

Exploring women-led peace efforts among local communities: a case study of Goma,
Eastern Congo

Presented by

Peace Mukazi Ndekezi

School of Conflict Studies, Faculty of Human Sciences

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ABSTRACT

Capturing the experiences and roles of women in conflict zones remains a significant challenge in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This is partly because women-led peace initiatives are poorly understood, a situation that can be attributed to several factors. First, research on the intersection of gender, conflict, and peace is limited, particularly regarding how gender equality impacts peacebuilding efforts. Second, the complex and dynamic nature of women's peacebuilding experiences in different social contexts is rarely documented. This is partly because gendered responsibilities often shape peacebuilding agency, with women's actions typically aligning with societal norms. Third, the informal roles that women undertake in peacebuilding are frequently overlooked. These roles are often performed by ordinary, often uneducated women who engage in everyday peace processes but remain unrecognized due to their lower social status.

To address these gaps, this dissertation examines women-led peace efforts within local communities in Eastern Congo. Specifically, it analyses how women contribute to peacebuilding and how their efforts are perceived by those around them. The study employs a qualitative case study approach, drawing on interviews with 14 women peacebuilders and 3 men. These interviews explore the participants' experiences, roles, and challenges in peacebuilding. The dissertation adopts a theoretical framework situated at the intersection of African feminism, Ubuntu, and the Ethics of Care. This framework allows for a nuanced understanding of the formality and informality of women's roles in peacebuilding at the community level, how they engage with and navigate socio-cultural issues that act as both a community bond and a barrier to achieving particular peace goals.

This includes the power relations that underpin the patriarchal systems, which are prevalent in many African societies.

Despite the significant challenges associated with implementing Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) policies, the findings suggest that these policies benefit certain women peacebuilders in particular. They not only inform their work but also serve as a vital reference for emphasizing the role of women as active agents in peacebuilding. Furthermore, some peacebuilders have translated these policies into local languages to improve community understanding. However, a significant gap remains; not all women peacebuilders are aware of these policies, and there is often resistance to foreign initiatives, particularly when they do not align with local realities.

The findings of this dissertation highlight the challenges that exist in Eastern Congo, such as deep-seated mistrust between and among communities. Although people may share physical spaces, they are often divided by tribal and political affiliations often create barriers to genuine community interaction. Despite pervasive social norms and the effects of patriarchy, the findings also show that Congolese women are remarkably resilient in their peacebuilding efforts. They are actively combating sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), advocating for women's rights, and contributing to community-based peace initiatives. These efforts are deeply shaped by the socio-cultural conditions in which they live, highlighting the interplay between structural constraints and individual agency. The study also reveals that women affected by SGBV often find it easier to open up to other women, particularly within women-led groups. This level of trust highlights the pivotal role women play in supporting victims of abuse.

Furthermore, the findings show that, despite traditional gender roles being deeply entrenched in the communities where the research took place, these women are challenging societal norms and demonstrating their critical role in promoting peace and social cohesion in conflict-affected communities. This challenges the conventional notion that women play a passive role in peacebuilding processes in conflict zones. The findings also suggest that women are increasingly optimistic about challenging regressive customs and practices through dialogue and informal discussions with community leaders. Women peacebuilders are gradually building trust within local communities, thereby increasing the effectiveness of their awareness-raising efforts. This demonstrates how women navigate through cultural norms to exercise their peacebuilding agency.

Overall, this dissertation contributes to both the academic and policy discourse on gender, peace and conflict by reframing women as active agents in peacebuilding and offering insights to strengthen the agency of individual women peacebuilders and that of women-led peacebuilding organizations in achieving long-term peace goals. The dissertation also contributes to the broader discussions on the need to understand the everyday peace efforts of ordinary citizens in achieving peace goals, rather than focusing solely on macro-level peace deals that take place at the state level, which often do not consider micro-level contexts of peace.

Keywords: Eastern Congo, women agency, women-led peace efforts, women peacebuilders, and peacebuilding.

