idole Kaiser explains this better in her words:

They provide the funding, but we are in direct contact with the participants. Yes, we live with them, sleep with them, wake up with them. We know the issue. And some of these issues, we are also survivors. Most of us women here, we have our own story that we can tell as a woman, especially for someone like me who went through the war, I have my own story. And so I know what women can go through. So, it is not just about sitting up there, but at the community level with the issue. You might have all your degrees but when you put the degree on the table, it will not perform to bring the solution. I do not have any degrees, but I have the influence. You understand what I'm saying? You have the degree I don't have. But I have influence over my people, the people that I live with.

The call for a novel approach to peace, sensitive to the realities and experiences of those affected, resonates as a critical step towards a more sustainable path to peace. Liberian women's experiences reveal a complex reality characterised by ongoing challenges and a nuanced understanding of peace. As they grapple with the consequences of war and strive to create a more peaceful society, their efforts must be recognised and complemented by a reimagined peace process that prioritises their invaluable insights and wisdom.

## **6.5 Multifaceted Understanding of Peace as a Continuous Communal Practice**

In this section, the focus will point towards centring the knowledge and practical strategies that women employ to achieve their visions of communal peace. While the liberal peacebuilding enterprise often ends in the absence of overt violence in some contexts, such a narrow understanding and practice of peace fails to capture its multidimensional nature as well as the plural ways in which different cultures and societies conceptualise and pursue it.

The Congolese and Liberian women in this study, rooted in their deep connections with community, offer perspectives that transcend conventional peacebuilding approaches. Beyond the single stories, colonial and patriarchal continuities, and tensions, these women sense peace not as a static endpoint; but as an ongoing communal process of healing, reconciliation, restoration of relationships, sharing, togetherness, etc. As revealed in the previous chapter, women in the DRC navigate a complex continuum of recurrent conflicts and nurturing peace. Thus, their understanding of peace revolves around security, the restoration of social cohesion and communal relationships, and economic stability. For example, Agnes Sadiki defines peace as:

It is first of all a kind of social harmony because when we talk about peace people like to link it to weapons while we can miss peace because we have lacked food, we can miss peace because we are not on good terms with our spouse, our children, with the community. We can also miss peace because of how we live here, all these inequalities that we live in, it does not create harmony. So, peace is the set of elements that create harmony in a society!

Florence Nguomoja described a peaceful community as:

It is a community in which we live in harmony, we share everything, we share life. In case of difficulties, others come to sympathise with the needy. In times of war, we know how to share with the poor.

Valentine Migabo also said:

A peaceful community is characterised by the love of neighbours, solidarity and sharing. In a peaceful community, people cannot kill each other, people cannot wish for the fall of others.

Solange Lwashiga expanded this point on the type of peace and peaceful communities that Congolese women are aspiring to build. According to her:

...What is most important is to see that woman even if she's barefoot, she does not have shoes, but she works day and night for her family! To cultivate and be sure that what she's cultivating, she will harvest and bring home, cook in her small house at night without closing the door. Cooking, and when there is the moon or there is no moon, the kids go outside, they take saucepans and small wooden sticks and begin beating, dancing, crying without bearing in mind that there will be somebody who will come and attack them. That's the peacebuilding that women are looking for. They don't ask for Mercedes Benz, no, they don't ask to fly and go to New York and so on, no.

For these women, peace is regarded as a state of balanced relationships within the community that promotes stability and cooperation. The definitions underscore the significance of harmonious interactions, playfulness, and a feeling of safety. This communal peace embodies a loving way of being, living, and doing; it connotes Oyewumi's concept of *Ọmọyá* which symbolises unconditional love, togetherness, unity, solidarity, and loyalty. It assumes the form of a lifestyle rather than a swift achievement. This communal peace requires a substantial duration, exceeding the mere span of six months; it necessitates an investment of time. Speaking of the investment of time, Angela Lederach (2019) theorises 'Slow peace'. For this scholar, slow peace recentres the capacity for collective action within the landscape of uneven power dynamics. The 'slowness' attributed to this communal peace indicates that this type of peace is neither linear nor sequential. It emphasises that communal peace is not dictated by a strict chronological or temporal framework. Rather, the everyday activities involved in fostering relationships, cultivating knowledge, and establishing

enduring collective procedures dictate how these women construe, experience, and internalise time. As discussed in the previous sub-heading, these women work for peace at their own pace depending on their socioeconomic capabilities even after the departure of international partners.

Such peace is life-affirming and less likely to produce the type of conflict that leads to armed violence and wars. This communal peace does not mean the absence of conflicts, but it means a situation where violence is less likely even when there are disputes. In nurturing this communal peace, these women's approaches include dialogue groups and listening clubs which provide a space for conversations, consensus-building, and conflict resolution. These dialogues draw from communal wisdom, fostering reconciliation and restoring harmony. Other approaches include awareness raising, education of women and young people, income-generating activities, and the use of music and theatre, to mention but a few. While I have extensively discussed this in the previous chapter, I will quote some of the women here. Case in point, Joly Kamuntu explained:

We also use culture – music, and theatre, because building peace is also through leisure. In the DRC, we have evolved in a context of war and leisure is part of the remedies to heal all these wounds that we have. We, therefore, supervise the musical artists to whom we give training on peacebuilding. They then produce songs, and sketches that we publish through popular expression forums. Around this issue of peace, we make what is called "youth coffee", we bring together 3000 young people and they exchange on the roles of young boys and girls in the fight for gender equality. And our strategy is to work first in the family because, in our country, discrimination already begins in the family. Whether it's music, sports, or culture, we integrate girls and boys to show them that they can do everything together.

Furaha Bisimwa also said:

What we do is raise awareness. Raise awareness especially among young people because they are the future of tomorrow. Most of the thugs are young people. So, if young people get involved in denouncing those who sow terror. Also, young people can get involved to raise awareness among their friends, things can change. We visit

neighbourhoods and train young people to sensitize their brothers and friends to get involved in conflict management and peace.

These quotes reveal the multifaceted dimension they bring into the practice of communal peace which is in sharp contrast with liberal peace or the imported top-down style of peace. These women's approaches to communal peace reinforce shared values and foster reconciliation. They operate on multiple levels, ranging from conflict resolution within communities to broader societal transformations. These women also understand that communal peace is both 'in the head and in the pocket' signifying the importance of autonomy and economic independence. It is for this reason that they prioritise entrepreneurship and develop ways to financially sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. One such way is through the Village Savings and Credit Associations. As expounded by Solange Lwashiga:

Women have grouped themselves into associations, and income associations. The 'AVEC' (Village Savings and Credit Associations). I think they are even in your country. Let me explain, they are local initiatives to allow women of low income to increase their income. So, in a group you can have the number you want, they can be 10, 20 and you say okay at the end of the week, each of us has to bring half a dollar. It's a process of maybe 9 or 10 months or a year. So, they have got two parts: the main box and the love box. In the main box, they put an amount which is for business and in the love box, they put a small amount for social problems. That's it! They have set up those things...

These women have devised financial coping mechanisms to enable them to traverse the war economy, especially because many of them now occupy the position of heads of households as a result of the war. The fact that they also make allowances for social problems in their savings further reflects their shared communal values. It can be considered as an attempt to create some kind of communal safety net that contributes to basic security and some peace of mind. In essence, within the context of a war economy, the economic sphere concurrently functions as the social and cultural sphere where these women are involved in their varied identities. As

Amadiume (1997) also argues, the distinction between the domains of personal roles such as housekeeping and homemaking, and those of the political sphere involving public matters and production, is effectively non-existent. These women's plural interpretations of peace as a continuous communal practice are embodied. It is not abstract, but incorporates embodied practices in community, with community, and for community.

The Liberian women in this study also described peace as communal, encompassing harmony and togetherness, love and sharing, access to basic amenities, economic stability, absence of violence, etc. For these women, a peaceful community is characterised by communal sharing and understanding among members, and care for one another. In the words of one of the market women:

From my understanding, for our environment right now, when you say the community is peaceful, then it means people that are living there, they understand each other, they live in the community, they have love for each other, they share things together and then the "Zogos" (thieves), for them to just enter the community is hard, so nobody in that community can harm anybody. Everybody there shares things, loves each other and then they keep eyes on each other things, so like that I consider it to be a peaceful community.

Using her community as a reference point to explain what peace means, Mameeke Sarnoh said:

In the Nigerian Shop Community in New Georgia, we love one another. Anything we do, we do it together. If something happens to somebody, you can't say oh, this is not my problem. We all join together to help that person. Whether Christians or Muslims, when Muslims have their thing (event), the Christians join and when Christians have their thing (event), we Muslims join them too. We all move together. We do things together. We love each other.

For Denise Johnson:

In my opinion, peace is when women are empowered and have the freedom to speak, they have the freedom to make a choice. Because when there is a culture of silence, there is no peace, because someone will be burning and be dying inside. And you think the person has peace, but they don't have peace. So, peace within yourself is

based on what you do, what you believe, and the freedom to do it. Also, you should be able to participate in decision-making concerning your health, your own self...

The variations in the interpretations of peace among these women not only question the oversimplified portrayal of women in societies recovering from conflicts but also challenge the mechanical and universalistic pretensions of the Western liberal approach to constructing peace. Significantly, these women recognise that the notion of peace lacks a universal and mechanistic nature. Consequently, they diligently strive to realise their visions of communal peace. In the words of Idole Kaiser:

We will still be here because the issues are our issues. We will take responsibility for this issue to make sure that they are corrected to make sure that our dream will not die because the dream is not for the donor, the vision is for us. And we must live up to the vision.

Living up to this vision for these women has also meant adopting several approaches to peacebuilding including motherwork, dialogue circles at the Palava hut, prayers, mediation, village savings and loans allocation, advocacy and awareness raising, and education as extensively narrated in the previous chapter. In terms of the importance of motherwork as an approach to peace, Olivia Steward said:

When they are having problems in the community, usually they don't go to my chairman, they will come to me. They call me either rescue mother or our ma (mother). So, the first thing they will say is "Let's go to our ma".

