

Women's experiences of peacebuilding in violence-affected communities in Kenya.

MUELLER-HIRTH, N.

2019

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Third world quarterly* on 3.10.2018, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/01436597.2018.1509701>.

Women's experiences of peacebuilding in violence-affected communities in Kenya

Name, affiliation and address:

Dr Natascha Mueller-Hirth

Lecturer in Sociology

School of Applied Social Studies

Robert Gordon University

Aberdeen AB10 7QG

Scotland

Email: n.mueller-hirth@rgu.ac.uk

Note on contributor

Natascha Mueller-Hirth is Lecturer in Sociology at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen. Her research utilises qualitative, often ethnographic methodologies, to examine issues around peace, conflict, development and gender in South Africa and in Kenya. She has published on time and temporality in transitional societies, NGOs and civil society, the governance of development and corporate social responsibility. She is co-editor of *Time and Temporality in Transitional and Post-Conflict Societies* (2018) and co-author of *The Sociology of Everyday Life Peacebuilding* (2018).

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. I am deeply indebted and grateful to all the participants in this study for sharing their experiences—I hope I have done your generosity justice and that I have managed to document your views appropriately. A huge thank you to all the inspiring individuals staffing the civil society organisations that supported this research: Kenya Female Advisory Organization (Kefeado), Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL), Transform Empowerment for Action Initiative (TEAM), Grace Agenda. Thank you also to staff at Riara University. A sincere and special thank you to Mark Okowa, Emma Mogaka, Easter Achieng Okech, Jacqueline Mutere, George Owur, Dr Ochieng Kamudhayi and Haggai Imbiaka.

Abstract

Despite the attention to gender and conflict in empirical positivist peace research, and the interest in local agency in recent peacebuilding literature, women's understandings and lived experiences of peacebuilding are not necessarily well accounted for. This article, drawing on interviews, focus groups and observation research with 57 female victims/survivors of post-election violence in Kenya, provides an ethnographic study of women's largely informal peacebuilding activities, ranging from mediation and dialogue to economic empowerment. It analyses women's constructions and ways of making sense of being peacebuilders, demonstrating that, while participants employed dominant gender frames, they exerted considerable transformative agency in their communities. It argues that their 'gendered responsibility for peace' at community level is simultaneously empowering and disempowering. The research aims to increase understanding of the gendered nature of peacebuilding and the ways in which women exercise peacebuilding agency through a focus on their own voices and lived experiences.

Introduction

It is well documented that violent conflict affects men and women differently and policy emphasises the importance of including women in all stages of peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction. There is considerable scholarship on the links between gender and conflict/peace, and increasing attention to the importance of local actors in peacebuilding. Yet, the everyday experiences of women living in violence-affected communities are not always well accounted for. Rather, the question of women's involvement in peace has often been answered by conceiving of peace as a top-down process or by observing peacebuilding at international or national levels (while noting the exclusion of women from these very arenas). This article analyses women survivors' understandings of their peacebuilding activities through ethnographic research. It examines how women that are affected by violence exercise agency and the ways in which their activities are gender transformative.

Research was undertaken in Kenya shortly before the contested 2017 elections. Campaigning was already impacting on people's senses of safety and, for some, rekindled traumatic memories of past violence. While Uhuru Kenyatta was sworn in as president in November 2017, political and ethnic tensions are extremely high and the country and communities remain deeply polarised. This renders peacebuilding more important than ever. The data that inform this article derive from a qualitative study with 57 participants that examined the reparative

and development needs of women survivors of the post-election violence (PEV) of 2007/2008.¹ Electoral violence is a sub-category of political violence, which can include physical and psychological harms,² and, as it did in Kenya, violations of civil and political and/or social and economic human rights.³ The violence that erupted between December 2007 and February 2008 included police use of excessive force against protestors as well as ethnic-based killings and reprisals by supporters aligned to both the ruling and opposition parties.⁴ It was partly the product of decades of political manipulation of ethnic tensions, tied up with other factors such as historical issues over land, corruption, political exclusion, regional inequality, and inequitable distribution of resources.⁵ 1,100 people were killed, 660,000 displaced or forcibly removed, and 40,000 became victims of gender-based violence.⁶

The participants in this research had experienced the following types of direct violence during the 2007/08 crisis: displacement, dispossession, being widowed, being raped/ sexually abused, having children born from rape, children injured/ sexually abused, severe ill-treatment. At the time of research in early 2017, heightened political and ethnic tensions were causing significant anxieties and feelings of insecurity for the majority of women, with a number of them already planning to move to home villages or other areas where they would be safer in the case of renewed electoral violence. Many participants had also been impacted by earlier cycles of election violence, having suffered gross human rights violations in 2002, 1997 and some even in 1992. This cyclical character of violence is important for understanding the context of community peacebuilding for the women in this study.

The article proceeds by first discussing relevant literatures. The scholarship on gender and conflict includes positivist empirical peace research as well as more conceptual feminist critiques. Such accounts are important in framing this study, but they do not begin with the lived experiences and understandings of women peacebuilders themselves. In this regard, the paper draws from the 'local turn in peacebuilding' literature and its focus on local agency. This literature has on the whole not been gender-sensitive however and understanding of the specific challenges for women in peacebuilding, and of their agency, remains limited.⁷ The present article then provides an interpretivist qualitative analysis of peacebuilding agency in practice. This interpretivist methodology and details of the study are outlined in part three. Part four examines women's peace activities in the field sites, arguing that, contrary to the arguments in the local turn literature, they are largely unfunded, informal and disconnected from 'liberal peace' actors. Section five analyses how women themselves made sense of their roles in

peacebuilding and their peacebuilding agency. Part six sets out the structural conditions in which women's peace work takes place and develops the concept of a 'gendered responsibility for peace'.