RÉSUMÉ

Capturer les expériences et les rôles des femmes dans les zones de conflit demeure un défi majeur en République démocratique du Congo (RDC). Cela s'explique par le fait que les initiatives de paix dirigées par des femmes sont encore mal comprises, une incompréhension qui peut être attribuée à plusieurs facteurs. Premièrement, les recherches sur l'intersection entre le genre, le conflit et de la paix sont limitées, en particulier en ce qui concerne l'impact de l'égalité entre les genres sur les efforts de consolidation de la paix. Deuxièmement, la nature complexe et dynamique des expériences de consolidation de la paix menées par les femmes à travers divers contextes sociaux est rarement documentée. Cette lacune est due en partie au fait que les responsabilités basées sur le genre façonnent souvent l'engagement des femmes dans la consolidation de la paix, leurs actions s'alignant généralement sur les normes sociales établies. Troisièmement, les rôles informels assumés par les femmes dans le cadre de la consolidation de la paix sont souvent négligés. Ces rôles sont souvent remplis par des femmes ordinaires, souvent peu ou pas éduquées, qui participent aux processus de paix quotidiens mais restent invisibles en raison de leur faible statut social.

Pour combler ces lacunes, cette thèse examine les efforts de paix menées par des femmes au sein des communautés locales dans l'Est de la RDC. Elle analyse plus précisément la manière dont les femmes contribuent à la consolidation de la paix et la façon dont ces efforts sont perçus par leur entourage. L'étude adopte une approche qualitative basée sur une étude de cas et s'appuie sur des entretiens réalisés avec 14 femmes artisanes de la paix et 3 hommes. Ces entretiens explorent les expériences, les

rôles et les défis rencontrés par les participantes dans le cadre de leurs actions de consolidation de la paix. La dissertation adopte un cadre théorique situé à l'intersection du féminisme africain, de l'Ubuntu et de l'éthique du care. Ce cadre permet de comprendre de manière nuancée la formalité et l'informalité des rôles des femmes dans la consolidation de la paix au niveau communautaire, de la manière dont elles s'engagent et naviguent à travers les enjeux socioculturels qui agissent à la fois comme un lien communautaire et un obstacle à la réalisation de certains objectifs de paix, y compris les relations de pouvoir qui soutiennent les systèmes patriarcaux souvent caractéristiques de nombreuses sociétés africaines.

Malgré les défis importants liés à la mise en œuvre des politiques Femmes, Paix et Sécurité (FPS), les résultats suggèrent que ces politiques sont particulièrement bénéfiques pour certaines femmes artisanes de la paix. Ces politiques influencent non seulement leur travail, mais servent également de référence essentielle pour souligner le rôle des femmes en tant qu'agentes actives de la consolidation de la paix. Certaines de ces femmes ont même pris l'initiative de traduire ces politiques dans les langues locales afin d'améliorer leur compréhension au sein des communautés. Cependant, un écart important demeure : toutes les femmes artisanes de la paix ne sont pas informées de ces politiques, et il existe souvent une résistance aux initiatives étrangères, en particulier lorsqu'elles ne tiennent pas compte des réalités locales.

Les résultats de cette thèse mettent en lumière les défis existants dans l'Est de la RDC, notamment la méfiance profondément enracinée entre et au sein des communautés. Bien que les populations partagent des espaces physiques, elles sont souvent divisées par

des affiliations tribales et politiques qui entravent une interaction communautaire authentique. Les résultats montrent également que, malgré les normes sociales contraignantes et les effets du patriarcat, les femmes congolaises font preuve d'une résilience remarquable dans leurs efforts de consolidation de la paix. Elles luttent activement contre les violences sexuelles et basées sur le genre (VSBG), défendent les droits des femmes et contribuent à des initiatives de paix communautaires. Ces efforts sont profondément façonnés par les conditions socioculturelles dans lesquelles elles évoluent, mettant en évidence l'interaction entre les contraintes structurelles et l'autonomie individuelle. L'étude révèle aussi que les femmes victimes de VSBG trouvent souvent plus de réconfort et de confiance à parler à d'autres femmes, en particulier au sein de groupes dirigés par des femmes. Ce niveau de confiance souligne le rôle crucial que jouent ces femmes dans le soutien aux victimes de violences.

