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Hybrid Clubs: A Feminist Approach to Peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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ABSTRACT

Critical approaches to peacebuilding have achieved a local turn wherein alienated indigenous experiences are the cornerstone of emancipatory practices – yet this emancipation of the ‘different’ risks perpetuating the discrimination and normalization of the challenged liberal peace. Using the case study of a feminist campaign to elect more women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this article’s feminist approach to critical peacebuilding utilizes storytelling to develop a conceptual grid that reveals the complexities of the politics of difference, and proposes the concept of the ‘hybrid club’ as a cluster of local and international actors coalescing to develop peacebuilding initiatives.

KEYWORDS

Hybridity; gender; Democratic; Republic of Congo; Space; Embodiment; Experience; Peacebuilding

Introduction

We had been talking for about an hour, sitting on the front porch of her father’s house. Clementine tells me that she lives in Goma but is in Kinshasa this week because the women’s organization that she founded is part of the ‘Rien sans les femmes [Nothing without the Women]’ (RSLF) campaign. They have a whole programme of advocacy activities planned for the next few days in the capital. The campaign, formed by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and national women’s organizations, is seeking to put more women in electoral seats in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Clementine studied law, but she says she is no lawyer; her friends say she is not like a ‘normal’ Congolese woman – and indeed, her role as the leader of a Congolese women’s organization has attracted the attention of both international donors and researchers such as myself. As I am about to leave, I ask if I can take a picture. She pauses to think for a moment, then agrees – but only on the condition that she can change her clothes. I patiently wait on the porch. When she returns, she is adorned with a piece of cloth that reads ‘Nothing without the Women’. I am curious. ‘Why did you want to change clothes?’ I ask. ‘Because out there’, she replies, ‘this is who I am – one of the leaders of the movement. Isn’t this the reason why you interviewed me in the first place?’

Clementine feels the need to represent a certain collective and perform in front of the camera for her international audience.¹ She is conscious of the fact that the international community has assigned her a role and a series of attributes that go hand in hand with

being a local woman of colour in charge of a women's organization in the DRC. This also means that she is part of a group of 'locals' in important positions who are equipped with the necessary skills to strategically make the most of this differentiation. She belongs to what Spivak named a floating zone of elite subalternity (Spivak, in Landy and MacLean 1996). Actors in this zone of elite subalternity naturalize their identity and difference in what constitutes 'a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest' (Spivak [1985] 1996, 214). 'Strategic essentialism' supposes that members of groups, although being highly differentiated internally, engage in the process of homogenizing their public image in order to portray a common identity as a means of achieving certain objectives. In order to illustrate this strategic essentialism, I propose the concept of the 'hybrid club' as a cluster of local and international actors that join forces to develop a series of peacebuilding and development initiatives. This club can be considered as a diagnostic site for studying complex processes of differentiation and identification in post-conflict settings.

I argue that, first, the hybrid club constitutes a space where difference is crafted and performed through the sharing of knowledge and practices with – and *only* with – its members. What makes the club 'hybrid' is not the diversity of the passports of its members but rather the fact that the performance of difference is deployed strategically as belonging to the local – and therefore 'authentic' – sphere, while also being part of the international sphere through promoting and valuing the notions of democracy, human rights, and civic identity. *Strategic* then borders on *pragmatic*, because it presents a definition of a certain political practice. Second, the hybrid club is also a space where actors build individual and collective identities through which they can make political claims. In other words, these identities intersect with the ways in which the club articulates and represents peacebuilding, development, and security. Ultimately, the club restricts access to competing modes of thought about what peacebuilding is, what development should take place, and who should be in charge of implementing it, as these modes of thought are heavily dependent on the collective identity that is developed.

This article focuses on the creation and strengthening of a national women's movement as a hybrid peace performance, recognizing that an initiative by two international NGOs instigated a process of collective identification and positionality. From the beginning of the 2000s critical approaches have been used to great effect to push practitioners to discover local knowledge in conflict-affected societies and interrogate the normative universality assumptions of liberal peacebuilding (Autesserre 2014; Mac Ginty 2010; Richmond 2011; Tadjbakhsh 2011). From the World Bank to the smallest international NGO, practitioners have engaged in a 'post-liberal' or 'hybrid' peace approach in which local and international peacebuilding actors 'coalesce and conflict to different extents on different issues to produce a fusion peace' (Mac Ginty 2010, 397). Nevertheless, hybrid peace works have been censured for reproducing the liberal and binary schemes that they were meant to overcome, failing to properly engage with 'difference' (Bargués-Pedreny and Mathieu, 2018; Heathershaw 2013; Millar, Van Der Lijn, and Verkoren 2013; Rampton and Nadarajah 2017; Randazzo 2016; Sabaratnam 2013; Wolff and Zimmermann 2016). In other words, hybrid peace works seem to have forgotten that identities are multidimensional, and that the dichotomy between the international and the local is often arbitrary, as is the perceived internal coherence of the categories.