The study contributes to the literature on gender and peace by, firstly, providing an empirical ethnographic study of the peacebuilding activities, conducted by victims/survivors of conflict themselves, that occur in violence-affected communities. Secondly, the focus on and analysis of women's constructions and framing of their activities as peacebuilders is important: whereas scholarship has much to say about the importance of including women in peace and security processes and the roles women *should* play in these, it does not usually begin with their lived experiences. Contrary to positivist studies of gender and peace, definitions of peacebuilding draw from participants' own understandings. Thirdly, given that peacebuilding in the researched communities largely occurred without the support of global or national actors, the participants' accounts supplement arguments in the 'local turn' literature about agency and resistance against the liberal peace and provide a gender-sensitive perspective on agency. Finally, the notion of a gendered responsibility for peace grapples with the simultaneously empowering and disempowering effects of women being peacebuilders and increases our understanding of the spaces that they shape through their peace work in the context of structural constraints.

2. Women and peacebuilding

The literature on gender and conflict broadly demonstrates the positive links between women and peace, although there is disagreement over the reasons for this relationship. Feminist research has often been conceptual, problematising notions of peace and security.⁸ Women's supposed peacefulness is attributed to motherhood, nurturance or caring responsibilities.⁹ This association of women with peace is criticised for entailing essentialist conceptions of what constitutes male and female (such as women's supposed natural affinity with peace and men's violence), ignoring power relations, neglecting women's roles as combatants and perpetrators, and confusing sex with gender.¹⁰ Conversely, the constructivist perspective on gender and peace argues that it is women's marginality in relation to political power that renders them more peaceful and that socialisation prepares girls for caring roles and boys potentially for confrontation or war.¹¹ Whether conceived as biological or social, this linkage of women with peace might be used to 'keep women in their place'¹² and to stifle their roles as public and political actors.

A number of empirical studies have demonstrated that it is in fact more gender-equal societies, rather than women, that are more peaceful:¹³ ‘the explanatory power of biological sex is diminished once other factors, particularly feminist attitudes or attitudes to gender equality, are controlled for.’¹⁴ This positivist strand in gender and peace research has often centred on international peacekeeping missions and conceived of peacebuilding as top-down processes, for instance seeing gender equality as increasing local cooperation to international operations.¹⁵

Given that the above literatures do not take women’s experiences and interpretations of peace and conflict as their starting point, it is useful to consider recent scholarship on peacebuilding, which has involved an epistemological and methodological focus on local agency, on bottom-up or everyday processes, and on the experiences of the marginal or subaltern.¹⁶ This ‘local turn’ developed out of a critique of the universalism and standardisation of the liberal peace paradigm that has characterised international peacebuilding efforts since the Second World War. It recognises the significance of peace actors at communal levels and their agency, rather than viewing them as the objects of top-down peace processes. There are different ways in which local agency in peacebuilding might be conceptualised. Mac Ginty & Richmond describe it as ‘small-scale mobilisation for peace in practical terms’ [...], often expressive of informal critical or tactical capacity rather than head-on public agency’, carrying ‘significant social legitimacy’ but facing considerable governmental power and structural obstacles to peace.¹⁷ Kappler conceives of ‘peacebuilding agency’ as one particular form of agency that relates to ‘transformative processes aiming to improve the social conditions of everyday life.’¹⁸ Encounters between ‘the local’ and ‘the international’ have been variously discussed in terms of resistance or hybridity,¹⁹ frictions²⁰ or infrapolitics.²¹

There are problems with ‘the local’, however: it can be conflated with professional civil society or liberal NGOs,²² it can be overstating local resistance against ‘liberal’ international actors while underplaying the agency of national elites²³ and the fact that actors frequently strategically reposition themselves in relation to ‘the local’ or ‘the international’.²⁴ What is more, when ‘the local’ is seen as automatically more empowering, there is a danger that issues of power are neglected, for example gender dynamics, ethnic politics and corruption (to name only a few issues that were shaping the women’s lives in the areas where this research took place). Most significantly, despite the central role that this literature affords to the agency of

local actors, it has not been gender-focused: ‘whereas local agency is brought to the fore, such agency has not been theorized as gendered.’²⁵

This article then engages with two literatures – the scholarship on relationships between gender and peace on the one hand, and the epistemological focus on local actors in recent work on peacebuilding on the other – in order to produce a gender-sensitive study of local actors’ understandings of their roles and peacebuilding activities. In violence-affected communities in Kenya, peacebuilding is not ‘local’ in opposition to a ‘global’ liberal peace and external actors, but occurs where the international peacebuilding industry has largely disappeared. Women were mobilising themselves and peacebuilding was occurring mostly *instead* of national and international involvement. To think of women’s agency in terms of a ‘gendered responsibility for peace’ that is empowered but also constrained, provides empirical nuance to the critiques in the existing literature that see the framing of women’s supposedly innate abilities as reproducing gender inequality: many women constructed their roles as peacebuilders in relation to experiences such as motherhood (so might well be considered to be drawing on essentialised conceptions of womanhood or traditional gender frames), but were in fact able to exert considerable agency and at times to transform social relations in their communities.

3. Study design

A interpretivist methodology was chosen because it centres on the accounts of women and what peacebuilding involves in everyday life. It contributes to ethnographic peace research that seeks to understand ‘experience of conflict or peace as nested within and filtered through the social and cultural lenses unique to particular peoples in conflict or postconflict settings.’²⁶ Interpretivist approaches (whether explicitly feminist or not) seek to produce understanding of the meanings of phenomena by drawing from social actors’ definitions, interpretations and everyday activities themselves.²⁷

In line with this interpretivist methodology, the study employed qualitative methods, including observation research, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups with 57 victims/ survivors of the PEV. Research was carried out in January and February 2017 in various communities in Nakuru, Bungoma, West Pokot, Uasin Gishu, Kisumu and Nairobi Counties. Field sites were chosen because they were among the most severely affected during the PEV. Given Kenya’s linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity and the varying impacts of colonial and post-colonial

politics of distribution, these areas differ in terms of gender relations, women's participation in political and communal life and the forms violence and conflict takes.