In terms of the spiritual dimension of peace which they practice, Marie Williams said:

We have prayer meetings where we meet once a month. We also have these many crusades where we meet all sorts of young people. Sometimes we invite them to the church. We have counsellors at the church who can counsel people. Sometimes it is one-on-one that we visit their homes.

Gbowee (2011) also highlights how Liberian women mobilised and demanded an end to the civil war, weaving together spirituality, collective action, and grassroots organising to foster lasting peace. This narrative echoes the ideas of Nigerian scholar

Ifi Amadiume who in her work – *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture* (1997) explores the complexity of gender roles, power dynamics, community, and religious practices within various African cultures. Thinking along with Amadiume, the women in this study adopt both traditional and transgressive roles to challenge colonial and patriarchal norms, and promote plural definitions and practices of communal peace.

Amadiume also underscores the importance of communalism in shaping individual identity and fostering social cohesion. She argues that African societies historically thrived on collectivism, where shared values and practices formed the foundation of communal bonds. It appears that these values still thrive even in contemporary times considering how the women in this study associate peace with harmony and communal living amongst other things. In advocating for a return to communal values, Amadiume envisions a society where interconnectedness prevails over isolation and individualism, and where cultural traditions foster a sense of belonging and purpose. However, it is crucial to challenge the notion of ‘tradition’ as something fixed, pure, or merely a relic of the past. Instead, tradition should be seen as dynamic and evolving, continuously interacting with contemporary realities. Questioning this fixed perception of tradition prevents a conservative reading that might misinterpret this thesis as a simplistic call to return to an idealised past (Tamale, 2020). The women in this study embody a living tradition that is neither fixed nor unchanging; their practices of communal peace are active engagements with their cultural heritage that address present-day needs and challenges. The conceptual emphasis on community, culture, and territory, buttressed by these embodied practices of communal peace, further bolsters my argument for the need to re-imagine peace.

At the heart of re-imagining peace lies the concept of decoloniality, which seeks to dismantle the enduring legacies of colonialism and promote the resurgence of indigenous worldviews. Mignolo (2011) underscores the importance of 'epistemic delinking' which is the process of disengaging from Eurocentric epistemologies to restore agency to marginalised communities. Thinking about peacebuilding and the field of International Relations, it is imperative to ask who, why, what, and where this knowledge is produced, for whom, and to be applied where. That is, it becomes necessary to explore the origins, rationales, content, and dissemination of this knowledge. It is equally essential to discern both the recipients of this knowledge and the contexts in which it is intended to be put into practice.

For example, Azarmandi (2023) problematises the fact that a White man – Johan Galtung is named the 'Founding Father' of peace studies. This attribution not only underscores the Eurocentric underpinnings of the field but also accentuates the perpetuation of patriarchal norms in knowledge creation. Galtung's conceptual framework, encompassing direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence, provides a valuable lens applicable to specific contexts. However, one of the limits of his framework is that he neither considered the epistemic location of his knowledge nor addressed the violence of coloniality. These omissions signify the need for a more comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing multifaceted dimensions of violence within peace and conflict discourse.

Thus, when Mignolo speaks of epistemic delinking, I argue that Congolese and Liberian women's embodied knowledge systems and practices provide an example of this, offering 'Other' worldviews rooted in non-Eurocentric understandings of peace. These women's knowledge and praxis often transcend dichotomies of war and peace,

encompassing conflict prevention, culture, spirituality, the restoration of harmony, etc. They challenge the reductionist views of conflict and peace prevalent in Western frameworks. Nonetheless, they are not without challenges as colonial legacies continue to undermine their agency. Particularly in the DRC where tensions exist between the imported liberal peace and women's understandings and practices of peace. These women's communal peace faces several paths as it clashes, dialogues, and even resists the imported peace. Also, the practice of having peacebuilding 'experts' on the ground who are oblivious to the erasures that are informed by their version of peace further delays the germination of these women's communal peace. This is in addition to the fact that these women also bear the brunt of the unsuccessful reintegration of ex-combatants, which is largely due to the inapplicability of the imported peace implemented in these countries.

Even so, the conversations with the women in this study revealed their unrelenting efforts to build peace, not only as the absence of colonial and patriarchal norms or war, but also as peaceful existence within their communities. There is constant struggle and resistance from these women to build peace that is relevant to their context. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that communal peace nurturing as practiced by these women is an ongoing process that requires continuous commitment. This presents a case for reimagining peace in ways that reflect the complexity of women's experiences and aspirations.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

Analysing the stories of Congolese and Liberian women through a feminist-decolonial lens reveals how they actively assert their agency and leverage their relational identities to foster communal peace. These women's narratives and actions

challenge the dominant binary view of war and peace, showing that peace can be actively pursued even amidst ongoing violence, as violence is not limited to overt conflict. They are not merely victims or peacemakers i.e., they are beyond the single stories perpetuated about them; instead, they embody multiple, overlapping identities in their work and aspirations for peace.

Despite the lingering colonial shadows in their contexts, these women remain undeterred, tirelessly working to nurture peace, heal, and restore relationships. They demonstrate resilience and adaptability, making the best of their circumstances. Their approach to communal peacebuilding offers valuable insights into the continuous, non-linear, and often messy realities on the ground. Through their efforts, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in achieving and maintaining peace in challenging environments.

## **Chapter Seven | Coming Full Circle: Concluding Reflections on Communal Peacebuilding**

In the introduction of this thesis, I outlined my objective to challenge and transgress the conventional boundaries of International Relations by talking and reimagining peace with those whose voices and experiences are often marginalised and deemed unintelligible within dominant perspectives in this field. Specifically, I aimed to foreground the perspectives and stories of Congolese and Liberian women regarding peace, alongside their lived embodied experiences and strategies for nurturing peace within their communities. To this end, this thesis sought to engage with the following research questions: How do women in the DRC and Liberia perceive peace, and what roles do they embody in nurturing peace within their respective communities? How have women in the DRC and Liberia contributed to the reintegration of female ex-combatants in their respective communities? How do the conceptualisations of peace and the practices of peace nurturing by Congolese and Liberian women inform theory?

Through the stories of the women in this study, as shared in Chapter 5, the concept of communal peacebuilding emerges, underscoring that relationality and communality are fundamental to their understanding of peace. These elements have been integral to their practices for generations. This concept, deeply rooted in the lived and embodied experiences of Congolese and Liberian women, challenges the individualism and linearity characteristic of liberal peacebuilding practices. Communal peacebuilding, as conceptualised in the preceding chapter, transcends the mere absence of conflict. It encapsulates a holistic approach that includes harmony, togetherness, spirituality, mutual support, stability, and collective well-being. The strategies employed by these women to foster communal peace are intimately connected to their roles as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, caregivers, and

community leaders. These roles position them uniquely within their communities to influence and sustain peace.

I contend that communal peacebuilding represents a feminist-decolonial action, confronting and contrasting sharply with the colonial underpinnings of liberal peacebuilding as presented in the previous chapter. The women in this study articulated a clear awareness of the temporality of liberal peacebuilding efforts, understanding that the presence of international partners is fleeting. Despite this, they persist in their peacebuilding efforts, emphasising that the peace they cultivate is a continuous, ongoing process, not a singular event. The persistence and resilience of these women highlight a critical aspect of communal peacebuilding: it is a sustained and active process, deeply embedded in the fabric of their daily lives and community interactions. This approach to peace is inherently more culturally resonant, as it draws upon indigenous practices and values that have been honed and passed down through generations. In this way, communal peacebuilding not only provides a framework for understanding and achieving peace but also serves as a counter-narrative to the often externally imposed models of peacebuilding, offering insights and strategies that are deeply rooted in the lived realities and wisdom of local communities.

In Chapter 3 of this thesis, I argued that gender is a colonial construct that must be historicised to unravel its coloniality. This construct is frequently integrated into liberal peacebuilding frameworks, perpetuating the coloniality of gender in the contexts where such approaches are employed. The analysis in Chapter 6 delved deeper into how this coloniality of gender manifests, particularly through the propagation of single stories about the women involved in this study. It is also evident in the dynamics of

liberal peacebuilding, where the knowledge and experiences of these women are often deemed inferior. This perspective assumes that they lack the necessary capacity and thus must be trained to adopt liberal norms. Regarding the reintegration of female ex-combatants, the thesis revealed a significant flaw in liberal peacebuilding practices. These practices often emphasise individuality over communality, which creates a rift between ex-combatants and their communities. This focus not only leads to further stigmatisation of the ex-combatants but also imposes an additional burden on non-combatant women within the community. These women are often left to manage the fallout from unsuccessful liberal peace interventions, exacerbating the challenges they face.

Nevertheless, the Congolese and Liberian women in this study display active subjectivity and resistance, through motherwork – an encompassing term that denotes the multifaceted roles and responsibilities they undertake in nurturing communal peace amidst ongoing conflict and international peacebuilding efforts. These women have steadfastly refused to be overshadowed by coloniality. Instead, they are engaged in an active process of negotiation and resistance against both colonial and patriarchal norms that continue to exert influence. Through their collaborative efforts, they are fostering a vision of communal peace that is both grounded and resilient. This dual process of negotiation and resistance highlights their agency and determination to shape a peaceful future for their communities, challenging and redefining the paradigms imposed by historical and contemporary oppressions.

## 7.1 Research Contributions

This thesis offers some contributions to the field of gender and peacebuilding, studies related to women in the DRC and Liberia, and how knowledge is cultivated in (I)R. This section delineates these contributions in terms of the arguments presented in this research, the methodologies and approaches employed in this research, and the theoretical framework used in this research, alongside the emergent theory from this research. Additionally, I will share the lessons I have learned from this research academically and personally.