In this article, first, I unpack how to engage more generously with ‘difference’ by using a feminist relational approach to critical peacebuilding (McLeod 2015; Read, 2018). A relational approach takes dynamic and ever-changing relationships amongst agents as the appropriate unit of analysis, as opposed to structural accounts that focus on social stratification embedded in social structure (Joseph, 2018). Agents acquire meaning through and are constituted by their transactions, connections, and relations with other actors that are developing a peacebuilding and development initiative. In turn, these transactions and connections are constituted not only by the formal rules and processes deployed in peacebuilding and development initiatives, but also by their informal and mundane practices. Second, I use storytelling in order to grasp not how the international understands alterity but rather how alterity identifies itself with and embraces international interventions, as well as how it differentiates itself from them (Daigle 2016). Some authors distinguish between a story and a narrative, the former denoting the ‘tale’ told by an individual and the latter uncovering the means of enquiry (Roberts 2002, 177). I use both terms almost interchangeably in order to offer an entry point for hybrid peace scholarship to study peacebuilding and the ‘different’ as a gendered, embodied, spatial experience. I argue that this can give us hints on how the politics of difference work. More specifically, I propose two theoretical and analytical points: feminist methodologies can provide more complex understandings beyond the essentialist dichotomy of local vs international; and feminist peacebuilding approaches analyse power, dominance, and resistance from a relational perspective by investigating the collective experiences of those at the margins – namely, at the intersections of gender, race, and class hierarchies and exclusions.

Focusing on data that is not often collected in international relations – data derived from participant observation and biographical interviews – I capture varied meanings of difference as experience in everyday peacebuilding practices and discourses. The article draws mainly on data gathered from my observation of an advocacy campaign conducted in May 2017 in Kinshasa, DRC on the reform of the electoral law in order to incorporate gender concerns. I documented this campaign using detailed field notes, photographs, and informal conversations with participants, activists, and audience members. I also conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with women who took part in the campaign, and I draw on data gathered from over six years of research and several months of fieldwork on gender and peacebuilding processes in the Great Lakes area, and in particular in Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC.

The conceptual grid used allows for the interpretation of relationality in a holistic way. Knowledge is interpreted in its context, and the scholar can reflect upon her own positionality while ‘reading between the lines of everyday practices’ (Wallis and Richmond 2017, 8) and how this positionality influences her interpretation of knowledge (Daigle 2016; Enloe 2010). Consequently, this research has been conducted with an awareness of the positionality and ontological assumptions of my own embodied experience of being a Western feminist researcher from a Belgian university – the ex-colonial power and one of the first donors to the DRC in terms of monetary income. That is to say, in choosing the stories and voices that are not mine but for which I will select words that inevitably interpret them, I am already pointing to what I consider to be difference and commonality. The body of this article is organized as follows. The first section offers a proposal for a feminist relational understanding of difference and presents a conceptual grid of three elements –

embodiment, experience, and space – through which the politics of difference can be grasped, accessed, and understood. The second section explores the different stories about women and peacebuilding developed on and about the DRC. The third section illustrates the preceding set of theoretical arguments through an analysis of the case of the RSLF women's movement. The article then ends with some concluding reflections on the potential of a feminist relational perspective for unpacking the possibilities and limits of the politics of difference in peacebuilding.

Telling stories of experience, embodiment, and spatiality

In this section, I offer a feminist relational approach to studying the politics of difference. I suggest that difference might best be characterized as an assemblage of relations which draws together diverse experiences of space and spatialization, embodiment and becoming, and conduct and social practices. First, I postulate that understanding the process of hybrid peacebuilding from a relational perspective can move the local turn away from a default understanding of difference or alterity as a fixed label. The idea is that the meaning of difference is acquired and evolves through the relationship between local and international actors in peacebuilding and development initiatives. This dynamic process also demonstrates slippage and interaction between the different and the common, as sometimes they are both so enmeshed that treating them as exclusive, fixed entities makes little sense. Second, I use the concepts of embodiment, experience, and spatiality as a frame which helps us to examine individual stories that illustrate how power relations shape the politics of difference and produce subordination, domination, and resistance.