The large majority of the participants were women; male survivors were only included where local dynamics or access made this critical or unavoidable. Participants ranged from 23 to 67 years and came from a range of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Their names have been anonymised. In addition, the study included conversations with local and provincial government officials and other people working with and in violence-affected communities. Participants were recruited through community-based organisations (CBOs) and personal contacts. In Cheptais, Kapenguria and Bungoma, interviews were conducted while accompanying field visits of the Eldoret-based CBO Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL).

Topics covered in the interviews included participants' experiences of policies and programmes for restitution, reparation, and development (including the gender quota and other gender equality policies); their reparative, justice and development demands; and their understandings and experiences of peacebuilding, transition and transformation. The majority of interviews were conducted in Kiswahili and translated by a female CBO worker familiar with the research issues. The aim of the broader study from which this article draws was to understand the reparative and development needs of women survivors of the PEV, how to deal with the legacies of the violent past, and to assess if and how Kenya's transitional justice mechanisms had been beneficial to women. Given the large amount of data generated, this article only focuses on women's experiences of peacebuilding. The kinds of questions asked on this theme included 'what does peace mean to you?', 'who builds peace?', 'what are your needs for sustainable peace?', 'what peace initiatives have you encountered where you live?'. The fact that so many of the participants – selected for this study because they were survivors of the PEV – were very active in peace work was unexpected.

Analysis of interview transcripts and field notes was informed by a constructivist grounded theory approach,²⁸ using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) to manage the data and create codes. Open coding allowed the development and subsequent refinement of a cross-sectional coding index. This produced codes such as 'justice', 'reparations', 'land', 'peacebuilding', 'memory', and additional themes such as 'coping', 'resilience', 'tribalism', 'responsibility', 'empathy' and 'motherhood'.

4. Peacebuilding activities

Many of the interviewees had become active participants in, or often instigators of, peacebuilding in their communities over the past decade. Activities included some NGO-funded projects, but the vast majority were unfunded, self-led, self-directed and informal. Informal and unfunded peace work has recently been discussed under the banner of ‘everyday peace’, but Mac Ginty’s definition as ‘the routinized practices used by individuals and collectives as they navigate their way through life in a deeply divided society’ does not fully capture the more purposeful and ambitious activities of the women in this study.²⁹ Women’s peacebuilding ranged from developing early warning systems to mediation, economic empowerment and counselling, as will now be detailed.

Developing early warning systems

Women organised informal initiatives to provide warning and response. One mother of five from Mount Elgon, whose husband had been killed by government forces, started her own foundation after the PEV, bringing together widows from all ethnic communities with the aim of educating themselves and their children on the benefits of peace. She said: ‘my greatest expectation is for more women to come together and to speak up, before issues escalate.’³⁰ Women from Kibera in Nairobi told me that they knew of no organised groups that educate on conflict resolution: ‘it’s just people like us now, we are talking, let’s embrace peace even if we are in women meetings, let’s just embrace peace after you have voted, you go to your house, you stay there.’³¹

Some CBOs were however involved in supporting early warning systems in the research sites. RWPL had set up peace dialogues in the aftermath of the PEV, which enables the development of early response mechanisms whenever community tensions are heightened. In the run up to the 2017 elections, RWPL were building on women volunteers in order to develop early mediation capacity once again, drawing on network leaders in remote rural communities. RWPL operates in an environment of precarious funding, occasionally being able to access international donor monies but relying on volunteers and working largely as a membership organisation.

Mediation and training

As above, some mediation and training activities were successfully undertaken by CBOs, occasionally funded by international donors or international NGOs. This kind of support was

not available everywhere and has decreased over time, but the need does not disappear, particularly given the cyclical nature of electoral violence in Kenya. As participants regularly pointed out, training and mediation is needed after and well beyond any immediate violent conflict if peace is to be sustainable.

Beyond such funded peace work, many women shared their experiences of mediating in very direct and physical ways, for example by ‘talk[ing] to the men to stop fighting, to stop burning houses [...] After some time I started finding myself being a peace builder and the community were listening to me’. What allowed some women to be mediators is that, through marriage, they become part of the husband’s ethnic community. A few women spoke about the resulting ability to translate and act as a ‘go between’ in times of heightened conflict in ethnically diverse areas. Maria’s experience is instructive here. She is a Kikuyu married to a Kalenjin man in a Kikuyu area:

So, I never knew that I would be attacked. But when 2007 came, the houses were burnt [...] There was a girl and a boy in my house. So as our house was poured paraffin or petrol, they told me in Kiswahili, please, just go outside and tell those boys who are burning our house, tell them you are a Kikuyu. [...] So, I went out [...] because that is what we had been taught in the peace meeting, stand up and shout, “why are you burning, stop it, there are children here, small ones, you are just going to burn them.”³²

It is this very in-between status that can make women vulnerable though: ethnic conflict and marginalisation affects them more immediately and it can be dangerous to be considered ‘other’. During the PEV, women have been victims of gender-based violence not only because they are women, but because of being members of particular ethnic groups.³³ Interviews contained examples of women who were separated from their husbands and forcibly removed from their homes because of their different ethnic background; others were sent away even by their own families because the children were not considered to be of their tribe. One focus group in Kisumu with internally displaced persons (IDPs) highlighted the prevalence of sexual violence in IDP camps.