In terms of **arguments**, this study makes a significant scholarly contribution by advocating for an in-depth examination of the interplay between gender dynamics and liberal peacebuilding strategies within the contexts of the DRC and Liberia. It contends that such analyses must be situated within the broader framework of modernity/coloniality projects to elucidate how both gender dynamics and liberal peacebuilding initiatives inadvertently perpetuate colonial patterns. Adopting a feminist-decolonial lens, the research undertakes an exploration of the historical trajectory of gender relations from the colonial encounter to contemporary manifestations, particularly as they manifest in liberal peacebuilding endeavours. The research discerns how gender roles and identities were constructed and codified during the colonial era, laying the groundwork for entrenched hierarchical binaries that persist in contemporary contexts. It elucidates how conventional narratives within liberal peacebuilding frameworks often dichotomise gender roles, portraying men solely as perpetrators of violence while relegating women to passive roles as victims or bystanders. This is exemplified in the case of female ex-combatants in the DRC, who were sensitised that their place is not in the army under the pretext of their 'femininity', as evidenced in detailed discussions in Chapters 5 and 6.

This study also challenges the prevalent notion of 'gender-blindness' within liberal peacebuilding paradigms, asserting that while gender is in fact acknowledged, there exists a pervasive blindness to its colonial underpinnings. It argues that a nuanced understanding of the coloniality of gender is imperative for comprehending its manifestations within liberal peacebuilding. Moreover, the research draws attention to the problematic tendency to use 'women' and 'gender' interchangeably, thereby reinforcing colonial binaries and erasing plural experiences and identities. By engaging with these arguments, this research not only sheds light on the relationship between gender and liberal peacebuilding but also underscores the imperative of adopting a feminist-decolonial lens to unravel and address the perpetuation of colonial logic within these approaches.

Additionally, this study contributes to the discourse surrounding the conceptualisation of wars and peace, as well as the trajectory of peacebuilding processes. It argues against the oversimplified binary oppositions often employed in understanding conflicts and peace and challenges the linear narrative that portrays peacebuilding as a straightforward progression from conflict to peace, where peace is merely the absence of conflict. Through the stories and analysis presented in Chapters 5 and 6, it becomes evident that wars and peace are not completely opposed concepts, nor are they distinct and isolated phenomena. The experiences of the Congolese women in this study elucidate the complex interaction between wars and peace in their endeavours. Despite the pervasive violence, these women engage in activities aimed at fostering communal peace, demonstrating the capacity to navigate the simultaneous existence of conflict and peace within their communities.

Conversely, the narratives of Liberian women underscore the inadequacy of labelling their societies as 'postconflict', as they continue to grapple with myriad challenges that impede the attainment of lasting peace. Their ongoing efforts to cultivate communal peace serve as a testament to the enduring nature of conflict dynamics even in supposed postconflict settings. Moreover, the discourse prompts an interrogation of the term 'postconflict' itself, questioning its appropriateness in describing societies grappling with the enduring legacies and reverberations of conflicts. This interrogation delves into the complexities inherent in defining transitional phases following periods of conflict, challenging the notion of a clear-cut delineation between war and peace. Indeed, the coexistence of wars and peace within communities underscores their integral role in the transformative processes shaping societies.

Another argument this research presents regarding the binary logic in wars and peace is the neat and simplistic categorisation of victims and peacemaker, positing that these roles are mutually exclusive. This dichotomous framing suggests that those who are victimised by conflict cannot concurrently engage in peacebuilding efforts, and conversely, those who pursue peace initiatives cannot themselves be victims. However, the experiences of Congolese and Liberian women, as elucidated in this study, challenge such rigid categorisations, revealing the complex and multifaceted nature of individual identities within conflict and 'postconflict' settings. The narratives of Congolese women, often depicted on a global scale as emblematic of sexualised victimhood in the context of war, defy simplistic portrayals by also embodying roles as nurturers of communal peace. Despite enduring suffering and marginalisation, these women actively contribute to peacebuilding endeavours within their communities, illustrating the co-existence of victimhood and agency within a single individual. This

proves the conceptual relevance of Lugones' decolonial understanding of active subjectivity and resistant agency.

Similarly, Liberian women, celebrated globally for their peacemaking efforts during the country's civil wars, confront the harsh reality of being subjected to sexual violence and femicide in what is presumed to be a 'postconflict' environment. Their lived experiences underscore the inherent complexity of identity, as they navigate roles as both champions of peace and victims of ongoing violence. Importantly, it is through the recognition and embrace of their plural identities that these women persistently strive for peace within their respective communities. By rejecting the constraints of binary categorisations, they embody resilience and agency, challenging prevailing narratives that seek to oversimplify the complexities of conflict and peace dynamics. Their experiences serve as a poignant reminder of the need for a more nuanced understanding of agency and the simultaneity of victimhood and peacemaking within the broader discourse on conflict and peacebuilding.

In terms of **methodologies**, one of the contributions of this research is in decolonising methodologies when it comes to researching wars and peacebuilding in (I)R. As presented in Chapter 4, I did not approach this research as a detached arrogant observer going into the 'field' to get a bird's eye-view on what is happening in the DRC and Liberia to report my 'findings' in academia. Instead, I adopted a feminist-decolonial stance that prioritises the recognition of embodied experiences and rejects the notion of a disembodied, ostensibly neutral perspective. Central to this feminist-decolonial approach is the acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of mind and body, underscoring the essential role of lived experiences in knowledge production. In contrast to conventional methodologies that often emphasise detached

observation and the extraction of ‘findings’ for academic consumption (Smith, 1999), this research emphasises collaboration, care, relationality, and respect in the pursuit of understanding peace dynamics within conflict-affected societies.

With loving perception and playfulness, I travelled the worlds of the women in this study to learn from their lived embodied experiences of wars and peace, embracing uncertainties and allowing myself to engage creatively (Lugones, 1987). Choosing a storytelling approach to narrate my methodological journey also speaks to the feminist-decolonial stance of this research that diverges from conventional research methodologies. Storytelling, as Chilisa (2012) tells us, is fundamental to the lives of the colonised as it is a powerful vehicle for conveying cultural knowledge and experiences. Therefore, utilising a storytelling approach in Chapter 4 was a way of ensuring relational accountability to everyone who contributed to this research (Wilson, 2008). This methodological journey, characterised by its rejection of conventional research paradigms in favour of a feminist-decolonial approach, represents a step towards decolonising methodologies within the field of war and peace research in (I)R.

In terms of **theory**, this research utilised a feminist-decolonial framework that draws from the lived embodied experiences of several non-White women and feminists, and argues against the binary of thinking and doing because thinking is doing. I also explained in Chapter 3 that attempting to encapsulate the multifaceted experiences of the women in this study in fostering peace inevitably falls short within any predefined neat conceptual framework. Thus, my theoretical contribution is two-fold. First, the theorising of peacebuilding as communal based on the women’s life stories requires feminist-decolonial option and action to understand the complexities of nurturing

peace in conflict-affected regions. Secondly, the study reframes the notion of peacebuilding as a collective endeavour, emphasising the centrality of community, relationality, and embodied practices in the process. Through the lived experiences of Congolese and Liberian women, the research elucidates a communal approach to peacebuilding that underscores the agency and contributions of marginalised voices. This challenges conventional paradigms of knowledge production that relegate these women to the status of mere objects of study when it comes to theorising about peace. Rather, the concept of communal peacebuilding that emerged from their lived experiences positions them as legitimate contributors to peacebuilding discourse in (I)R.

### **Revisiting the ‘So What?’ Question**

The question ‘so what?’ emphasises the importance of articulating the broader significance of this research. The narratives presented in this thesis challenge the detached, top-down approaches of liberal peacebuilding by demonstrating the tangible and context-specific practices of women who navigate and transform conflict dynamics. For instance, the story of a woman addressing soldiers as her sons, urging them to lay down their weapons, exemplifies a form of power that transcends public-private dichotomies. This narrative highlights the unique roles women play in fostering reconciliation and accentuates the need to reimagine peacebuilding frameworks that prioritise such grassroots efforts.

The implications of these narratives extend beyond anecdotal evidence; they call for a rethinking of who is considered an agent of change in peacebuilding. If lasting peace is to be achieved, the agency of these women must be recognised and centred

in developmental agendas. This thesis thus contends that women in these contexts are not passive or subordinate actors but are pivotal to the creation of lasting peace.

### **Bridging Theory and Practice**

This thesis firmly anchors the narratives within the feminist-decolonial critique of liberal peacebuilding, demonstrating how these frameworks help unpack the complexities of indigenous peace practices. By integrating storytelling as both a method and a form of knowledge production, this research challenges the erasure of women's voices and highlights their capacity to disrupt hegemonic narratives of peace and conflict. These lessons contribute to critical discourses in Feminist Peace Research, Women, Peace, and Security scholarship, and decolonial IR studies by offering concrete examples of how indigenous women's knowledges can inform and transform global peacebuilding practices.

### **Contributions to Feminist Peace Research and Beyond**

This work contributes to Feminist Peace Research by foregrounding the lived experiences and resistant agency of women often excluded from formal peace processes. It advances critical security studies by highlighting plural forms of security embedded in community-based practices. In the context of WPS scholarship, this research critiques the liberal implementation of UNSCR 1325 and advocates for a culturally sensitive approach. Finally, this thesis enriches decolonial approaches in IR by demonstrating the epistemic value of narratives and the importance of centring marginalised voices in global politics.