En outre, les résultats montrent que, malgré l'enracinement des rôles traditionnels de genre dans les communautés étudiées, ces femmes défient les normes sociales et jouent un rôle essentiel dans la promotion de la paix et de la cohésion sociale dans les zones de conflit, ce qui remet en question l'idée conventionnelle selon laquelle les femmes y joueraient un rôle passif. De plus, les résultats suggèrent que les femmes sont de plus en plus optimistes quant à leur capacité à remettre en question les coutumes et pratiques régressives par le dialogue et à des discussions informelles avec les leaders communautaires. Les femmes artisanes de la paix gagnent progressivement la confiance au sein des communautés locales, ce qui renforce l'efficacité de leurs actions de sensibilisation. Cela démontre la manière dont les femmes naviguent à travers les normes culturelles pour exercer leur agence en matière de consolidation de la paix.

Dans l'ensemble, cette thèse contribue aux débats académiques et politiques sur le genre, la paix et le conflit en reconsidérant les femmes comme des agentes actives dans la consolidation de la paix. Elle propose également des perspectives susceptibles de renforcer l'autonomie ou l'agence individuelle des femmes artisanes de la paix ainsi que celle des organisations de consolidation de la paix dirigées par des femmes pour atteindre des objectifs de paix durables. Elle s'inscrit également dans les discussions plus larges sur la nécessité de prendre en compte les efforts de paix quotidiens des citoyens et citoyennes ordinaires dans la réalisation des objectifs de paix, au-delà des accords de paix au niveau macro, qui tiennent rarement compte des contextes micro de la paix.

Mots-clés : Est de la RDC, agence des femmes, initiatives de paix menées par des femmes, actrices de paix, consolidation de la paix.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my late grandparents, whose lives and values continue to inspire me.

To my late grandfather, Nzaramba, who believed that education is the greatest treasure one can possess.

To my late grandmother, Edisa, a remarkable force of nature whose strength and spirit remain unforgettable.

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List of Acronyms

ACNDC: Action pour la Conservation de la Nature et Developement Communautaire
 ADF: Allied Democratic Forces
 AFDL: Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo
 AU: African Union
 AVEC: Association Villageoises d'Épargne et de Crédit
 CAFED: Collective des Femmes et Associations pour le Developement
 CBA: Community Based Approach
 CNDP: Congrès National pour la Defence du Peuple
 CODECO: Coopérative pour le Développement du Congo
 CSO: Civil Society Organization
 DDR: Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
 DRC: Democratic Republic of Congo
 EAC: East African Community
 EU: European Union
 FARDC: Forces Armées de la Republique Démocratique du Congo
 FDLR: Forces Démocratiques pour la Liberation du Rwanda
 GBV: Gender Based Violence
 ICC: International Criminal Court
 IDP: Internally Displaced Persons
 M23: Movement du 23 Mars
 MONUC: Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies au Congo
 MONUSCO: Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo
 NAP: National Action Plan
 NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
 OAU: Organization of African Unity
 PEV: Post-Election Violence
 RCD: Rally for Congolese Democracy
 RDF: Rwanda Defense Force
 SADC: Southern African Development Community
 SGBV: Sexual and Gender-based Violence
 SOFEPADI: Solidarité Féminine pour la Paix et le Développement Intégral
 UN: United Nations
 UNSC: United Nations Security Council
 WPS: Women, Peace, and Security

INTRODUCTION

Following several peace agreements and negotiations that sought to end hostilities in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), many hoped to see a reconstructed Congolese society. However, inter-community conflicts persisted despite the 1999 Lusaka ceasefire agreement (Autesserre, 2011) and many other peace agreements. With persistent conflicts in the DRC since the inception of these accords, it is clear that peacebuilding and peacekeeping missions have largely failed to create a conducive environment for positive or negative peace. Instead, continued conflicts have increased poverty levels, hunger, insecurity, and trauma in several parts of the DRC.

Although both men and women bear the burden of violence and war in the region, the consequences of these conflicts have been disproportionate. That is, while boys and men remain the primary casualties of frontline/battlefield death, women and girls bear the burdens of sexual violence and rape (Sadie, 2015; Pankhurst, 2008; Goldstein, 2001). According to Pankhurst (2008), women face multiple challenges in the post-war period. These include rebuilding their lives, becoming the primary providers for their families, seeking justice for the wrongs done to them, and accessing peacebuilding and restorative initiatives.