Dialogue within families

Some women felt that their roles as wives or mothers allowed them to initiate dialogue about political events and de-escalation. Ann explained: ‘as women we decided it is good for us to

talk about peace [...] They are our husbands, they are our sons, so it is good for us to sit down and discuss with them. So that they can understand conflict is bad, it affects our family, our children, everybody.’³⁴ Two women spoke specifically about their power of withholding food for male family members that chose violent actions, explaining that they encouraged other women to do the same:

We gave them a message [...] it is so bad when you cook, you make that *ugali* for a man to go and kill another one’s child, another woman’s child, you are also a killer. So, what can we do? We told them simple method. When you are serving them, tell them, please my son, just talk in your house. Tell them in your family, me I won’t like to have killers. I won’t like to have people, people who burn houses, in my house. Please let us stop this nonsense, and as you talk, start with one step.³⁵

This kind of peace work in the private sphere is sometimes seen as not properly transformative,³⁶ since it appears to reproduce stereotypical and traditional roles of women as wives and mothers, rather than challenging gender stereotypes. However, as will be argued in more detail below, although the women in this study drew on particular gender roles, their diverse activities in the private and public spheres transform conflict dynamics and ultimately have the potential to change community relations.

Economic empowerment

Support groups that seek to reduce conflict include mentorship projects as well as women’s cooperatives and *chamas* (i.e. merry-go-arounds or micro-savings groups). *Chamas* can be empowering by affording women independent incomes and can indirectly promote peace through development. The *chamas* that interviewees in Kibera were involved in welcomed women from all ethnicities and were used as mixed spaces in which peace could be discussed. Again, these groups are not funded: women mobilise and empower themselves and others. Some CBOs in the research areas also focused on economic empowerment in order to encourage integration and reconciliation. Another example of economic spaces providing opportunities for peacebuilding is Burnt Forest market, which was destroyed during the PEV and rebuilt, with international funding, to operate as a place where Kalenjin and Kikuyu women trade together.

Training and capacity building

Some of the interviewed women had undergone trauma counselling after 2007/2008 and largely found it useful. Survivors had sometimes been given training by NGOs to become trauma counsellors themselves, such as this survivor who is a leader of IDPs:

As a leader I want people to be taught about trauma. They need to be counselled. If they are taught about trauma, they can then find ways of managing trauma [...] We have about 2000 women, and NGOs only work with a few. If I am told to go and teach I cannot manage to teach all of these women. We need women to be taught so that they are able to go and train others so that they all become a network. Because if I am the only one who is trained, I am not healed myself.³⁷

Some reported that, in the absence of funding for counselling or the lack of facilities nearby, they had begun informal counselling sessions within their support groups.

In summarising this section, much of the peacebuilding that occurred in the selected areas is not funded or formalised. There was little evidence of the elites and civil society activities commonly associated with liberal peacebuilding, just as there was little resistance against them where they did exist.³⁸ Government (and to a lesser extent funded civil society) was perceived to be absent in relation to peacebuilding, particularly in Western areas. Ten years after the PEV and with another election and associated violence looming, the overwhelming sense gained from victim/survivors was that they had been ‘forgotten’ and that their ongoing needs were ignored.

5. Women’s understandings of peacebuilding

Three main arguments emerged from women’s accounts of peace and peacebuilding. To examine how they made sense of being peacebuilders is not to claim that women are always peaceful – in addition to the literature that criticises this conception, reviewed above, my field notes refer to instances when women committed violence – but to chart how the interviewed women framed their own engagement and exercised peacebuilding agency. This focus on their voices and lived experiences adds to the existing literature by producing locally-grounded research on women’s engagement in peacebuilding and their specific challenges.

Victimhood

When asked how they came to be engaged in the above peacebuilding activities, most interviewees said that women are good peacebuilders because they have been victims first. For example:

The experiences I went through are what made me a peacebuilder. First, in the early 90s, when the conflict started, the tribal clashes, for me that was the first time that I saw [...] people kill one another. For me, it was the first time seeing people burn down houses. And for me, it was a very big traumatic event.³⁹

Victimhood and peacebuilding were run together in many interviews, and the suffering of women was often highlighted: ‘Unlike men, women are the ones who carry the burdens of the war, any war. [...] Women are the ones who suffer. And so, they always fight for peace.’⁴⁰ All interviewees felt that women and children being most affected led to their ability, willingness and need to work towards peace. Coupled with this recognition of suffering were expressions of empathy for women survivors from ‘the other side’: as Emma put it in a phrase that was echoed in other conversations, women from other ethnic backgrounds are ‘women like you.’⁴¹

Empowerment

In addition to victimhood, many women said they were able to work towards peace because they had been ‘empowered’:

At first I was so traumatised. When I saw a place burning, I felt so bad, I could feel the fear. And that’s when I realised that it is not only me, there are some people who are going through the same. So at the end of the day, I felt that I have to go through a training so that I can help people to understand that problem. Empowerment is like a weapon you have given a person, it is like knowledge. This time I am empowered.⁴²

Women attributed their empowerment to training and education, as discussed in the above section, as well as to role models – other women who had played important peacebuilding roles in earlier cycles of violence in their community. Moreover, the consequences of mass violence can paradoxically lead to empowerment and changing gender relations because women become heads of households and sole or major breadwinners.⁴³

Within development studies, women's empowerment has been understood as the ability to make strategic life choices by those who were previously denied such choice (Kabeer 1999) – and to be able act on these choices in 'ways that challenge power relations' (Kabeer 2005: 14). The language of empowerment has global referents and has increasingly come to be equated narrowly with economic empowerment.⁴⁴ Yet, although empowerment may be used by global agencies in ways that betray its radical transformative roots in feminist movements, the study participants, in interviews and focus groups, related it to widening political participation, challenging patriarchal norms and increasing their agency and independence, often through education, skills and knowledge.⁴⁵

Being women

Interviewees moreover frequently constructed their peace work as relating to being women and what they perceived to be women's traits:

Because of being weak, women think of risks, other devices of not using weapons, and that is why women are more peaceful than men. And again, women were created in a way that they are, their hearts are soft, they are softer than men. Women are emotional. So, their emotions are open... that is, their conscience is not dead.⁴⁶

Women can build peace. We can build peace because we are weak. I have seen scenarios where men have been at the forefront to instigate violence. But I have never seen a woman being put on the forefront. So women are weak but women are great peace builders at the same time.⁴⁷

In these extracts, women's abilities to be effective peacebuilders are associated with risk awareness, softness, emotions, weakness and the ability to communicate. Other interviews and focus groups produced notions that women are more patient than men and more forgiving.