## **7.2 Limitations, Lessons, and Possibilities**

While this research has contributed to the understanding of women's experiences in specific regions of the two countries under study, there remain opportunities for further research. Primarily, it is important to acknowledge the limitations imposed by the geographical scope of this study, which focused on regions deemed relatively safe for travel, as elucidated in Chapter 4. Consequently, the narratives and insights learned from the women in this study cannot be inferred to represent the experiences of women across all regions within these countries. It is crucial to recognise that the intention of this research was not to achieve universal applicability; however, this recognition underscores the need for future research to delve into the other contexts and circumstances encountered by women in other regions of the two countries, as well as in different countries altogether. It invites further exploration of the interplay between feminist and decolonial methodologies in peacebuilding, particularly in other 'postconflict' contexts. Second, it calls for longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impact of women's grassroots peacebuilding practices on broader political and social structures. These directions highlight the potential for this research to inform and inspire new ways of thinking about peace and security in diverse settings.

Furthermore, while this study sheds light on the concept of communal peacebuilding within the specified contexts, there remains a wealth of potential for further exploration in other contexts and settings. By broadening the scope beyond the confines of the present research, scholars can elucidate how communal peacebuilding manifests across diverse cultural, social, and political settings. This expansion not only enriches our understanding of the dynamics of peacebuilding but might also offer insights into the adaptability of communal peacebuilding strategies in addressing conflict and fostering peace in different contexts.

This PhD has been a journey of learning. It is not just about delving into history and tracing gender to the colonial encounter as well as unravelling the coloniality embedded in liberal peacebuilding; but it is also in seeing the ways of being, thinking, and doing that undergirds communal peacebuilding. It has to do with unlearning and relearning to understand that communal peacebuilding has always been in existence. Initially, the research aimed to analyse the persistent marginalisation of female ex-combatants within liberal peacebuilding initiatives such as Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes. The underlying premise posited a discord between the application of Western liberal methodologies in non-Western conflict-affected contexts. While recognising existing feminist peace scholarship advocating for gender integration within liberal peacebuilding paradigms, it became apparent that despite such inclusions, the marginalisation of female ex-combatants and the subsequent shortcomings in their community reintegration persisted. This quandary prompted a deeper contemplation, leading to the recognition of gender's entanglement with colonialism and the coloniality of gender, as elucidated by Oyewumi Oyeronke and Maria Lugones. Drawing from their seminal works, I was able to analyse the interplay between gender dynamics, coloniality, and the flawed reintegration efforts within liberal peacebuilding frameworks. However, this exploration culminated not only in an elucidation of existing issues but also in an appreciation of communal peacebuilding as a manifestation of feminist-decolonial praxis. Communal peacebuilding, as observed in the practices of women within this study, emerges as a locus of resistance against the coloniality of gender. It embodies a form of activism grounded in feminist-decolonial aspirations, challenging hegemonic structures and fostering peace.

Throughout this PhD journey, I have also been compelled to constantly question my own internalised coloniality and as Maria Lugones said, 'resistance starts with a questioning of what is accepted'. I posit that resistance is a central theme resonating throughout this research endeavour, both on my part and within the experiences of the women in this study. Personally, I have resisted and continue to resist the prevailing hegemonic ways of knowing and doing within academia. I vividly recall the mental and emotive battle during the writing process of this thesis, torn between allowing creative expression to flow freely and restraining myself with concerns such as, 'This is International Relations; perhaps this phrasing is not sophisticated enough'. At times, I grappled with the difficulty and apprehension of articulating ideas in a manner that might be perceived as 'illogical' to the 'disciplined' mind. By disciplined mind, I refer to the discipline of (I)R and its entrenched standards. These internal struggles were indicative of the politics of knowledge which often privilege certain forms of knowledge production while marginalising others (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). In the end, my ability to articulate and share these thoughts was facilitated by engaging with the writings of numerous non-White women and feminists whose perspectives I draw upon in this thesis. For instance, I will never forget the confidence and validation I gained after reading these empowering words of Gloria Anzaldua in 'Speaking in Tongues' (1981, p.169):

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency, I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that I can and that I will write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the

unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing.

Similarly, my encounters with the women involved in this study, witnessing and learning from their own resistance, wisdom, and strength in their pursuit of communal peace without awaiting external validation or acknowledgement, prompted me to reassess my assumptions, broaden my perspectives, and write passionately to do justice to their/our stories. This doctoral journey has underscored the significance of listening to and learning from those situated at the margins. It has taught me the virtues of humility, empathy, and solidarity in academic research and beyond. As I conclude this thesis, I do so with a deep sense of gratitude and the beginning of myriad possibilities yet to unfold.

## References

- Abu-Assab, N., Azarmandi, M. and Shroff, S., (2022). Feminist Peace Interrupted: A Critical Conversation on Conflict, Violence and Accountability. In *Feminist Conversations on Peace* (pp. 17-33). Bristol University Press.
- Acker, J. (1992), "From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions", *Contemporary sociology*, vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 565-569.
- Acharya, A. (2014). *Rethinking Power, Institutions, and Ideas in World Politics: Whose IR?*. Routledge.
- Acharya, A. (2018). *Constructing Global Order: Agency and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Adesina, O.A., (2021). Women and Colonialism Across Africa in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, eds. O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola, 1st edn, Springer Nature, Switzerland, pp. 1203-1218.
- Adichie, C., (2009). The danger of a single story: Chimamanda Adichie on TED.com. *TED Blog. TED Ideas Worth Spreading*, 7.
- Agathangelou, A.M. and Turcotte, H.M., (2010). Feminist" Theoretical Inquiries and "IR. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*.
- Ahmed, S., (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Akpan, M.B., (1982). Gola Resistance to Liberian "Rule" in the Nineteenth Century 1835-1905. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 11(3/4), pp.142-164.
- Alcoff, L. (1991). 'The problem of speaking for others', *Cultural Critique*, 20, pp. 5–32.
- Amadiume, I., (1987). *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. Zed Books Ltd.
- Amadiume, I., (1997). *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, religion and culture*. Zed Books Ltd.
- Amadiume, I., (2017). Gender Field Experience, Method and Theory. *Journal of West African History*, 3(2), pp.131-138.
- Amnesty International (2008), Mar/31-last update, *Liberia: A flawed process discriminates against women and girls* [Homepage of Amnesty International], [Online]. Available: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/52000/afr340042008eng.pdf> [2018, June/09].

- Amoah-Boampong, C. and Agyeiwaa, C., (2021). Women in Pre-colonial Africa: West Africa in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, eds. O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola, 1st edn, Springer Nature, Switzerland, pp. 1099-1111.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1981). 'Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers'. In Moraga, C. and Anzaldúa, G. (eds). *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco.
- Autesserre, S., (2010). *The trouble with the Congo: Local violence and the failure of international peacebuilding*. Cambridge University Press.
- Autesserre, S. (2012), "Dangerous tales: Dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences", *African Affairs*, vol. 111, no. 443, pp. 202-222.
- Awodola, B., (2009). Comparative international experience with reintegration programmes for child soldiers: The Liberian experience. *Peace & Conflict Review*, 4(1), pp.1-10.
- Azarmandi, M., (2018). The racial silence within peace studies. *Peace Review*, 30(1), pp.69-77.
- Azarmandi, M., (2023). Disturbing a Discipline: Towards Pluriversal Peace and Conflict Studies. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, pp.1-15.
- Ball, N. and van der Goor, L., (2006). DDR: Mapping Issues, Dilemmas and Guiding Principles. *Conflict Research Unit. Netherlands Institute for International Relations, The Hague*.
- Barnes, K. (2010), *Engendering peace or a gendered peace? The UN and liberal peacebuilding in Sierra Leone, 2002-2007.*, London School of Economics and Political Science (United Kingdom).
- Beckley, E.M. (2021), "DDR and the Education of Ex-Combatant Girls in Africa" in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, eds. O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola, 1st edn, Springer Nature, Switzerland, pp. 178-199.
- Beckley, E. (2023), 'From Young Girls to "bush wives"', *ISS blog*. Available at: <https://issblog.nl/2023/03/16/womens-week-2023-from-young-girls-to-bush-wives-armed-conflicts-are-traumatising-girl-soldiers-in-africa-and-post-conflict-peacebuilding-and-rehabilitation-efforts-could/>
- Bekoe, D. & Parajon, C. (2007), *Women's Role in Liberia's reconstruction*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington.
- Bellamy, A.J. (2004), "The 'next stage' in peace operations theory?", *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 17-38.

- Berrio, A. (2013), "Invisible Women: Militarized Gender and the need for gender-focused DDR process in Colombia", pp. 1-21.
- Boateng, B., (2016). Women out of Africa: Naming, knowing, and the conditions of being. *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies*, 16(4), pp.400-413.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V., (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), pp.77-101.
- Brigg, M., (2016). Relational peacebuilding: Promise beyond crisis. In *Peacebuilding in crisis* (pp. 56-70). Routledge.
- Boutros-Ghali, B. (1995), *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace*, United Nations, New York.
- Burin, E., (2008). *Slavery and the peculiar solution: A history of the American Colonization Society*. University Press of Florida.
- Butler, J. (2004), *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, United States of America.
- Butler, J. (2002), *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, United Kingdom.
- Butler, J. (1988), "Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory", *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 519-531.
- Butler, J. & Scott, J. (eds) (1992), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Routledge, New York.
- Chadwick, R., (2021). On the politics of discomfort. *Feminist Theory*, 22(4), pp.556-574.
- Chandler, D.C. (2010), "The uncritical critique of 'liberal peace'", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 36, no. S1, pp. 137-155.
- Chilisa, B. and Ntseane, G., (2010). Resisting dominant discourses: Implications of indigenous, African feminist theory and methods for gender and education research. In *Rethinking gendered regulations and resistances in education* pp. 23-38. Routledge.
- Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.
- Chilmeran, Y., (2022). Women, Peace and Security across scales: exclusions and opportunities in Iraq's WPS engagements. *International Affairs*, 98(2), pp.747-765.
- Chowdhry, G. & Ling, L. (2010), "Race (Ing) international relations: A critical overview of postcolonial feminism in international relations", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*.