Accordingly, women have developed strategies – stemming from resilience – to find solutions to problems in their communities, such as feeding and taking care of the family (Mueller-Hirth, 2019; Sadie, 2010; Ball, 2008; Manchanda, 2005). In other instances, women have stepped into some of the roles traditionally attributed to men as

the first providers. In a way, women take an active role in providing for the family despite the limited opportunities they have and gendered roles that limit economic opportunities available to them.

Despite these challenges, the role of women in peacebuilding and conflict prevention has yet to receive particular attention in the dominant literature and policy orientations. This is usually due to problems such as patriarchal systems – sometimes culturally embedded – where women's concerns are considered less critical. Authors such as Rehn and Sirleaf (2001) argue that considering women as mere victims of war (or vulnerable individuals) leads one to believe that women are agency-free victims, which, according to them, reduces their participation in peace efforts. Also, accessing peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives is still an uphill task, as women are often excluded, and when present, they represent a smaller fraction of participants. As such, their impact and influence on decision-making have become minimal. Often, women's rights are not at the forefront of negotiations despite the existence of supporting policies. The challenges outlined above highlight the struggles women must overcome to make their voices heard and their agency operational. This study focuses on the experiences of women in Eastern DRC and their efforts toward community-based peacebuilding.

A. Problem Statement

While women's agency in community-based peacebuilding remains a major challenge everywhere, the situation in Eastern DRC is of particular interest to this project for two reasons. First, the living and working conditions of women leading peace efforts

are widely affected by sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Eastern Congo. A 2011 UN report shows that in just three days, at least 387 people were raped¹ by armed groups, particularly the FDLR, the Mayi Mayi and former FARDC soldiers (OHCHR, 2011). Furthermore, in rural areas, groups of armed boys were reportedly attacking homes and raping women and young girls (Mer & Flicourt, 2015). Such security concerns continually place women at the frontline of violence, perpetuate gender-based discrimination, and, by extension, undermine their agency. This is because women are less likely to speak freely about the violence perpetrated against them. The vast majority of women in Eastern DRC are subject to stigma whenever they speak about sexual violence and rape, and it happens that most women remain silent unless they contract diseases or become pregnant (Daudu & Shulika, 2019). It is only recently that cases of rape and sexual violence against women and girls in Eastern Congo have been extensively documented.

Second, while there have been many attempts to find long-term solutions to the conflicts in the DRC, there has been a visible and worrying absence of women in peace talks. Of particular concern is the exclusion of women from restorative initiatives such as the Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs (Sadie, 2010). Yet, rape and sexual violence have also influenced women's decisions to join rebel groups and become fighters (Houngbedji et al., 2012). Excluding women from DDR programs denies them the opportunity to reintegrate and be accepted by their communities as it is the case of their male counterparts. This is also firmly entrenched in the DRC constitution,

¹ The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) documented 804 cases of conflict-related sexual violence: among them, 507 were women, 265 were girls, and 30 were men and 2 boys (UN Secretary General's report, 2017)

particularly in the Family Code², which places women in a precarious position due to widespread traditional and religious practices³. Despite its discriminatory aspects, the Family Code was only amended in 2016.⁴ However, the application of these clauses at the local level remains an uphill task.

Pending these observations, this study first and foremost examines the formal and informal roles women play in conflict affected communities to determine how they can reduce the scale and intensity of conflict. Second, the project examines the ways in which women-led peace efforts take place. The assumption here is that security concerns have led to women's resilience in taking initiatives to cultivate peace in their communities.

While women are often seen as victims during conflict and wartime periods (Asaf, 2017; Ali, 2007), studies have shown the centrality of women's agency in increasing their resilience⁵ in such times (Manchanda, 2005). In the DRC, women are actively involved in various organizations through formal and informal peace processes that draw upon community-based initiatives (Sadie, 2010). This may explain why recent studies portray women as active agents in post-conflict reconstruction (Hilhorst & Bashwira, 2014). These studies suggest that the negative effects of war and violence create opportunities for women to step out of their comfort zones and engage in peacebuilding initiatives (Yadav, 2021; Goetz & Jenkins, 2016; Manchanda, 2005).

² The DRC family code refers to legal frameworks that governs family relations. These include laws governing nationality, the person, the family, inheritance and estates. More information about the family code is discussed in chapter two of this dissertation.