Perhaps most centrally, motherhood was often seen as a reason for women's engagement in peace work. Women are peacebuilders because of their 'sorrowful heart. [...] Given that we all have children, when something happens to them, even to other people's children, we feel it in our hearts. We can even be sick for them. Yes we feel things very much. That is what makes women great peacebuilders.'⁴⁸ Empathy towards other mothers allowed some participants to

overcome divides. One woman recounted that the shared experience of motherhood enabled women from different ethnicities to come together after the violence:

The first meeting between the Kalenjin and the Kikuyu women was chaotic. They wanted to fight. We put something in between, like a wall. They threw words. “If I greet a Kikuyu, a Kalenjin man or a woman, [I need to] wash with anti-septic” So there were no greetings. [...] The second [meeting] now they started listening. Some stood, even the Kikuyus, and cried, “My child is dying, she is bed-ridden, I don’t have milk. And this maize is so hard for my children.” In the next meeting, the Kalenjin were talked to. Please have mercy. When you are coming for the meeting, come with exchange goods. They are just women like you. Just come and give them something. So they came the next day: “Mama, we heard you crying because of your kid, how is your kid?”⁴⁹

When discussing, in a focus group, whether men do not also have ‘sorrowful hearts’ or empathy, there was collective sighing and mumbling. To agreement of others, a young woman said:

I don’t think so. [...] It is easier to fight than it is to hold together the family at home. I don’t know what happens to men. But when I look at them, it is the other way around. Because why should I go and fight that neighbour of mine, who comes from a different community and we have been living together for over 10 years. As a woman, I would say, “No! That is my neighbour, whenever that neighbour is beaten I would be the first person to run out and say, please, forgive him”. [...] That’s how we feel as women.⁵⁰

The above extracts demonstrate that specific gender constructions were central to the women’s understandings of peacebuilding. Women often emphasised their peacebuilding agency in relation to roles as mothers, aunts or neighbours, drawing on particular femininities such as ‘having a sorrowful heart’.

There is a danger of understanding women’s contributions in terms of a particular image of femininity. The assumption of women’s caring nature, as reified in motherhood, in particular has been critiqued for reinforcing traditional stereotypes and stifling the goals of gender equality.⁵¹ Brewer distinguishes between healing/ reconciling and social transformation roles that women play in peacebuilding, arguing that only in the latter ‘women break out from

traditional gender roles.’⁵² As healers/reconcilers, they exercise stereotypical feminine qualities and skills such as ‘repairing relationships, healing divisions, bringing people together, caring and nurturing’, which distorts their engagement with peace processes.⁵³ If women are included in peace processes because of an understanding that they have special womanly qualities, ‘their political agency will be limited to what is made possible by that representation and restricted to “feminized” tasks’ involving nurturing and mothering.’⁵⁴

The above narratives of becoming peacebuilders – through suffering, empowerment as well as through their caring and mothering roles – emerge from the accounts of women themselves, however. They are part of their ‘weapons’ and ‘knowledges’, as one interviewee put it in an earlier extract.⁵⁵ The women’s framings represent their experiences of peacebuilding and demonstrate the successful and effective ways in which they work towards resolving conflict and initiating change. To better understand how women can and do exercise peacebuilding agency in their specific (and gendered) cultural and social contexts is arguably vital for developing solutions to conflict and should therefore not be dismissed outright as essentialising or stifling gender equality.

This is not only an epistemological criticism: many of the above-discussed activities have been transformative. They have been successful in relation to conflict mitigation, for example when women initiated interethnic dialogues in divided communities. Social transformation can be witnessed in relation to leadership and political participation as well, such as the participation of women in Councils of Elders and the gradual, if slow, increase of female Members of County Assembly (MCA). In other words, the women in this study drew on particular gender roles but are nonetheless social transformers.⁵⁶ Even though dominant gender frames shape women’s peacebuilding practices and understandings, their critical peacebuilding agency, in the sense of improving the social conditions of everyday life,⁵⁷ also transcends this gender order.

6. The gendered responsibility for peace

So far, I have argued that the women in this study are involved in a wide range of mostly self-organised peace activities and that they frame their agency in ways that partially draw on traditional gender roles but that are transformative and critical. Yet, it would be naïve to claim that their peacebuilding agency is not also shaped by social and cultural contexts, such as ethnic identities, poverty and patriarchy. The continuing political manipulation of ethnic conflicts in the national, county and local arenas was a main driver of the 2007/08 violence and was once

again present at the time of research. There are long-standing conflicts and injustices that relate to land, corruption, marginalisation, regional inequality and the unequal distribution of resources – dynamics that most participants referred to as ‘tribalism’ in shorthand.⁵⁸ Some interviewees felt that, no matter how effective their peacebuilding activities were at a communal level, they could not transform the tribalism of national politics (which in turn can have serious local reverberations). For instance, during a focus group with women of different ethnicities in Kuresoi, one of the worst affected communities in the Rift Valley, participants were proud to discuss the effective conflict mediation activities they had jointly organised since 2008, but feared that ethnic identities could be politically mobilised and would potentially override everything else.