- Clandinin, D.J., and Connelly, F.M., (2000). *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clarke, Y., (2021). Exploring feminist notions of peacebuilding: experiences of women activists in Northern Uganda. University of Cape Town.
- Clarke, Y., (2021). Considering 'gender fluidity' in Zambia: femininities, marriage and social influence. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 39(4), pp.576-588.
- Cohn, C., Kinsella, H. & Gibbings, S. (2004), "Women, peace and security resolution 1325", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 130-140.
- Cooper, N., Turner, M. & Pugh, M. (2011), "The end of history and the last liberal peacebuilder: a reply to Roland Paris", *Review of International Studies*, pp. 1995-2007.
- Coulter, C. (2008), "Female fighters in the Sierra Leone war: challenging the assumptions?", *Feminist Review*, vol. 88, no. 1, pp. 54-73.
- Cox, R.W., (1981). Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory. *Millennium*, 10(2), pp.126-155.
- Da Costa, L.B., Icaza, R. and Ocampo Talero, A.M., (2015). Knowledge about, knowledge with: Dilemmas of researching lives, nature and gender otherwise. *Practicing feminist political ecologies: Moving beyond the "Green Economy*, pp.260-285.
- Davis, L. (2013), "Power shared and justice shelved: the Democratic Republic of Congo", *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 289-306.
- Debusscher, P. & Martin de Almagro, M. (2016), "Post-conflict women's movements in turmoil: the challenges of success in Liberia in the 2005-aftermath", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 293-316.
- Denov, M. & Richard-Guay, A. (2013), "Girl soldiers: towards a gendered understanding of wartime recruitment, participation, and demobilisation", *Gender & Development*, vol. 3, no. 21, pp. 473-488.
- Dosekun, S., (2021). African feminisms in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, eds. O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola, 1st edn, Springer Nature, Switzerland, pp. 47-63.
- Ellis, S., 2006. *The mask of anarchy updated edition: The destruction of Liberia and the religious dimension of an African civil war*. NYU Press.
- England, K.V., (1994). Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. *The professional geographer*, 46(1), pp.80-89.

- Eriksson Baaz, M. & Utas, M. (2012), *Beyond "Gender and Stir": Reflections on gender and SSR in the aftermath of African conflicts*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Sweden.
- Fisher, J., (2021). How I dealt with my ethics committee, and survived. *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*, pp.17-33.
- FitzGerald, G., (2023). Unsettling Peace: The Settler-Colonial Challenge to the Local Turn. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, pp.1-18.
- Fuest, V., (2008). 'This is the Time to get in Front': Changing Roles and Opportunities for Women in Liberia. *African Affairs*, 107(427), pp.201-224.
- Fuest, V. (2010), "Contested inclusions: Pitfalls of NGO peace-building activities in Liberia", *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 3-33.
- Gallo-Cruz, S. and Remsberg, R., (2021). Peacebuilding, Liberian women, and the invisible hand of conflict in the postwar era. *The Journal of Social Encounters*, 5(2), pp.77-105.
- Gani, J., & Marshall, J. (2022). 'The impact of colonialism on policy and knowledge production in International Relations', *International Affairs*, 98(1), pp. 5-22.
- Gani, J.K. & Khan, R.M. (2024). 'Positionality Statements as a Function of Coloniality: Interrogating Reflexive Methodologies.' *International Studies Quarterly*, 68(2).
- Garnett, T. A. (2016) "Ellen Is Our Man: Perceptions of Gender in Postconflict Liberian Politics", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 18(1), pp. 99–118.
- Gberie, L., (2005). *A dirty war in West Africa: The RUF and the destruction of Sierra Leone*. Indiana University Press.
- Gbowee, L., (2011). *Mighty be our powers: How sisterhood, prayer, and sex changed a nation at war*. Beast Books.
- Gbowee, L. (2019), "When Women Stand Together as One: The Power of Women's Grassroots Peace Movements", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 2, pp. 13-18.
- Gibbins, S.L. (2011), "No angry women at the United Nations: political dreams and the cultural politics of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 522-538.
- Gizelis, T. & Joseph, J. (2016), "Decoupling local ownership? The lost opportunities for grassroots women's involvement in Liberian peacebuilding", *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 51, no. 4, pp. 539-556.
- Goduka, I.N., (2000). African/indigenous philosophies: Legitimizing spiritually centred wisdoms within the academy. *African voices in education*, pp.63-83.

- Goldstein, J.S. (2003), *War and gender: How gender shapes the war system and vice versa*, Cambridge University Press.
- Gonzalez, A.G. (2018), "Feminist Approaches to Peacebuilding and Reconciliation", *Paper Feminist Review Early Careers Workshop* University of Brighton, May 2016, pp. 1.
- Gourevitch, P., (1998). *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families*. Picador: United States
- Haastrup, T. & Hagen, J.J., (2020). Global racial hierarchies and the limits of localization via national action plans. In *New directions in women, peace and security*. Bristol University Press, pp. 133-152.
- Haastrup, T. and Hagen, J.J., (2020). Race, justice and new possibilities: 20 years of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2020/07/28/race-justice-new-possibilities-20-years-of-the-women-peace-and-security-agenda/>
- Haer, R. (2017), "The study of child soldiering: issues and consequences for DDR implementation", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 450-466.
- Haraway, D.J. (1988), 'Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575–599.
- Harcourt, W., Van den Berg, K., Dupuis, C. & Gaybor, J., (2022). *Feminist methodologies: Experiments, collaborations and reflections* (p. 296). Springer Nature.
- Harding, S., (1991). *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Harper-Shipman, T.D., Hall, K.M.Q., Cutipa-Zorn, G. and Dougé-Prosper, M.A., (2021). Stripping Away the Body: Prospects for Reimagining Race in IR. *International Studies Review*, 23(4), pp.2019-2047.
- Hauge, W.I. (2019), *Gender in Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes*, Peace Research Institute Oslo, Oslo, Norway.
- Hellmüller, S. (2012), "The ambiguities of local ownership: Evidence from the Democratic Republic of Congo", *African Security*, vol. 5, no. 3-4, pp. 236-254.
- Henderson, E.A., (2013), Hidden in plain sight: racism in international relations theory. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26(1), pp.71-92.
- Hendricks, C. (2012), *Research on gender and SSR in Africa: challenges and gaps*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Sweden.
- Holsoe, S.E., (1971). A study of relations between settlers and indigenous peoples in western Liberia, 1821-1847. *African Historical Studies*, 4(2), pp.331-362.

- Hochschild, A., (1998). *King Leopold's ghost: A story of greed, terror, and heroism in Colonial Africa*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin.
- hooks, b., (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. South End Press.
- hooks, b., (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- hooks, b., (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Pluto Press.
- Houngbedji, M., Grace, R. & Brooks, J. (2012), *The Impact of Gendered Misconceptions of Militarized Identities on Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Humanitarian Assistance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, SIDA.
- Hudson, H. (2016), "Decolonizing the mainstreaming of gender in peacebuilding: toward an agenda for Africa", *African Peacebuilding Network (APN) Working Paper*, no. 8.
- Hudson, H. (2012), "A double-edged sword of peace? Reflections on the tension between representation and protection in gendering liberal peacebuilding", *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 19, no. 4, pp. 443-460.
- Hudson, H. (2009), "Peacebuilding through a gender lens and the challenges of implementation in Rwanda and Côte d'Ivoire", *Security Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 287-318.
- Hudson, H. (2005), "'Doing' security as though humans matter: A feminist perspective on gender and the politics of human security", *Security Dialogue*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 155-174.
- Hudson, H., (2021). When theory meets method: Feminist peace research in Africa and how to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. In *Researching Peacebuilding in Africa* (pp. 38-55). Routledge.
- Hudson, H. & Madsen, D.H., (2024). The Politics of Space and Relationality: Localization and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Uganda. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, pp.1-21.
- Icaza Garza, R., (2017). Decolonial feminism and global politics: Border thinking and vulnerability as a knowing otherwise. In *Critical Epistemologies of Global Politics*, eds M. Woon and S. Weier. E-International Relations Publishing, pp. 26-46.
- Icaza, R., (2022). Tanteando en la obscuridad: Decolonial Feminist Horizons [Lecture]. Inaugural Lecture Professor Rosalba Icaza, The Hague.
- Icaza, R., and Salem, S., (2023), "A world in which many worlds can fit:" On Knowledge Production and Multiplicity. *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 9(1).
- Jackson, P., (2021). Interview Locations. *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*, pp.101-113.

- Jennings, K.M., (2007). The struggle to satisfy: DDR through the eyes of ex-combatants in Liberia. *International Peacekeeping*, 14(2), pp.204-218.
- Kyamusugulwa, P. & Mwenebyake, D. (2023), 'Creating a space for Congolese to talk about issues including how widespread sexual abuse is ravaging the Democratic Republic of Congo's humanitarian sector', *ISS blog*. Available at: <https://issblog.nl/2023/11/23/humanitarian-observatories-series-creating-a-space-for-congolese-to-talk-about-issues-including-how-widespread-sexual-abuse-is-ravaging-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congos-humanitarian-se/>
- Kelly, G., (2021). Researching over-researched societies. *The companion to peace and conflict fieldwork*, pp.47-63.
- Krystalli, R., (2021). When Humans Become Data. *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*, pp.35-46.
- Kunz, R. (2016), "Windows of Opportunity, Trojan Horses, and Waves of Women on the Move: De-colonizing the Circulation of Feminist Knowledges through Metaphors?" in *The Politics of Feminist Knowledge Transfer* Springer, pp. 99-117.
- Lawson, E.S. & Flomo, V.K. (2020), "Motherwork and gender justice in Peace Huts: a feminist view from Liberia", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 11, pp. 1863-1880.
- Lederach, A.J., (2019). "*Feel the Grass Grow*": *The Practices and Politics of Slow Peace in Colombia*. University of Notre Dame.
- Lemarchand, R., (2012). *The dynamics of violence in Central Africa*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lemay-Hébert, N. (2013), "Critical debates on liberal peacebuilding", *Civil Wars*, vol. 2, no. 15, pp. 242-252.
- Lewis, D. (2013), "The multiple dimensions of human security through the lens of African feminist intellectual activism", *Africa Peace and Conflict Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 15-28.
- Lewis, C., (2022). The making and re-making of the 'rape capital of the world': on colonial durabilities and the politics of sexual violence statistics in DRC. *Critical African Studies*, 14(1), pp.55-72.
- Lugones, M., (1987). Playfulness, 'world-travelling', and loving perception. *Hypatia*, 2(2), pp.3-19.
- Lugones, M., (1992). On borderlands/La Frontera: An interpretive essay. *Hypatia*, 7(4), pp.31-37.
- Lugones, M., (1994). Purity, impurity, and separation. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 19(2), pp.458-479.