³ See Articles 444 and 448 of the constitution of the DRC.

⁴ It is important to note that in 2016, article 448 was amended, giving equal value to spouses.

⁵ The concept of resilience is defined in Chapter Two of this dissertation. For the purposes of this dissertation, women's resilience is understood as the collective ability of individuals, households and communities to confront adversity, adapt to changing circumstances and rebuild their lives after periods of hardship.

Similarly, the universal norms of women's rights give power to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) policy and the need for countries to implement it in their National Action Plan (NAP). This means addressing women's issues in war, violent conflict, and everyday insecurity, and including women in peacebuilding initiatives. If states and governments embrace the WPS policies, this could facilitate the operationalization of women's agency. However, the failure to implement the NAP at the national level contributes to the challenges women face in their efforts to influence peacebuilding initiatives, particularly at the community level. These include but are not limited to insufficient support from politicians and elite groups, inadequate funding for women's projects and businesses, patriarchal gender relations⁶, and the presence of certain religious beliefs that relegate women to a secondary status (Le Roux et al., 2020; Chitando, 2019; Machakanja, 2016; Sadie, 2010). Other authors, such as Manchanda (2005, p. 4737), have also highlighted that women-led peace efforts are often overlooked in the dominant views of peace, conflict, and security studies, as the focus is primarily on state actors, armed groups, and formal negotiations. This contributes to the lack of visibility of women-led peace efforts and further reproduces a culture of silence in conflict narratives, often undervaluing women's everyday practices of sustaining peace and resilience (ibid).

⁶ Nagel (2021) explains patriarchal gender relations as relationships that favour the masculine gender over the feminine one. In such a context, it gives meaning to excluding women in economic and political aspects.

B. Research Questions and Objectives

This study examines the role of women in fostering peace through formal and informal processes. In particular, it focuses on women's agency in peacebuilding in Eastern Congo. In light of the challenges described above, this study seeks to address two key questions: In what ways are women-led peace efforts in Eastern DRC informed and/or affected by the politics of SGBV? How do the challenges of victimization and cultural constraints experienced by Congolese women shape their engagement in community-based peace efforts? In addition, the study addresses two interrelated sub-questions: (1) How do women's caregiving roles influence their approach to community-based peacebuilding? and (2) How has the WPS agenda changed or transformed women's agency in community-based peacebuilding?

In terms of objectives, and owing to the fact that this project explores the active role of women in enhancing a culture of peace in local communities, the project aims to: (1) explore the formality and informality of women's agency to advance peaceful solutions in Goma and Eastern DRC at large; (2) probe the significance of culture in shaping how Congolese women engage in everyday peacebuilding activities within and between communities; and (3) understand the implications of the WPS agenda on community-based peacebuilding.

C. Significance of the study

In terms of relevance and contribution, this study contributes to academic debates on women's agency in community-based peacebuilding. Specifically, the study

contributes to the empirical and methodological advancement of women's agency in peacebuilding. Existing research on community-based peacebuilding in the DRC is minimal in explaining the role of women. Furthermore, studies on women often emphasize the burdens and challenges of rape and sexual violence in conflict. While it is important to pay special attention to these issues, this study provides a more nuanced understanding about women as active agents in peacebuilding.

The experiences of Congolese women in peacebuilding reflect broader global patterns of women's agency, seen in regions such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. These parallels underscore the universal relevance of community-based, women-led peacebuilding initiatives while highlighting the unique cultural frameworks that shape such efforts in different contexts. This dissertation aims to contribute to these ongoing global conversations by focusing on the Eastern Congo's distinct sociopolitical and cultural landscapes.

More specifically, this dissertation foregrounds women's choices and actions in peacebuilding and the challenges they face in the process. Furthermore, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, bridging African studies, women's studies, conflict and peacebuilding, cultural studies, and social justice. In doing so, it aims to foreground academic debates on gender and feminist intersectionality and to foster linkages between these fields. Beyond academic debates, the study has societal benefits, including the role of women's groups, associations and organizations and their centrality in addressing conflict. The findings of this study hold the potential to benefit the local, national, and international actors involved in peacebuilding and the search for long-term solutions for peace, security, and stability in Eastern Congo.