Individual stories are key to a relational perspective to peacebuilding, as they are 'a primary way by which we make sense of the world around us, produce meanings, articulate intentions, and legitimize actions' (Wibben 2010, 2). Stories are therefore sites where power is exercised, and where 'the personal and the collective deviate' (Wibben 2010, 2). Stories make sense of embodied experiences, and are therefore subjective. Stories narrate personal experiences about war, peace, and security from everyday perspectives (Holland and Solomon 2014; Read, 2018; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016). Additionally, using storytelling as a method gives scholars the opportunity to pay greater attention to interpretive praxis (Wallis and Richmond 2017) and to step out of the binary division between personal and political (Enloe 2014; McLeod 2015).

Storytelling is therefore 'a means of illuminating lived and embodied experiences' (Daigle 2016, 30) that constitute and are constituted by the politics of difference in peacebuilding. Although individually performed, stories are always intersubjective and relational, as they are used to make sense of *experience* that goes beyond the individual *embodied* event in a particular *space*. To be sure, studying personal experiences and their (re)production through individual stories can be problematic because it relies on the 'fragility of human memory' (Woodward and Jenkins 2012, 120). In addition, and as Joseph (2018) points out, there is a risk of privileging narrated experience 'over the context within which difference occurs' and treating it 'as though it were unmediated by wider relations, institutions and processes' (Basham 2013, 8). Therefore, the stories herein should be read as part of a set of 'processes of identity production', as testimony on the 'discursive nature of experience and on the politics of its construction' (Scott 1992,

37), and as facilitating the (re)presentation of that which is ‘unstructured, contingent and difficult’ (Daigle 2016, 25).

Embodiment

A number of feminist scholars have challenged taking a disembodied approach towards knowledge production (Butler 1999; Dyvik 2016; Enloe 2014; Gatens 1996; Haraway 1988; McLeod 2015; Moon 1997; Young 1980). In particular, these scholars criticize the body versus mind hierarchical dichotomy which puts the mind over the body as a site of knowledge production, and which also associates mind with rationality and body with passion, then rationality with masculinity and passion with femininity, as this series of associations effectively subordinates the feminine to the masculine (Grosz 1994; Prokhomik 1999). Bodies indeed produce and are productive of race, class, and sexual configurations of power and knowledge and should therefore be ‘directly involved in the political field’ (Foucault 1991, 25). However, although this turn to experience and embodiment is prominent in the literature on war and international relations (Parashar 2013; Sylvester 2013; Wilcox 2015), this is not the case in the literature on peacebuilding (Read, 2018), a field that is still seen from an essentially technical perspective, as though matters of war and peace can be easily separated and put into two different boxes.

Experience

Experience is connected to embodiment, as stories about embodied and emotional experiences enable us to understand how peacebuilding practices are simultaneously creations of, and creative of, identities and differences (McLeod 2015). What is more, ‘experience is not something that happens to the self, but experience becomes the self – it is that through which identity is forged’ (Nordstrom 1997, 185). Although hybridity takes very seriously everyday local experiences and practices (Richmond 2010), the diversity of the personal experiences of the international is not examined (McLeod 2015, 6). It is as though there are no individuals in the international sphere whose everyday practices and logics can shape the meaning of peacebuilding and development initiatives. Therefore, if we are to understand better the power relations shaping knowledge production negotiation between local and international actors, we need to analyse the diversity of personal experiences of both – local and international– in their everyday practices.

Spatiality

Through the concept of spatiality, this article stresses the contingency, precariousness, and instability of identity. This is done by paying special attention to the different places in which actors in post-conflict contexts are constituted by a multiplicity of positions that do not respond to the binary local–international (McLeod 2015). This understanding resonates with the ideas of Henri Lefebvre on space as being socially and meaningfully produced in stories and implicated in embodied social practices at sites where the structures of the national and the international are both reproduced and challenged (Lefebvre 1991, 33). Therefore, while being grounded in materiality, spaces are social constructs produced through and by embodied experiences and practices. Although it is true that the local turn

has caused a shift from state-centric analysis to the study of local dynamics, it has prompted little examination of the ways in which local spaces become meaningful in terms of being produced by identities and memories.