- Lugones, M., (2005). From within germinative stasis: Creating active subjectivity, resistant agency. In *Entre Mundos/Among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa* (pp. 85-99). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Lugones, M., (2007). Heterosexualism and the colonial/modern gender system. *Hypatia*, 22(1), pp.186-219.
- Lugones, M., (2010). Toward a decolonial feminism. *Hypatia*, 25(4), pp.742-759.
- Lugones, M., (2020). Gender and universality in colonial methodology. *Critical philosophy of Race*, 8(1-2), pp.25-47.
- Mac Ginty, R. (2010), "Hybrid peace: The interaction between top-down and bottom-up peace", *Security Dialogue*, vol. 41, no. 4, pp. 391-412.
- Mac Ginty, R. & Richmond, O.P. (2013), "The local turn in peacebuilding: A critical agenda for peace", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 5, pp. 763-783.
- Madsen, D.H., (2018). 'Localising the Global'—Resolution 1325 as a tool for promoting women's rights and gender equality in Rwanda. In *Women's Studies International Forum* (Vol. 66, pp. 70-78). Pergamon.
- Magalhães Teixeira, B., (2024). The Global South as a theoretical and methodological marker for scientific inquiry: researching and teaching decolonial peace. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, pp.1-15.
- Magubane, B., (2007). *Race and the Construction of the Dispensable Other*. Unisa Press.
- Maldonado-Torres, N., (2020). Notes on the Coloniality of Peace. *Frantz Fanon Foundation online*. [www.fondation-frantzfanon.com/notes-on-the-coloniality-of-peace/](http://www.fondation-frantzfanon.com/notes-on-the-coloniality-of-peace/)(Abfrage: 07.06. 2023).
- Malik, H. (2014), "Bringing Local Back In: A reassessment of peacebuilding strategies in the DRC", *Human Security Centre*, vol. 3, no. 8.
- Mamdani, M. (1996). *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Martin de Almagro, M. (2018), "Hybrid clubs: A feminist approach to peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 319-334.
- Martin de Almagro, M. & Ryan, C. (2019), "Subverting economic empowerment: Towards a postcolonial-feminist framework on gender (in) securities in post-war settings", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 1059-1079.
- Mazurana, D. & Carlson, K. (2004), *From combat to community: Women and girls of Sierra Leone*, Hunt Alternatives Fund Washington, DC.

- McFadden, P., (2016). *Becoming contemporary African feminists: Her-stories, legacies and the new imperatives*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- McMullin, J.R., (2020). *The Legacy of DDR in Liberia*. Department of Peace Operations: New York
- Medie, P.A., (2019). Women and violence in Africa. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*.
- Mignolo, W., (2011). *The darker side of Western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*. Duke University Press.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2005). *The Idea of Latin America*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Mignolo, W.D., (2002). The geopolitics of knowledge and the colonial difference. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(1), pp.57-96.
- Mignolo, W.D., (1999). I am where I think: Epistemology and the colonial difference. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 8(2), pp.235-245.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2000). *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton University Press.
- Mignolo, W.D., (2011). Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: On (de) coloniality, border thinking and epistemic disobedience. *Postcolonial studies*, 14(3), pp.273-283.
- Mignolo, W.D., (2017). Interview with Walter Mignolo. In *Critical Epistemologies of Global Politics*, eds M. Woon and S. Weier. E-International Relations Publishing, pp. 11-26
- Mignolo, W., (2020). 'Foreword: Thinking Decoloniality beyond One Nation–One State', in Laurent Dubois (ed.), *The Haitians: A Decolonial History*. Chapel Hill, NC. North Carolina Scholarship Online.
- Mitton, K., (2021). Making contact: interviewing rebels in Sierra Leone. *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*, pp.175-187.
- Mkeremy, M.N. and Lisakafu, J., (2023). Human Needs and Civilian Violence in United Nations Peace Keeping Operations: A Case of MONUSCO in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Journal of African Politics*, 3(2), pp.1-15.
- Mlotshwa, K., (2021). The “subalternity” of women in social movements and African politics in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, eds. O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola, First edn, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, pp. 1453-1471.
- Mohanty, C., (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, 30(1), pp.61-88.
- Moran, M.H., (2023). We Were Running and Running: Rural-Urban Imaginaries and Strategic Mobility during the Liberian Civil War. In *Africa and Urban Anthropology* (pp. 335-353). Routledge.

- Muraina, L.O. and Ajímátanraẹjẹ, A.J., (2023). Gender relations in Indigenous Yorùbá culture: questioning current feminist actions and advocacies. *Third World Quarterly*, 44(9), pp.2031-2045.
- Musisi, N.B., (2021). Women in Pre-colonial Africa: East Africa in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, eds. O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola, First edn, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, pp. 1073-1097.
- Nast, H., (1994). Women in the field: Critical feminist methodologies and theoretical perspectives. *Professional Geographer*, 46(1), pp.54-66.
- Neethling, T., (2011). From MONUC to MONUSCO and Beyond: Prospects for Reconstruction, State-building and Security Governance in the DRC. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 18(1), pp.23-41.
- Newman, E. (2009), "Liberal Peacebuilding Debates" in *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*, eds. E. Newman, R. Paris & R. Mac Ginty, UN University Press, Tokyo, pp. 26-53.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J., (2021). The cognitive empire, politics of knowledge and African intellectual productions: reflections on struggles for epistemic freedom and resurgence of decolonisation in the twenty-first century. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(5), pp.882-901.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J., (2013). Why decoloniality in the 21st century? *The thinker*, 48.
- Nzegwu, N.U., (2006). *Family matters: Feminist concepts in African philosophy of culture*. State University of New York Press.
- Nzegwu, N., (2020). Omumu: disassembling subordination, reasserting endogenous powers. *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies-Multi-, Inter-and Transdisciplinarity*, 15(1), pp.41-58.
- Nzongola-Ntalaja, G., (2006). War, Peace and Democracy in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *World Political Science*, 2(3).
- Obradovic-Wochnik, J. (2018), "Hidden politics of power and governmentality in transitional justice and peacebuilding: The problem of 'bringing the local back in'", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, pp. 1-22.
- Ogundipe-Leslie, M., (1994). *Re-creating ourselves: African women & critical transformations*. Africa World Press.
- Olonisakin, F. & Hendricks, C. (2013), "Engaging (in) security as an entry point for seeking redress in gender inequality in Africa", *Africa Peace and Conflict Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 1-14.

- Olonisakin, F., Hendricks, C. & Okech, A., (2015). The convergence and divergence of three pillars of influence in gender and security. *African Security Review*, 24(4), pp.376-389.
- Oluwaniyi, O. (2019), "Women's Roles and Positions in African Wars" in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, eds. O. Yacob-Haliso & T. Falola, First edn, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, pp. 85-105.
- Oluwaniyi, O. (2018), "The Challenges of Reintegration in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: The Case of Nigeria's Niger-Delta Region", *Social Science Research Council | Working Papers*, no. 18, pp. 1-46.
- Onyido, O. (2013), "Reconceptualizing women's role in peacebuilding", *Africa Peace and Conflict Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 74-87.
- Oyèwùmí, O., (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Oyewumi, O., (1998). De-confounding gender: Feminist theorizing and Western culture, a comment on Hawkesworth's "Confounding gender". *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 23(4), pp.1049-1062.
- Oyèwùmí, O., (2002). Conceptualizing Gender: Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies. *African gender scholarship: Concepts, methodologies and paradigms*, pp.1-8.
- Oyèwùmí, O., (2003). *African women and feminism: Reflecting on the politics of sisterhood*. Africa World Press: Trenton, NJ
- Oyèwùmí, O., (2016). *What gender is motherhood?: Changing Yoruba ideals of power, procreation, and identity in the age of modernity*. Springer.
- Oyèwùmí, O., & Magubane Z., (2016), *Conversation on Gender and Motherhood at Rhodes University, South Africa*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NRbvqeY1xw>
- Oyèwùmí, O., (2024), *A Panel Discussion on Decolonisation/Decoloniality*. Toyin Falola Interviews, Texas.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WG0wn62xjtc&t=263s>
- Parashar, S., (2018). The WPS agenda: a postcolonial critique in *The Oxford University Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security*, eds. S. Davies & J. True, pp.829-839
- Paris, R. (2010), "Saving liberal peacebuilding", *Review of International Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 337-365.
- Paris, R. (2009), "Does Liberal Peacebuilding have a future?" in *New Perspectives on Liberal Peacebuilding*, eds. E. Newman, R. Paris & R. Mac Ginty, UN University Press, Tokyo, pp. 97-112.