D. Scope and Delimitation

The geographical focus of this study is Eastern Congo, where primary data was collected through online in-depth interviews, and secondary data was obtained through systematic reviews of existing research. Eastern Congo is a region characterized by volatility and ongoing conflict, resulting in significant human suffering. However, it is also home to a wide array of associations and civil society organizations (CSOs) dedicated to advancing peace initiatives and putting an end to violent conflict in the region. In particular, there is a growing presence of women's associations and organizations that support communities, combat sexual and gender-based violence, and actively engage women in peacebuilding efforts. This makes Eastern Congo a particularly compelling area for this study, as it offers insights into how women's groups navigate violent conflict and advocate for peace and gender equality.

The study focuses specifically on women's agency in peacebuilding in Eastern Congo, categorizing their roles into two main themes: formal roles and informal roles. **Formal roles** are typically defined by structured engagement, such as women's participation and representation in peace agreements and related initiatives. In contrast, **informal roles** are often characterized by women's resilient actions. For instance, in a hypothetical scenario where a conflict breaks out in a market in Saké, women working in the market may spontaneously come together to respond to the conflict. In such cases, their interventions are not driven by formal organizations but emerge from informal actions that create spaces for discussing security matters.

This distinction between formal and informal roles offers insight into the various ways in which women in Eastern Congo contribute to peacebuilding, be it through established channels or grassroots initiatives that address the immediate challenges posed by the region's conflicts. Formal peacebuilding is more visible in terms of representation and participation at the peace table. It also involves government agendas aimed at ensuring stability. In contrast, informal peacebuilding is more localised, drawing on communal coexistence and traditional knowledge. Religious teachings can also influence informal peacebuilding; for example, people may perform acts of kindness because their religion encourages it.

E. Limitations

As a country affected by ongoing conflict, war, and violence, attempts to conduct research in such contexts have their own limitations. These include issues of security, logistics, and data availability.

Due to ongoing conflict in Eastern Congo, security concerns were significant, making it difficult to conduct in-person field research, particularly in Goma. The security situation not only prevented physical access to the area but also necessitated an online research approach. This made it difficult to make in-person observations that could have provided richer, more nuanced data. A further challenge was the pervasive mistrust among and between peacebuilders and local communities, which, in turn, posed another challenge. People were often skeptical about sharing information, fearing potential repercussions, such as imprisonment or physical harm, that could result from a misunderstanding. To address this, I found that presenting an ethical approval document

and obtaining informed consent helped to allay some of these concerns. Using purposive sampling, complemented by snowball sampling method also proved effective, as participants were more willing to engage in discussions if they trusted the person who referred them.

Logistical challenges also arose, particularly in relation to internet connectivity. Occasionally, poor internet connections disrupted scheduled interviews, requiring rescheduling or, in some cases, replacing audio calls with text-based conversations. These disruptions, while manageable, occasionally affected the flow of data collection and the depth of interaction during interviews.

Data availability was another limitation, particularly in the context of documentary reviews. Many local women's associations and organizations lacked comprehensive annual reports or written documentation, limiting the availability of secondary data. While some organizations provided rich content, much of the available literature from international organizations and academic sources focused predominantly on women as victims of violent conflict rather than as active agents in peacebuilding. To mitigate this, I leveraged tools such as Semantic Scholar's Connected Papers⁷ to identify relevant literature on women's agency in the DRC. This approach helped supplement the available data, enriching the findings and discussions in this study.

⁷ Semantic Scholar's Connected Paper is a website with AI capabilities that help to locate multiple articles in various fields. It can find articles from open sources, peer-reviewed journals, books, book chapters, reports, and more.

Although challenging, these limitations were addressed through adaptive strategies, ultimately contributing to the robustness of the research findings. Despite being the standard for qualitative research, having an open discussion about the ethics documents and the purpose of the consent form proved to be an effective strategy for mitigating issues relating to a lack of trust. Additionally, adapting to participants' technological preferences such as using WhatsApp calls instead of Zoom proved beneficial, as many participants encountered difficulties setting up or navigating through Zoom. Put simply, I proactively prepared for potential obstacles during the pre-phase of data collection to ensure the process remains smooth and efficient despite adverse conditions

F. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters, each examining a specific role of women in peacebuilding in the DRC.