In sum, there is no difference before its performance. Difference and commonness come into existence through the relational process of identity (re)production. But identities are not ‘out there’ – thus, differences are not inherent to one person or group. Instead, these (individual and collective) identities are born out of embodied experience. Once born, these identities are deployed and open up new spaces in which new relations between groups conforming to collective identities are formed. These new relations, in turn, produce new embodied experience. By focusing on embodied experience and post-war spatialities, I try to challenge hegemonic narratives and capture the intricate ways in which difference is regulated in the stories told in and about peacebuilding. In doing so, this article focuses on the ways in which storytelling both talks about other bodies and collectivizes bodily experience, in particular spaces, recognizing that peacebuilding and development projects are relational encounters in which the different is produced, retained, or discarded.

Differentiating gender narratives, resisting peacebuilding initiatives

International narratives about women in the DRC have propagated a bad reputation when it comes to gender equality and justice (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Holmes 2013, 2015). For example, in a speech by the United Nations (UN) Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in conflict at the time, Margot Wallstrom, the eastern part of the DRC was labelled ‘the rape capital of the world’, where sexual violence is perpetrated in a war driven by conflict minerals (Wallstrom 2010). What is more, these narratives have been stabilized by popular culture through documentaries such as *The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo* (2007) and *The Man Who Mends Women* (2015) portraying women in the Congo as victims of sexual violence and other atrocities. Eastern Congolese female bodies are thus stripped of any political agency and associated in this narrative with the experience of sexual violence during conflict. This fits very well with the main narrative of the UN Security Council (UNSC), which understands the gendered body as female, and as being a passive body that needs to be protected from violence (McLeod 2015, 12). For example, the 2006 Security, Stabilization and Development Pact put in motion by the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region understands gender as a transversal issue, but gender disappears completely in the 2013 Framework for Peace, Security and Cooperation for the Democratic Republic of Congo and Region, wherein gender as a power relation is substituted for a meagre mention of ‘women’s empowerment’. What is more, different declarations by heads of state in the region related to the issue – the Goma declaration on the eradication of sexual violence and the eradication of impunity in the Great Lakes region, and the Kampala declaration on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in 2011 – have focused on sexual violence. The Stabilization and Reconstruction Plan in Eastern DRC (2009) concentrates on SGBV, as does the 2010 national action plan for the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325, which urges the UN and its member states to ensure women’s participation and involvement in decision-making in peace and security matters, and to mainstream gender in all areas of peacebuilding. The resolution has been very much criticized for putting an accent on the protection of

women from SGBV in conflict and for equating gender with women (Martin de Almagro 2017). This is important because although these plans and frameworks are national and regional mechanisms, they are supported and funded by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) under the framework of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda.

It is with the idea of countering this narrative in mind that the RSLF campaign was developed, under the hybrid initiative of the international NGOs International Alert and Kvinna till Kvinna and several women's organizations in eastern Congo.² The two international NGOs invited 30 leaders of Congolese civil-society organizations to a workshop in March 2015 to reflect on how to promote the political participation and representation of Congolese women in the country because 'the National Action Plan on UNSCR1325 focuses too much on SGBV'.³ The result of the workshop was the launch of the RSLF campaign, which constitutes one of the rare occasions where female activists from North and South Kivu and female activists from Kishasa joined forces. It had two aims: firstly to advocate for the enactment of the Parity Law that would recognize the importance of women's participation in governmental structures and more broadly in all aspects of public life, and secondly to request the revision of electoral law to require the inclusion of women in all electoral lists. The campaign managed to collect more than 200,000 signatures from individuals around the country, and in May 2015 it submitted its petition and signatures to the President of the National Assembly. The petition asked that Article 13.4 of the electoral law be revised to require that all future electoral lists would respect the principle of parity between men and women. Marches were organized at the same time in Bukavu, Uvira, and Goma in order to gather popular support for the campaign. More than 6000 people joined the march in Bukavu, and these marches were an essential mechanism for setting up the counter-narrative of women as passive victims, since they constitute a visual performance of female bodies actively protesting and occupying public spaces. Although the Parity Law was passed in August 2015, the movement has kept on growing since and now incorporates more than 160 women rights organizations.