Another factor limiting women’s agency is the persistence of patriarchal cultures and values, particularly in rural areas. Women’s peacebuilding roles and changing identities clash with such gender-unequal norms, for example that women should not be speaking in front of men or participating in community decision-making. While Kenya’s new constitution of 2010 includes provisions to promote gender equality, such as the one-third gender quota, many felt that this has only helped women who were already more educated or privileged: ‘it has not helped the woman who comes from the grassroots level’⁵⁹ and ‘[rights] do not bring food at the end of the day’⁶⁰

The last quote draws attention to poverty as a further structural factor that constrains women’s agency. To be kept busy with ensuring survival of themselves and others in their care makes the task of being engaged in political life far more difficult.⁶¹ Where women became heads of households as a consequence of the PEV, they were more economically independent and involved in decision-making, which can be seen as empowering in its own right. But these new responsibilities can also constitute additional economic burdens. Female-headed households are the most socio-economically vulnerable in post-conflict societies.⁶² A sense of burden came through clearly in a number of interviews: ‘Being a woman in Kenya is a problem. Because of the responsibilities that women have. If you are a mother in Kenya, then you are a mother, you are a father, you are everything in that community. And a lot of bad goes to the women’.⁶³

Importantly, women’s new roles in community peacebuilding involved obligations in relation to peace, too. One community leader explained: ‘I have children. There is a lot of burden on the woman. We were taught how to heal so we can continue to fulfil our role as women in

society.’ Key among these ‘roles as women in society’ is the task of teaching their children about peace, as many participants noted. There is what might be called a ‘responsibility for peace’ placed on women: to either raise the next peacebuilders – or be the ones responsible for having raised the perpetrators in the next election violence. If their children end up becoming involved in political violence, does it mean that their mothers are at fault? A related element of this gendered responsibility for peace is that the women I encountered were expected, by their communities and wider society, to simply manage and cope with the consequences of violence (as in the above extract, they were ‘taught to heal so they can continue to fulfil their roles’), usually in lieu of external support from the state or from non-state actors. Moreover, on a practical level, participation in peace work or women’s groups can lead to unsustainable increases in work load⁶⁴ and an immediate impact on precarious family budgets, particularly given that they might be the only breadwinner.

I refer to this responsibility as gendered because of the duties that disproportionately fall to women, largely in the absence of men: to raise their children to be peace-loving, to cope with ongoing violence and poverty, and to be actively engaged in mediating conflict and building peace. It is moreover a responsibility that has developed partly due to the absence of international agencies and the state: put simply, the women have to be involved since no one else will. This local gendered responsibility for peace is not captured by the large-scale studies on women and peace, which focus on international actors and peacekeeping. Nor is it well understood in the local turn in peacebuilding literature, which ascribes a greater presence to the international than existed in the selected communities in Kenya and is not necessarily gender-sensitive. Crucially, women’s agency in communities is at once empowered and constrained by this gendered responsibility for peace.

Conclusions

This article has examined the activities and understandings of peacebuilding by women in a number of divided and violence-affected communities in Kenya. Analyses of and solutions for conflict are ‘fundamentally limited by our failure to understand how it is experienced by those who live through it.’⁶⁵ By foregrounding women’s voices, this study has produced in-depth insights into their agency, perceptions, and contributions to peacebuilding. It documented the range of activities that women undertook. Contrary to how post-conflict peacebuilding is often imagined in policy and scholarship, electoral violence in Kenya has been cyclical and external funding for peacebuilding initiatives was limited at the time of research. As a result, most

activities were unfunded or informal and sometimes, though not exclusively, it was women's roles as wives or mothers that enabled them to be effective peacebuilders in their communities. However, by drawing on the framings of women themselves, the study shows that although their constructions might mirror dominant gender frames, women exerted considerable agency. They are peacebuilders not because of essential qualities, but partly because of their positioning in a patriarchal gender order, by which their agency as peacebuilders is shaped but which it also transcends. So while participants might employ particular gender roles and understandings, these roles allow them to make transformative changes.

At the same time, the notion of 'peacebuilder' (which emerged from women's narratives) itself needs to be considered – we might ask if these women are not literally survivors, who are coping as best as they can in an environment of cyclical violence and a lack of resources, with a gendered expectation that they must be able to mediate. What I have called the gendered responsibility for peace partly appears to involve the responsabilisation of women in lieu of other support and structural changes. While the responsibility for peace is then an effect of the constraints of women's agency, this article has also highlighted the ways in which it is empowering and transformative. Women's peace work increased their ability to make strategic life choices, participate in public and political life and contributed to transforming gender relations. As such, a gendered responsibility for peace does not have to lead to gendered peace, where the needs of women are less adequately addressed than those of men.⁶⁶

Historical and contemporary socio-economic and ethnic-political tensions mean that Kenya continues to be deeply divided. Peacebuilding activities such as the ones discussed here are absolutely essential in the communities where they occur, and it is important to understand the opportunities and challenges they bring from the perspective of those involved in them. Despite the scholarly interest in women and peace, the experiences and realities of local peacebuilders, especially in contexts of ongoing or cyclical violence, are not well captured. This article has sought to contribute to our knowledge of the gendered nature of peacebuilding and of the ways in which women exercise peacebuilding agency. If we are serious about understanding women after conflict as active and autonomous agents, rather than as passive victims of violence, it is vital to put their accounts and constructions first.