- Paris, R. (2004), *At war's end: building peace after civil conflict*, Cambridge University Press.
- Paris, R. (1997), "Peacebuilding and the limits of liberal internationalism", *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 54-89.
- Perera, S., (2024). Methodology of the excluded: conspiracy as discourse in the eastern DRC. *Peacebuilding*, pp.1-16.
- Pillow, W., (2003). 'Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), pp. 175–196.
- Porter, E., (2007). *Peacebuilding: Women in International Perspective*. London: Routledge.
- Prunier, G., (2008). *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan genocide, and the making of a continental catastrophe*. Oxford University Press.
- Randazzo, E., (2021). The local, the 'indigenous' and the limits of rethinking peacebuilding. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 15(2), pp.141-160.
- Reiling, C., (2024). How West African Women "Save" the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda. In *Who Gives to Whom? Reframing Africa in the Humanitarian Imaginary* (pp. 137-153). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Reno, W., (1995). Corruption and state politics in Sierra Leone. In *Corruption and state politics in Sierra Leone*. Cambridge University Press; African Studies Series, 83.
- Reno, W., (1998). *Warlord Politics and African States*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Richmond, O. (2016), "Peace in international relations theory" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Disciplinary and Regional Approaches to Peace* Springer, pp. 57-68.
- Richmond, O. (2011), *A post-liberal peace*, Routledge, London.
- Richmond, O. (2010), "Beyond liberal peace? Responses to "backsliding", *Contexto Internacional*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 297-332.
- Richmond, O. (2006), "The problem of peace: understanding the 'liberal peace'", *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 291-314.
- Richmond, O. (2005), *The transformation of peace*, Springer.
- Richmond, O. & Mac Ginty, R. (2015), "Where now for the critique of the liberal peace?", *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 171-189.
- Rutazibwa, O.U., (2020). Hidden in plain sight: Coloniality, capitalism and race/ism as far as the eye can see. *Millennium*, 48(2), pp.221-241.

- Sa'ar, A., (2005). Postcolonial feminism, the politics of identification, and the liberal bargain. *Gender & Society*, 19(5), pp.680-700.
- Sabaratnam, M. (2017), *Decolonising intervention: International statebuilding in Mozambique*, Rowman & Littlefield, London.
- Sadie, Y. (2010), "Women and peace-building in the democratic republic of Congo.", *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, vol. 32, no. 1.
- Sawyer, A., (1992). *The emergence of autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and challenge*. ICS Press: United States
- Sheik, Z.B., (2021). *Liminagraphy: Lessons in Life-affirming Research for Collective Liberation*. Netherlands: International Institute of Social Studies
- Shepherd, L.J. (2011), "Sex, Security and Superhero (in) es: From 1325 to 1820 and Beyond", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 504-521.
- Shilliam, R. (2021). *Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction*. UK: Polity Press.
- Shohat, E., (2001). Area studies, transnationalism, and the feminist production of knowledge. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26(4), pp.1269-1272.
- Simpson, L.B., (2017). *As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Sjoberg, L. (2011), "Looking Forward, Conceptualizing Feminist Security Studies", *Politics & Gender*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 600-604.
- Sjoberg, L. and Thies, C.G., (2023). Gender and International Relations. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 26, pp.451-467.
- Skjelsbæk, I. (2001), "Is Femininity Inherently Peaceful? The Construction of Femininity in War" in *Gender, Peace and Conflict*, eds. I. Skjelsbæk & D. Smith, Sage Publications, California, pp. 47-67.
- Smet, S. (2009), "A window of opportunity—improving gender relations in post-conflict societies: the Sierra Leonean experience", *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 147-163.
- Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
- Soukotta T. (2023). *The past in the present: Segregation and relational peacebuilding in Ambon*. FSC, The Netherlands.
- Steans, J. (1998), *Gender and International Relations: An Introduction*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

- Stavrevska, E.B., Carvajal, S.Z. & Luci, N., (2022). 'Peace' across Spaces: Discussing Feminist (and) Decolonial Visions of Peace. In *Feminist Conversations on Peace* (pp. 34-46). Bristol University Press.
- Sudarkasa, N., ((1986). "The Status of Women" in Indigenous African Societies. *Feminist Studies*, 12(1), pp.91-103.
- Tadjbakhsh, S. (2011), *Rethinking the liberal peace: external models and local alternatives*, Taylor & Francis, London.
- Tamale, S. ed., (2011). *African sexualities: A reader*. Pambazuka Press.
- Tamale, S., (2020). Decolonization and Afro-feminism. Daraja Press: Ottawa
- Tanabe, J. (2017), "Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding: A Critique of Liberal Peacebuilding and Exploring a Postmodern Post-Liberal Hybrid Model of Peacebuilding", *International Relations and Diplomacy*, vol. 5, no. 8, pp. 447-459.
- Tasker, H.C., (2023). "Justice Must be Done": Legal Engagements and Gendered Harms Following Peacekeeper Perpetrated Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in the Democratic Republic of Congo. York University: Ontario
- Tickner, J.A. (1995), "Introducing feminist perspectives into peace and world security courses", *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 3/4, pp. 48-57.
- Tickner, J.A. (1992), *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*, Columbia University Press, United States of America.
- Tronto, J.C., (1998). An ethic of care. *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, 22(3), pp.15-20.
- Tschunkert, K., (2021). Working with translators: implications of the translator's positionality for the research process and knowledge production. *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*, pp.249-261.
- Tuck, E. & Yang, K.W., (2014). R-words: Refusing research. *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*, pp.223-247.
- United Nations Security Council (2000), *Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security*, United Nations, New York.
- Van Houten, K. (2020), "Present, yet unaccounted for women's participation in civil society-led peacebuilding activities in South Kivu, the Democratic Republic of the Congo", *Peacebuilding*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 240-255.
- Van Leeuwen, M., Nindorera, J., Kambale Nzweve, J. & Corbijn, C. (2020), "The 'local turn' and notions of conflict and peacebuilding—Reflections on local peace committees in Burundi and eastern DR Congo", *Peacebuilding*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 279-299.

- Vázquez, R., (2009). Modernity coloniality and visibility: The politics of time. *Sociological Research Online*, 14(4), pp.109-115.
- Velez, E.D., (2019). Decolonial feminism at the intersection: A critical reflection on the relationship between decolonial feminism and intersectionality. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 33(3), pp.390-406.
- Vergès, F. & Bohrer, A.J.,(2021). *A decolonial feminism* (Vol. 13). London: Pluto Press.
- Wa Thiong'o, N., (2009). *Something torn and new: An African renaissance*. Basic Books.
- Walsh, C.E., (2023). *Rising Up, Living On: Re-Existences, Sowings, and Decolonial Cracks*. Duke University Press.
- Whetstone, C. & Luna, K.C., (2023). Disrupting the Saviour Politics in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Global South: Grassroots Women Creating Gender Norms in Nepal and Sri Lanka. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 10(1), pp.95-121.
- Wilson, S., (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Wollie, J.T., (2016). *Phenomenological Study on the Educational Component of the Formal Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Ex-Militants in Liberia*. Walden University.
- Zambakari, C. (2017), *Challenges of Liberal Peace and Statebuilding in Divided Societies*, ACCORD, South Africa.
- Zvaita, G.T. & Mbara, G.C. (2019), "Engaging the values of local participation in African peacebuilding processes", *Journal of African Union Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 155-178.

## **Appendices**

### **Annex 1: Conversation Guides DRC**

#### **General**

1. What is your name? Do you want to use your real name or choose a nickname?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your position (in this organisation)?

#### **Women's Organisations in Urban Areas**

1. What motivated the creation of your organisation?
2. How long has your organisation been established?
3. How would you describe your organisation's contribution to promoting peace in your community?
4. Will you say that your organisation is a 'feminist' organisation? If yes, how? If no, why?
5. Is 'feminism' a term that Congolese women associate with? If yes, how? If no, why?
6. Does your organisation work with international organisations on projects for peace? If so, how would you describe your relationship with them? If not, is there a reason for that?
7. Would you say that your organisation's approach is different from that of international organisations? If so, explain to us?
8. What are the negative points in your relationships? (International NGO). What is your attitude to this?
9. Does your organisation work with grassroots women's organisations on projects for peace? If so, how would you describe your relationship with them? If not, is there a reason for that?
10. Will you say that your approach is different from that of grassroots women? If so, explain to us?
11. What are your thoughts on the sexual violence victim narrative about Congolese women?
12. How would you describe Congolese women?

## **Women's Organisations Involved in DDR**

1. What motivated the creation of your organisation?
2. How long has your organisation been established?
3. How would you describe your organisation's contribution to promoting peace in your community?
4. Is your organisation involved in the reintegration of ex-combatants into your community? (men or women? both categories?)
5. Can you describe the role of your organisation in the reintegration of demobilised people into your community? What is the age range of the women you work with? (age of demobilised women)
6. How does your organisation proceed with the reintegration of demobilized women?
7. What are the difficulties you encountered during the reintegration process?
8. Does your organisation work with international organisations on projects for demobilized people? If so, how would you describe your relationship with them? If not, is there a reason for that?
9. Who are your partners in the DDR programme?
10. Would you say that your organisation's approach is different from that of international organisations? If so, explain to us?
11. What are the negative points in your relationships? (International NGO). What is your attitude to this?
12. What is the future of local women's organisations to contribute to peacebuilding and support demobilised women?
13. What are your thoughts on the sexual violence victim narrative about Congolese women?
14. How would you describe Congolese women?

## **Demobilised Female Combatants**

1. Were you in an armed group or the regular army? What armed group did you belong to?
2. What was your role in the armed group/regular army?