During the last week of May 2017, representatives of the movement from Goma and Bukavu flew to Kinshasa to join forces with the capital's representatives in order to carry out a week of advocacy activities and present their detailed report on the successes and shortcomings of the recently passed Parity Law.⁴ Throughout the advocacy activities, rather than focusing on women's fundamental rights or on women as victims through a rights-based approach, the master narrative was that parity in decision-making institutions is good for sustainable development and peace. It is worth highlighting here that this master narrative is framed in opposition to the earlier dominant narrative while still playing with some of the keywords that appeal to donors. The idea is that making political institutions accessible to women is a condition sine qua non for a successful bottom-up approach to peace. The advocates of the initiative aim to create a new space for women to voice their experiences and become political subjects instead of being mere beneficiaries of peacebuilding processes. The organizers explained that peacebuilding projects which include gender are normally directed at protecting women yet fail to challenge the structures of the state that have disempowered them and made them vulnerable to violence in the first place.⁵

This framing marks the first determinant of difference by which the international approach to implementing the Women, Peace, and Security agenda based on women's

rights – which has previously been embraced as the standard – is actively being countered, in this case by a coalition of international and Congolese women’s organizations engaged in resisting the agenda of the UN and the DRC government. The women I interviewed, all of whom belong to activist organizations, indicated that they had become active in political resistance because they saw no other way out.⁶ These women were fed up with the international narrative which seemed to simply have forgotten that women in the DRC had mobilized for peace during the inter-Congolese dialogue in 2001 that put an end to the Second Congo War:

We were a group of African women leaders that were taken to a training in Sweden. The first thing they do is to show us a film on Liberian women as peacemakers and a second one on 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.⁷

The violence experienced by their female bodies did not depoliticize them, but rather provided a collective story for mobilization. The life stories of these activists not only ensure them a subject position but also provide counter-narratives to the dominant international narrative through which alternative forms of peace can be proposed: ‘We have not documented to the world the story of the fight of the Congolese woman. There is a story of the women victims, but not of women peacebuilders. And I can say today that we have fought a lot’.⁸

Telling their story as a sustainable peace narrative provides a way to establish ‘a political identity from which to make claims’ (Stern 2005, 116). Moreover, it also offers a counter-narrative to the international idea that there is not a women’s movement in DRC with a clear leader and joint efforts.⁹ The RSLF movement represents one of the most important hybrid alternatives to the official line of implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 in the DRC and its national action plan. The next section shows how the construction of a hybrid club constitutes a political strategy for selling a story in the peacebuilding market.

Clubbing in the DRC: It is not always the Other who is the Different

Having discussed the particular emphasis on political participation and the seemingly contradictory stories on embodied experiences of victimhood, I now move on to discuss the ways in which the local women elites, who are part of the women’s organizations, conceptualize difference through particular sensory regimes. An intricate web of individual and collective identities results in power relations being determined not only by whether or not an actor is associated with and/or associates herself with the ‘local’ or the ‘international’, but also by interpersonal relations between actors at the local and international levels. These power relations, in turn, regulate who can and cannot participate in a certain hybrid peace initiative.

From the perspective of several women’s groups in the DRC, it is not only that some of the local actors are more connected to international actors for different reasons such as funding, language, and geographical situation, but also that clusters of local actors and organizations are more connected to particular international actors and institutions, forming what I call ‘hybrid clubs’.¹⁰ Several interviewees attributed the difficulties of having a strong and united women’s movement to club divisions: ‘if you work with one

women's organization, you need to work with members of that organization's club. And you have to be very conscious of which organizations are part of this club and which are not'.¹¹

Performing embodied sameness and difference

The RSLF movement is one of these hybrid clubs. Resistance to the implementation of a certain approach to the Women, Peace, and Security agenda is one element of determining difference, effectively positioning itself against other 'hybrid' projects on gender and peacebuilding. Additionally, it is also a way of reinforcing group identity. Several other sensorial strategies are implemented by the movement to reinforce group identification. One of the most telling practices of embodied identification and differentiation is dress. On 24 May 2017, four women belonging to the RSLF were in charge of presenting a report for the movement on the challenges of the Parity Law to the international donors, at the residence of the Swedish ambassador. Sweden had funded the '*Tushikiri Wote* [Let's Participate!]' project through which the movement was funded, and all the women – the representatives of the international NGOs included – arrived at the residence of the Swedish ambassador wearing dresses made of cloth that read 'RSLF'. If these dresses provide a trait of unity amongst members of the hybrid movement, it is the introductory remarks of one of the international NGO representatives about how the 'equal participation of women and men in politics is vital for sustainable peace' that make the RSLF different from the rest of the hybrid initiatives on gender.