Notes

- ¹ The research focus does of course not imply that the PEV did not affect men, boys and gender minorities. Neither does it seek to suggest that women in conflict settings are always victims, or that their victimhood ought to be opposed, in a binary fashion, to a conception of men as perpetrators (or indeed, to women as perpetrators).
- ² Fischer, "Electoral Conflict and Violence".
- ³ Robins, "Live as Other Kenyans".
- ⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Sit and Wait".
- ⁵ De Smedt, "No Raila, No Peace".
- ⁶ Amnesty International, "Crying for Justice".
- ⁷ Björkdahl and Selimovic, "Gendering agency," 166.
- ⁸ Olsson and Gizelis, "Advancing Gender Research"; but see Porter, *Peacebuilding: Women in international perspective* on women peacebuilders at grassroots levels.
- ⁹ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*; also see Tessler et al. "Further tests," for an overview of the women and peace hypothesis. Ruddick argued that mothering and its distinctive ways of thinking and social practices provided an alternative to male global politics, but importantly held that mothering did not have to be female.
- ¹⁰ Buckley-Zistel and Zolkos "Introduction"; Charlesworth, "Are Women Peaceful?". Research on women's agency and violence moreover problematises the gendered associations of women with victimhood or peace and demonstrates that dominant narratives such as 'the mother' 'the monster' and 'the whore' curtail the agency of female perpetrators (Sjoberg and Gentry, *Mothers, monsters, whores*).
- ¹¹ Tessler et al. "Further tests"; Bjarnegård & Melander, "Disentangling Gender".
- ¹² Charlesworth, "Are Women Peaceful," 348.
- ¹³ Gizelis, "Gender Empowerment"; Melander, "Gender Equality"; Bjarnegård & Melander, "Disentangling Gender".
- ¹⁴ Bjarnegård et al., "Gender, peace, armed conflict," 106.
- ¹⁵ Gizelis, "Gender Empowerment".
- ¹⁶ Mac Ginty and Richmond, "Local turn in peacebuilding"; Mac Ginty, "Everyday Peace".
- ¹⁷ Mac Ginty and Richmond, "Local turn in peacebuilding," 770.
- ¹⁸ Kappler, "Dynamic local," 876.
- ¹⁹ Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding*
- ²⁰ Millar, van der Lijn and Verkoren, "Peacebuilding plans".
- ²¹ Richmond, "Pedagogy of Peacebuilding".
- ²² Paffenholz, "Unpacking the local turn".
- ²³ Mac Ginty and Richmond, "Local turn in peacebuilding".
- ²⁴ Kappler, "Dynamic local".
- ²⁵ Björkdahl and Selimovic, "Gendering agency," 167.
- ²⁶ Millar, "Key Strengths", 11.
- ²⁷ Blaikie, *Designing Social Research*.
- ²⁸ Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.
- ²⁹ Mac Ginty, "Everyday Peace", 549.
- ³⁰ Interview 13, 25 January 2017, Cheptais.
- ³¹ Interview 21, 4 February 2017, Kibera.
- ³² Interview 4, 23 January 2017, Eldoret.
- ³³ Robins, "Live as Other Kenyans".
- ³⁴ Interview 15, 26 January 2017, Kapenguria
- ³⁵ Interview 10, 24 January 2017, Eldoret.
- ³⁶ Brewer, *Peace Processes*.
- ³⁷ Interview 16, 29 January 2017, Kisumu.
- ³⁸ Cf. Paffenholz, "Unpacking the local turn".
- ³⁹ Interview 5, 23 January 2017, Eldoret.
- ⁴⁰ Interview 12, 25 January 2017, Cheptais.
- ⁴¹ Interview 2, 21 January 2017, Kuresoi.
- ⁴² Interview 11, 25 January 2017, Cheptais.
- ⁴³ Buckley-Zistel and Zolkos "Introduction".
- ⁴⁴ Cornwall and Rivas, "From gender equality".
- ⁴⁵ Whether empowerment is a discourse that was ultimately brought about by engagement with global actors is not a question that my data allows me to answer.
- ⁴⁶ Focus group 2, 28 January 2017, Kisumu.

- ⁴⁷ Interview 21, 3 February 2017, Kibera.
- ⁴⁸ Focus group 3, 28 January 2017, Kisumu.
- ⁴⁹ Interview 10, 24 January 2017, Eldoret.
- ⁵⁰ Focus group 3, 28 January 2017, Kisumu.
- ⁵¹ Tessler et al. "Further tests".
- ⁵² Brewer, *Peace Processes*, 78.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Otto 2006, cited in Charlesworth, "Are Women Peaceful?"
- ⁵⁵ Interview 11, 25 January 2017, Cheptais.
- ⁵⁶ Cf. Brewer, *Peace Processes*.
- ⁵⁷ Kappler, "Dynamic local", 876.
- ⁵⁸ Lonsdale, "Moral ethnicity," defined tribalism as the use of ethnic identity in political competition with other groups.
- ⁵⁹ Interview 9, 24 January 2017, Burnt Forest.
- ⁶⁰ Interview 4, 23 January 2017, Eldoret.
- ⁶¹ Fiske and Shakel, "Gender, poverty", 111.
- ⁶² Myrntinen et al., "Re-thinking gender".
- ⁶³ Focus group 2, 28 January 2017, Kisumu.
- ⁶⁴ Pankhurst, "Women, gender".
- ⁶⁵ Millar, "Key Strengths", 1.
- ⁶⁶ Cf. Pankhurst, "Women, gender".

Bibliography

Amnesty International. "Crying for justice. Victims' perspectives on justice for the post-election violence in Kenya." London: Amnesty International, 2014.

Bjarnegård, Elin, and Erik Melander. "Disentangling gender, peace and democratization: the negative effects of militarized masculinity." *Journal of Gender Studies* 20, no. 2 (2011): 139-154. doi: 10.1080/09589236.2011.565194.