3. Can you describe your experience with the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process into civilian life? What did you need to do to participate in the process?
4. Can you describe your experience of returning to your community? Have you been accepted by members of your community?
5. How were you reintegrated into your community? Have you been given access to education or employment?
6. Have local organisations helped facilitate your reintegration and return to the community? If so, how?
7. What roles do you think local women in your communities have played in helping you reintegrate and return to your community?
8. Would you say that your experience as a demobilised woman is different from that of male demobilized women in the DDR process? If so, how?
9. Are you satisfied with the demobilisation and reintegration process? If so, why? If not, what were you going to change or advise managers to do?
10. What has been most beneficial to you, participating in the conflict or the DDR process?
11. If you were given the opportunity to return to the army, would you agree? If so, why? If not, why?
12. How would you define peace?
13. How would you describe a peaceful community?
14. What do you think of the peacebuilding process in the DRC?
15. Based on your definition of peace, would you say that the DDR process has contributed to the restoration of peace? If so, how? If not, why?

## **Red Cards**

1. Were you in an armed group or the regular army? What armed group did you belong to?
2. What was your role in the armed group/regular army?
3. Why did you not participate in the official DDR process?
4. Can you describe your experience of returning to your community? Have you been accepted by members of your community?
5. How were you reintegrated into your community?

6. Did you receive any support from local women's organisations or local organisations in general or the military in your reintegration process?
7. As a female, do you think that it was more difficult for you to reintegrate into your community? If yes, why? If no, why?
8. Do you think there is a difference between you and those who participated in the official DDR? If yes, why? If no, why?
9. If you were given the opportunity to return to the army, would you agree? If so, why? If not, why?
10. How would you define peace?
11. How would you describe a peaceful community?
12. What do you think of the peacebuilding process in the DRC?

### **Cross-border Women Sellers**

1. Has the war in your country affected the position of women in your community?
2. How has the war affected your business as women in the market?
3. What do you think of the reintegration of demobilised people into your community?
4. Have you contributed in any way to the reintegration of demobilized people into your community? If so, how? If not, why?
5. How would you define peace?
6. How would you describe a peaceful community?
7. Can you say that your community is at peace now?
8. How have you contributed to the restoration of peace in eastern DRC?
9. What are your thoughts on the sexual violence victim narrative about Congolese women?
10. How do you describe the Congolese woman?

### **Women's Organisations Working for Peace in Rural Areas**

1. How would you define peace?
2. How would you describe a peaceful community?
3. Were women involved in maintaining peace in your community before the war? What was it based on?

4. Has the war affected the position of women in your community and their methods of conflict resolution?
5. Can you say that your community is at peace now? What roles have local women played in this regard?
6. How would you describe your relationship with the forum of women (intellectuals) working for peace at the national level? Do you have any joint projects? Which?
7. Would you say that you have similar goals and objectives with the Forum of Women Intellectuals? which?
8. What are the negative points in your relationships? (Forum of women intellectuals). What is your attitude to this?
9. Have you been involved in the reintegration of demobilised people, especially women in your community? If so, how? If not, why?
10. What are your thoughts on the sexual violence victim narrative about Congolese women?
11. How would you describe Congolese women?

## **Annex 2: Conversation Guides Liberia**

### **Women's Organisations Working for Peace in Urban Areas**

1. What is your name? Do you want to use your real name or choose a nickname?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your position (in this organisation)?
4. What motivated the creation of your organisation?
5. How long has your organisation been established?
6. How would you describe your organisation's contribution to promoting peace in your community?
7. What methods and approaches does your organisation employ in building peace in your community?
8. Will you say that your organisation is a 'feminist' organisation? If yes, how? If no, why?
9. Is 'feminism' a term that Liberian women associate with? If yes, how? If no, why?
10. Does your organisation work with international organisations on projects for peace? If so, how would you describe your relationship with them? If not, is there a reason for that?
11. Would you say that your organisation's approach is different from that of international organisations? If so, explain to us?
12. What are the negative points in your relationship with international organisations? What is your attitude to this?
13. Does your organisation work with women's organisations in rural areas on projects for peace? If so, how would you describe your relationship with them? If not, is there a reason for that?
14. Will you say that your approach is different from that of grassroots women? If so, explain to us?

## **Women Working for Peace in Rural Areas**

1. What is your name? Do you want to use your real name or choose a nickname?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your position (in this organisation)?
4. What motivated the creation of your organisation?
5. How long has your organisation been established?
6. How would you define peace?
7. How would you describe your organisation's contribution to promoting peace in your community?
8. What methods and approaches does your organisation employ in building peace in your community?
9. Will you say that your organisation is a 'feminist' organisation? If yes, how? If no, why?
10. Is 'feminism' a term that Liberian women associate with? If yes, how? If no, why?
11. Does your organisation work with international organisations on projects for peace? If so, how would you describe your relationship with them? If not, is there a reason for that?
12. Would you say that your organisation's approach is different from that of international organisations? If so, explain to us?
13. What are the negative points in your relationship with international organisations? What is your attitude to this?
14. Does your organisation work with women's organisations in urban areas on projects for peace? If so, how would you describe your relationship with them? If not, is there a reason for that?
15. Will you say that your approach is different from those in urban areas? If so, explain to us?

## **Women's Organisations that Worked with Ex-Combatants**

1. What is your name? Do you want to use your real name or choose a nickname?
2. How old are you?
3. What motivated the creation of your organisation?
4. How long has your organisation been established?

5. What was your position in the organisation?
6. Was your organisation involved in the reintegration of ex-combatants into your community? (men or women? both categories?)
7. Can you describe the role of your organisation in the reintegration of ex-combatants into your community? What is the age range of female ex-combatants you work with?
8. What approaches and methods did your organisation use to reintegrate female ex-combatants back into their communities?
9. What difficulties did you encounter during the reintegration process?
10. Did your organisation work with international organisations on projects for ex-combatants? If so, how would you describe your relationship with them? If not, is there a reason for that?
11. Who were your partners in the DDR programme?
12. Will you say that the methods and approaches used were successful in reintegrating ex-combatants back into their communities?
13. What is the future of local women's organisations to contribute to peacebuilding and support female ex-combatants?

## **Market Women**

1. What is your name? Do you want to use your real name or choose a nickname?
2. How old are you?
3. How would you define peace?
4. How would you describe a peaceful community?
5. Can you say that your community is at peace now?
6. How have you contributed to maintaining the peace in your community?
7. How are disputes/conflicts resolved among market women?
8. Did the civil war affect women's position in your community and their conflict resolution methods?
9. Were women involved in maintaining peace in your community before the war? What inspired them?

## **Women Religious/Non-Religious Leaders in the Community**

1. What is your name? Do you want to use your real name or choose a nickname?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your position in this community/church/mosque/traditional institution?
4. How would you define peace?
5. How would you describe a peaceful community?
6. Were women involved in maintaining peace in your community before the war?  
What inspired them?
7. Did the war that occurred in your country affect women's position in your community and their conflict resolution methods?
8. Will you say that your community is peaceful now that the war is over? What roles did local women play in this?
9. How was the post-war peace achieved? Has it been through local institutions or methods?
10. What has been the role of international organisations in establishing peace in your community? How have local women been involved in this?
11. What role does religion play in promoting and maintaining peace in your community?
12. What methods and approaches do you employ in building peace in your community?
13. Do you work in partnership with non-religious organisations working for peace?  
How would you describe your relationship?
14. Would you say that you have similar goals and objectives to non-religious organisations working for peace?
15. Were you involved with the reintegration of ex-combatants, particularly female ex-combatants in your community? If so, how? If not, why?

## Annex 3: Mission Order



DEPARTMENT OF  
INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONS

**Faculty of Arts**

University of Malta  
Msida MSD 2080, Malta

Tel: +356 2340 2337  
int-relations.arts@um.edu.mt

[www.um.edu.mt/arts](http://www.um.edu.mt/arts)

### ORDRE DE MISSION N° 0001/2022

La personne dont les noms et fonction ci-dessous est autorisée à effectuer une mission de recherche (collecte des données) en République Démocratique du Congo (RDC), particulièrement dans les provinces du Nord-Kivu et du Sud-Kivu, dans le cadre de ses recherches doctorales à l'Université de Malte, Malte.

Il s'agit de :

Mme **Esther Mojisola BECKLEY**, Doctorante à l'Université de Malte, au Département des Relations Internationales.

Ses recherches doctorales visent à comprendre les connaissances et l'action des femmes congolaises sur la consolidation de la paix, en particulier en ce qui concerne la réintégration des ex-combattantes.

Période de la mission : deux mois (du 16 février au 16 avril 2022).

Lieux de la mission : Nord-Kivu (Goma, Masisi) et Sud-Kivu (Bukavu).

Moyens de transport : avion, bateau, véhicule motorisé.

Frais de la mission : A charge de l'Université de Malte.

Nous prions les autorités tant civiles que militaires et policières de la RDC de lui apporter assistance dans l'accomplissement de sa mission.

Fait à la Valette, Malte le 16 février 2022.

**Dr. Anna Khakee**

**Senior Lecturer**



Vu de passage à la  
33 Région Militaire  
ce 22 FEV 2022



33 RGM MIC

Vu à l'arrivée, le 23/02/2022



~~Signature~~  
Min. Intérieur

Vu de passage  
SECAS  
ce 28 fev 2022



Vu pour arrivée à Sika  
le 12/03/2022  
Le chef de Groupement  
~~Signature~~

~~Signature~~  
P.O. SECAD  
M. BAKRA BITUMU S.

Vu pour l'arrivée à la  
Traine de Coma et pour  
autorisation ce 10/03/2022

Le chef de Division Urbain  
~~Signature~~  
Alexis KAHORARYE



Vu d'arrivée au centre  
de regroupement des  
ex-combattants de  
MUBAMBIRO, le 12/03  
2022



~~Signature~~  
MAYALA N'GIMBA E.  
CAPITAINE  
Commandant CENTRE

Vu pour l'arrivée à notre  
Bureau du réseau des  
Femmes Psychologues 2022/14/03

~~Signature~~  
Micheline BAUMA LIAFA  
Contacts: refejpasbl@gmail.com  
#243 995828156 / 243 810129750