However, this identification is not fixed, but variable, and some differences are created depending on the spaces in which they are performed. For example, whereas the 'locals' and 'internationals' dressed uniformly in an effort to show the international community present at the Swedish ambassador's residence that a hybrid initiative telling a story of women as peacebuilders is worth funding, the internationals and locals dressed differently for the movement's presentation to members of parliament the following day. Indeed, the visual element that was used to identify 'sameness' one day was used to identify 'difference' the next; this time it was only the local women – and the newly appointed Minister of Gender – who wore the RSLF clothes and spoke about sustainable peace. As requested by the Congolese members of the campaign, the members of the international NGOs sat at the back of the room, did not speak at any time during the event, and wore different clothes in an attempt to prove to parliamentarians that this was not a hybrid initiative but a truly Congolese one. The way in which listening to and seeing difference is called into being lies in everyday, seemingly trivial details that make bodies intelligible with reference to clubs. But however trivial these may seem, and contrary to what we might think, these are performed in a very much conscious attempt – remember Clementine's insistence on wearing the RSLF clothes for the picture – to shape the politics of difference.

When sensorial strategies are no longer needed to perform club membership, alterity is felt in another way. For example, the distribution of space and distance amongst individuals who are part of the same movement is striking; before the event at the residence of the Swedish ambassador started, clusters of staff from international NGOs asked one another how their children were doing and when they were going on holiday, while the Congolese women also gathered in groups of three or four to chat informally. The ordering of 'different' bodies in the same space was also very telling during an informal preparatory meeting conducted the previous day at the headquarters of one of the

international NGOs. The oval table distributed the bodies in two opposite spaces: two representatives of the international NGOs were seated on the left side of the oval table, while on the right side – the one farthest away from the door – six female Congolese members of the RSLF prepared for the week of activities ahead. This distribution of the physical space is vital because it also demarcates the distribution of tasks in the movement: the direction, coordination, and even cheerleading comes from the international side – but the final decisions are taken on the local side of the table. Nevertheless, there are also differences amongst the locals; the two women from eastern Congo sat together, their bodies touching one another, even though one had come from Goma and the other from Bukavu. They were the ones who were away from home and whose bodies had directly experienced conflict. They came to the meeting dressed in traditional clothing, portraying a clear visual difference from the Kinshasa-based activists, who attended wearing Western attire.

The making of ‘difference’ happens through the complex performances of individual and collective bodies. Wearing a particular item of clothing, occupying a certain space, speaking or staying silent – these are all parts of the production of commonness and difference that goes beyond geographical spaces and skin colour, and simultaneously makes individuals part of the same club. As the women in the movement actively and consciously rescript their identity, they present certain markers – wearing or not wearing traditional dresses, for example – as primordial. Yet, at the same time, ‘they also assign certain social/political meaning to them within the particular historical context’ in which they are situated (Stern 2005, 103). Differentiation therefore constitutes a strategic approach to reaching political aims, namely getting funding from the international community or convincing members of parliament of the need to reform the electoral law.

The international is (also) a personal experience

Differentiated narratives and embodied experiences regulate the politics of difference in hybrid clubs. These clubs therefore seem to be very much coordinated and orchestrated by local elites who work with a diversity of donors and international partners on the implementation of hybrid peacebuilding initiatives. What is striking then is that, without exception, all the donors that I interviewed pointed to the fact that the women’s organizations in the DRC are scattered, and that previous attempts to work with them have not delivered good results. In this section I argue that past attempts to work with a coherent movement have failed precisely because practising a ‘politics of difference’ has served to differentiate women’s organizations from others and make them stand out in the overcrowded peacebuilding market. These women’s organizations are therefore very much wary of sharing their space, narratives, and international partners with the others. The selling point and main narrative of ‘differentiation’ of the RSLF plays precisely on leaving the differences among members aside in order to create a ‘coherent, non-partisan and inter-generational movement’ that can transform the story of the everyday realities of women in eastern Congo as victims.¹² As the peacebuilding market in the DRC has started to experience donor fatigue due to the lack of results from engaging with women’s organizations, presenting a completely different narrative based on unification seems particularly canny.

The personal stories narrated by my interviewees reveal a clash between clubs – that is, between those organizations supported by UN Women, mainly from Kinshasa, and those

who are supported by the international partners of the RSLF. When conducting interviews, it was very clear that women from different clubs experience the international in very diverse ways. One interviewee expressed her confusion about the division: ‘We don’t understand why UN Women has not joined the efforts. Maybe they had other priorities’.¹³ Another expressed her perception of how some organizations give far less local ownership than they claim:

And here Alert has played the game of local ownership in order to make people feel responsible for their actions and their future, while at the same time doing a close follow-up. However, with other partners you feel that it is very different, they are simply too present and, in a way, that it is almost them who do all the process. I can give you the example of [name of organization], that is a national dialogue framework with representatives in different parts of the country. Every time [this organization] is mentioned, you realize that they follow a project-by-project strategy. For instance, UN Women has just funded one of their projects and all they do is project, project, project, but it is not the women themselves who take the future into their own hands.¹⁴