Chapter One presents the background of conflicts in the DRC, the evolution of the peace agreements, and the status of women. This chapter provides a historical overview of the conflict, setting the context for the study. It also provides a chronology of peace agreements since 1999, accompanied by a brief analysis of each, before turning to the status of women. Here, the chapter examines the impact of the conflict on Congolese women, including the socio-cultural implication and the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence. It also examines the broader role of women in peacebuilding and the challenges they face in exercising their agency.

Chapter Two focuses on the literature review. It begins by clarifying key concepts used in the study and exploring women's active agency, including their roles in war and in formal and informal peacebuilding. The chapter reviews existing academic research on women's agency in war and peacebuilding and identifies gaps in the literature.

Chapter Three introduces the thesis's theoretical framework of the dissertation, which is situated at the intersection of African Feminism, Ubuntu, and the Ethics of Care. This framework provides critical insights into the cultural implications and significance of community-based approaches to peacebuilding. It also contextualizes the communal and empathy-based work typically undertaken by women and offers a nuanced understanding of their contributions to peacebuilding.

Chapter Four outlines the research methodology. It describes the methodological approaches that guided the research, focusing on the qualitative research design, which is grounded in a social constructivist epistemology. The chapter discusses the choice of data collection methods, participant selection, data analysis techniques, ethical considerations, and limitations of the data collection procedures.

Chapter Five presents the research findings, including demographic data, a review of secondary data, and an analysis of women-led peace initiatives in Eastern Congo. This chapter explores the motivations behind women's involvement in peacebuilding, their activities, and their engagement with the community. It also examines the influence of cultural, social, economic, and political norms on Congolese women and how they navigate these challenges.

Chapter Six discusses and analyzes the findings, drawing on the literature review, background context, and theoretical framework to interpret the results. The chapter begins

by summarizing the findings and then explores the formality and informality of women-led peace efforts in Eastern Congo. To contextualize the shaping of women's agency in peacebuilding, the chapter integrates insights from African Feminism, Ubuntu, the Ethics of Care, and resilience studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the values and motivations that drive women's agency.

Finally, the thesis concludes by summarizing the key arguments of each chapter and offering final reflections. The conclusion also highlights areas for further research and provides recommendations for future studies on women, gender, conflict, and peacebuilding.

CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND OF CONFLICTS IN THE DRC

This section provides a brief background of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and an overview of sexual and gender-based violence. It then describes the various challenges Congolese women face in their attempts to initiate peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Figure 1 shows a map of Congo, its provinces, and cities. The map is intended to help understand the deeply fragmented areas and those affected by violent conflict.



Figure 1 Political Map of the Democratic Republic of Congo: Nations Online Project

1.1. Background of Conflict in DRC

The DRC, like many other African states, has suffered from the legacy of colonialism. Since independence, Congo has been politically unstable, a situation accentuated by the effects of the Cold War (Nfundiko et al., 2020, p. 9; Kent, 2010). Although independence marked the end of colonialism, it culminated in the opposing geopolitical forces of Western democracies (and American policies) and Soviet communism, which contributed massively to the current political situation in the DRC (Kent, 2010). On the other hand, the DRC faced internal political problems. The then Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, a supporter of socialism, allied with the Soviet Union, which was seen as a challenge to European and American foreign policy (Nfundiko et al., 2020; Kent, 2010). Lumumba believed in the unity of all Congolese and the politics of communalism, but was assassinated, which greatly contributed to the political instability and lack of cooperation in the country (Nfundiko et al., 2020).

The conflicts in the Eastern part of the country began in the 1960s. In North Kivu, an outbreak of conflict known as the “Kanyarwanda War” began in 1963. This war pitted the Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese against the Nande, Hunde and Nyanfa for over two years (Rusamira, 2003, p. 147). Le Marchand (2009) characterizes the Kanyarwanda War as an ethno-political conflict between the so-called indigenous groups—the Hunde and the Nande—and Rwandophone Hutu and Tutsi communities, which concluded in 1966 when the Congolese army intervened at the request of local elites to suppress Banyarwanda resistance. While his work is based on substantial field research, it reflects certain colonial biases. By framing Rwandophone groups primarily as “settlers,” Le Marchand underplays

their long-standing presence in North Kivu. These communities became “unwanted citizens” largely as a consequence of the colonial demarcation of borders following the Berlin Conference, which reclassified historically rooted populations as foreigners within the new Congolese state. In the other part of the country, there was the secession of Katanga, which wanted its independence from the Belgian Congo (Willame, 1972, p. 161). On the flipside, a coup d’état happened in 1965 by Mobutu Seseseko – during his time as president, the DRC was overly centralized despite the presence of over three hundred ethnic groups (Diggs, 2012, p. 25).