Bjarnegård, Elin, Erik Melander, Gabrielle Bardall, Karen Brounéus, Erika Forsberg, Karin Johansson, Angela Muvumba Sellström and Louise Olsson. "Gender, peace and armed conflict." In *SIPRI Yearbook 2015: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, edited by Ian Davis, 101-109. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Björkdahl, Annika, and Johanna M. Selimovic. "Gendering agency in transitional justice." *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 2 (2015): 165-182. doi: 10.1177/0967010614552547.

Blaikie, Norman. *Designing Social Research*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010.

Brewer, John D. *Peace processes: A sociological approach*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010.

Buckley-Zistel, Susanne, and Magdalena Zolkos. "Introduction: Gender in Transitional Justice." In *Gender in Transitional Justice*, edited by Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Ruth Stanley, 1-33. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Charlesworth, Hilary. "Are women peaceful? Reflections on the role of women in peacebuilding." *Feminist Legal Studies* 16, no. 3 (2008): 347-361. doi: 10.1007/s10691-008-9101-6.

Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage, 2006.

Cornwall, Andrea, and Althea-Maria Rivas. "From 'gender equality and 'women's empowerment' to global justice: reclaiming a transformative agenda for gender and development." *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2015): 396-415. doi: 10.1080/01436597.2015.1013341.

De Smedt, Johan. "'No Raila, No Peace!' Big man politics and election violence at the Kibera grassroots." *African Affairs* 108, no. 433 (2009): 581-598. doi: 10.1093/afraf/adp043.

Fischer, Jeff. "Electoral Conflict and Violence: A Strategy for Study and Prevention. IFES White Paper 2002-01." Washington, D.C.: International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2002. <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/untc/unpan019255.pdf>

Fiske, Lucy, and Rita Shackel. "Gender, poverty and violence: Transitional justice responses to converging processes of domination of women in eastern DRC, northern Uganda and Kenya." In *Women's Studies International Forum* 51 (2015). doi: 110-117. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.11.008>.

Gizelis, Theodora-Ismene. "Gender empowerment and United Nations peacebuilding." *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 4 (2009): 505-523. doi: 10.1177/0022343309334576.

Human Rights Watch. "I Just Sit and Wait to Die". Reparations for Survivors of Kenya's 2007-2008 Post-Election Sexual Violence." London: Human Rights Watch, 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/02/15/i-just-sit-and-wait-die/reparations-survivors-kenyas-2007-2008-post-election>

Kabeer, Naila. "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment." *Development and change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 435-464. doi: 10.1111/1467-7660.00125.

Kabeer, Naila. "Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1." *Gender & Development* 13, no. 1 (2005): 13-24. doi: 10.1080/13552070512331332273.

Kappler, Stefanie. "The dynamic local: Delocalisation and (re-) localisation in the search for peacebuilding identity." *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 875-889. doi: 10.1080/01436597.2015.1025740

Lonsdale, John. "Moral ethnicity and political tribalism." In *Inventions and boundaries: historical and anthropological approaches to the study of ethnicity and nationalism*, edited by Preben Kaarsholm and Jan Hultin. Roskilde University: IDS Occasional Papers No. 11.

Mac Ginty, Roger. *International peacebuilding and local resistance: Hybrid forms of peace*. Springer, 2011.

Mac Ginty, Roger. "Everyday Peace: Bottom-Up and Local Agency in Conflict-Affected Societies." *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 6 (2014): 548-564. doi: 10.1177/0967010614550899.

Mac Ginty, Roger, and Oliver Richmond. "The local turn in peace building: A critical agenda for peace." *Third World Quarterly* 34 no. 5 (2013): 763-783. doi: 10.1080/01436597.2013.800750.

Melander, Erik. "Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict." *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2005): 695-714. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2478.2005.00384.x.

Millar, Gearoid. "Introduction: The Key Strengths of Ethnographic Peace Research." In *Ethnographic Peace Research. Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies*, edited by Gearoid Millar. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Millar, Gearoid, Jair Van Der Lijn, and Willemijn Verkoren. "Peacebuilding plans and local reconfigurations: Frictions between imported processes and indigenous practices." *International Peacekeeping* 20, no. 2 (2013): 137-143. doi: doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2013.791556.

Myrntinen, Henri, Jana Naujoks and Judy El-Bushra. "Re-thinking Gender in Peacebuilding." London: International Alert, 2014. <http://www.international-alert.org/publications/rethinking-gender-peacebuilding>.

Olsson, Louise, and Theodora-Ismene Gizelis. "Advancing Gender and Peacekeeping Research." *International Peacekeeping* 21, no. 4 (2014): 520-52. doi: 10.1080/13533312.2014.946742.

Paffenholz, Thania. "Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: a critical assessment towards an agenda for future research." *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 857-874. doi: 10.1080/01436597.2015.1029908.

Pankhurst, Donna T. "Women, gender and peacebuilding." University of Bradford: Centre for Conflict Resolution Working Papers, no. 5 (2000).

Porter, Elisabeth. *Peacebuilding: Women in international perspective*. Routledge, 2007.

Richmond, Oliver P. "A pedagogy of peacebuilding: Infrapolitics, resistance, and liberation." *International Political Sociology* 6, no. 2 (2012): 115-131. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-5687.2012.00154.x.

Robins, Simon. "'To Live as Other Kenyans Do': A Study of the Reparative Demands of Kenyan Victims of Human Rights Violations." International Center for Transitional Justice, 2011. <http://www.aihr-resourcescenter.org/administrator/upload/documents/ICTJ-Kenya-Reparations-Demands-2011-English.pdf>.

Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal thinking: Toward a politics of peace*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

Sjoberg, Laura, and Caron E. Gentry. *Mothers, monsters, whores: women's violence in global politics*. Zed Books, 2007.

Tessler, Mark, Jodi Nachtwey, and Audra Grant. "Further Tests of the women and peace hypothesis: Evidence from cross-national survey research in the Middle East." *International Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (1999): 519-531.