It appears from these two quotes that the clubs are led by international partners who have different approaches to what local ownership constitutes and the kind of activities that should be carried out. I therefore decided to talk to the representative of the national dialogue framework in order to explore these differences in more detail. On paper, this national framework funded by UN Women is also part of the RSLF movement. However, in reality, they have never attended any RSLF activities. The representative was upset that women from the east had come to Kinshasa in what she considered an attempt to steal her funding and partners: ‘why do they have to fly women from the other side of the country to do advocacy? They can do advocacy directed towards local politicians there and we will do our part here’.¹⁵

For their part, the international donors had never heard of the RSLF, with the exception of those who had attended the presentation at the Swedish ambassador’s residence. Instead, they were very much aware of Café Genre – UN Women’s new project. Every two months, a conference is organized at which ambassadors share best practices with the international community and the Ministry of Gender, as well as with civil-society organizations. The aim is to raise awareness and build a network of women in Kinshasa which then distributes information to provincial branches on how the knowledge shared during Café Genre will be ‘communicated to those women who cannot read and write’.¹⁶ The fact that the most recent Café Genre conference at the time had been held on the topic of SGBV was very telling, as it served to reinforce the narrative of women as victims. Several of my interviewees from the international community and local women’s organizations indicated that this is an event through which UN Women seeks visibility, but that there is no real work behind it. When I asked a local staff member of UN Women whether or not her organization was aware of the RSLF movement and had any synergy with it, she simply shook her head. This is all the more surprising given that, minutes before, she had spoken about her previous personal experiences as the lead researcher for eastern Congo for a project on women’s participation in the Great Lakes region. She had been hired specifically for her knowledge on the subject.

The international women involved in the RLSF campaign made clear how they are ‘different’ from the abstract idea of the international and its institutions operating in

the DRC, as they are ‘tired and frustrated’ from seeing ‘incompetent people’ or ‘people that simply do not care’ overseeing the cause of gender in international and national institutions.¹⁷ One of the interviewees deplored the fact that the RSLF has contacted UN Women on several occasions yet received no response.¹⁸ They do not like the fact that ‘international organizations fund once, twice, and three times the same national federation of women’s organizations, but they have no idea of what they are funding’.¹⁹ The personal experiences of this failure to engage with difference might therefore be due to the politics of hybrid clubs, where funders within the club stick to working with their members, even though inter-club collaboration has been sought. In this case, collaboration between UN Women and the RSLF has not so far been achieved. Certainly, the differentiation strategies between these clubs lie in their disparate understandings of local women’s experiences and their opposing narratives – women as victims on the one hand and women as policymakers and political figures on the other – which seem to be irreconcilable.

Using the conceptual toolbox of experience, body, and space to analyse the politics of difference reveals firstly that ‘difference’ is not to be understood as being between the local and the international but rather between ‘hybrid clubs’ which portray a certain narrative on gender and peacebuilding, and secondly that these clubs are composed of individuals with complex identities who have chosen to perform sameness or difference according to their particular goals and spatiotemporal circumstances. Looking at ‘difference’ from a relational perspective enables us to see that it is not always the international actors that seek compliance and the local actors that resist, ignore, or adapt to peace interventions, and/or offer alternative forms of peacemaking.

Concluding remarks: Implications for the (hybrid) politics of difference

My point of departure was that the concept of ‘hybrid clubs’ can help us to emphasize the non-essential character of difference and study how actors can simultaneously belong to different clubs without being essentially attached to them, while also strategically performing a collective identity. Difference is performative and relational; it is created through encounters and actions in peacebuilding practice (such as the table in the middle of the meeting) and therefore does not exist in a vacuum, independent from the actions of the diversity of agents which take part in peacebuilding and development initiatives. As Laura McLeod claims, ‘realizing the diversity of local and international allows a deeper consideration of what knowledge counts and why it matters, and the ways in which certain knowledge is privileged’ (McLeod 2015, 14–15). I demonstrate this affirmation by showing not only the diversity of local(s) and international(s), but also how one can be both at the same time in different spaces. In other words, identities are neither essential nor static phenomena. The case of the RSLF shows that identities shift and slide, and that even if a marker of identity is the same (local Congolese women), its meaning differs depending on the context of the encounter between individuals belonging to what previous hybrid approaches have qualified as the sphere of either the ‘local’ or the ‘international’.

I have argued that the value of using a feminist approach to understanding the politics of difference is twofold. First, feminist methodologies based on storytelling can provide more complex understandings of the essentialist dichotomy of local vs international in order to make visible blind spots such as the ‘hybrid clubs’ identified in this article. Listening to the stories of the embodied experiences of the local elite shows how they walk a

fine line of identity–difference that is subtle and shifting, depending on the configuration of power relations in a particular geographical and temporal space. This analysis has brought forth female activists in the DRC as resourceful, agential subjects who know how to play the politics of difference which hybrid peace brings about. Second, feminist approaches analyse power, dominance, and resistance from a relational perspective, thus demonstrating how the local(s) and the international(s) are multiple, and how the dynamics of power and privilege have important implications for who is considered different and in what context. Ultimately, paying attention to individual and collective experiences of hybrid peacebuilding reveals the organizing politics of difference that arrange not only who is incorporated into peacebuilding interventions, but also how this incorporation is negotiated, resisted, or validated through everyday micro-politics.

This micro approach may be considered by some to be banal in terms of its relevance to better understanding the politics of difference in hybrid peace. In response to this view, I claim that there are two points to be made. First, I argue that attending to micropolitics and its manifestations through a relational approach is a crucial undertaking if we are to better understand how identity–difference is created during peacebuilding interventions without essentializing one or the other. The ordinary instances of differentiation depicted in this article were employed by individuals and groups to gain better access to resources, improve work performance, and/or denounce having been left behind. At the same time, they all constitute embodied experiences that transform identities and differences in a peacebuilding and development initiative – and in doing so, these experiences defy problematic assumptions on difference. Second, a micro approach enables us to use a precise kind of radical reconsideration of the costs of war and peace – which are ‘everywhere’, from civilian employment to marital bedrooms to high schools – by directing ‘serious attention’ at individual’s lives (Enloe 2010). Future research could use a feminist relational approach to hybridity in order to examine in more detail the politics of difference within particular cases or across particular issues. This may help to unpack the nuances that determine which actors are considered the good kind of ‘different’ and are allowed to take part in hybrid peace initiatives while other ‘different’ actors and initiatives are pushed to the margins, as well as helping us to understand how different narratives emerge on how to implement those initiatives which are deemed worthy of implementation.

Notes

1. And in this case it is I, the researcher, who is part of this international audience collective before which she, the activist, felt obliged to perform a certain identity.
2. Fieldwork notes, Kinshasa, 24 May 2017.
3. Interview with a staff member of an international NGO, Kinshasa, 26 May 2017.
4. At the time of writing (September 2017), the legal status of the petition to modify the electoral law and the procedures to follow are unclear.
5. Fieldwork notes, Kinshasa, 25 May 2017.
6. Interview with the leader of a women’s organization, 24 May 2017; interview with the leader of a women’s organization, 25 May 2017; interview with the leader of a women’s organization, 26 May 2017.
7. Intervention by a female lawyer and member of the RSLF movement at a presentation of the RSLF movement, Swedish Embassy, 24 May 2017. Kinhasa, direct quotation.
8. Interview with the leader of a national women’s organization, Kinshasa, 24 May 2017.

9. Intervention by a high-ranking MONUSCO staff member at a presentation of the RSLF movement, Swedish Embassy, 24 May 2017. Kinhasa, rephrase of her intervention.
10. The word ‘club’ was used by several of the interviewees to explain the intricacies and divisions of the women’s movement in the country.
11. Interview with a member of staff of an international NGO, Kinshasa, 25 May 2017.
12. Fieldwork notes, Kinshasa, 24 May 2017.
13. Interview with the leader of a national women’s association based in Kinshasa, 24 May 2017.
14. Interview with the leader of a women’s organization from Sud-Kivu, Kinshasa, 27 May 2017.
15. Interview with the president of the main women’s organization of national dialogue framework, Kinshasa, 23 May 2017.
16. Interview with a UN Women staff member, Kinshasa, 24 May 2017.
17. This also points to another issue on the gendered dynamics of power in hybrid peace wherein ‘soft’ issues such as women’s issues and the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda are resisted or ignored by international and national organizations due to being considered ‘unimportant’ matters in post-conflict contexts (for a developed argument on this issue, see Ryan and Basini 2016).
18. Interview with a staff member of an international NGO, Kinshasa, 25 May 2017.
19. Informal conversation with two members of staff from international NGOs, Kinshasa, 22 May 2017.

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