The 1990s, in particular, saw a profoundly fragmented country, especially in North Kivu, and corruption became institutionalized (Nfundiko et al., 2020). As Diggs (2012) observes, in 1994 alone, the DRC received approximately 1.2 million refugees from Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, Sudan, and Uganda, as well as 700 (approximately) internally displaced persons. Among them was a group of armed Hutu genocidaires who fled along with Hutu citizens under the guise of refugee protection, fleeing from being held accountable for their actions in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi (Kimonyo, 2020). What followed was the rise of insurgent groups and anti-Tutsi narratives in North and South Kivu.

The First Congo War (1996-1997) culminated in a regional dilemma because of the alliances it created, such as the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo (AFDL) led by Laurent Desiré Kabila. Both Uganda and Rwanda supported the alliance to overthrow Mobutu’s government in 1997 (Nfundiko et al., 2020). The Second Congo War began in 1998 following a fallout between Kabila and the former allies, Rwanda and Uganda (Nfundiko et al., 2020). Kabila appealed to neighbouring Southern

African countries for help and, in the meantime, exploited Congolese natural resources to fund rebel groups (Daley, 2006, p. 307), particularly the Rwandan *genocidaires*. Seven countries and ten rebel groups were involved in this war, exploiting the natural resources of the DRC (Daley, 2006). In 2001, following the death of Laurent-Desire Kabila, his son, Joseph Kabila, became President of the DRC. These events led to a number of peace agreements, including the Lusaka Peace Agreement of 1999, the Sun City Agreement of 2003, and the North and South Kivu Peace Agreements (Stearns, 2017; Sadie, 2010). The war officially ended in 2003, but conflict remains widespread, particularly in South Kivu, Katanga and Ituri (Autesserre, 2011).

Rising anti-Tutsi narratives in Eastern DRC led to more local insurgent groups fighting for their Congolese citizenship and acceptance⁸. In particular, the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) in 1998, the Congrès National pour la Defence du Peuple (CNDP) in 2002 led by Laurent Nkunda, and the Movement du 23 Mars (M23) in 2012, led by Bosco Ntaganda, who was later incarcerated and sent to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Relatedly, the Congolese government supported the Forces Démocratiques pour la Liberation du Rwanda (FDLR), including the *genocidaires* (Stearns, 2017). Other movements included the Mai Mai and the Lord Resistance Army, which are primarily Ugandan rebels. Between 2006 and 2008, there were a number of clashes between the CNDP, the FDLR, the Forces Armées de la Republique Démocratique du Congo (FARDC), and the Mai Mai movement (Stearns, 2017).

⁸ The narratives of the Banyarwanda community are classified into three meanings: the Banyamulenge, a Tutsi pastoralist residing in Congo in the 19th century (Vlassenroot, 2002). The Banyarwanda comprised Hutus, Tutsis and Twas who found themselves in Congo after the repatriation of the map, and the refugees, those who fled in 1959, predominantly Tutsis and those of 1994, predominantly Hutus.

Recently, there have been violent clashes between the Congolese army and the M23⁹ (who now occupy part of Rutchuru, Lubero, Masisi, and Nyiragongo) in North Kivu¹⁰. The Congolese government accuses Rwanda of supporting the M23, while Rwanda claims that the DRC is collaborating with the genocidal forces of the FDLR (Pietromarchi, 2024). The M23, in turn, criticizes the Congolese government for failing to protect Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese, particularly the Tutsi ethnic group in both North and South Kivu, which fuels anti-Tutsi sentiment. At the same time, CODECO has killed Hema civilians in Ituri¹¹ and has carried out several attacks against the Banyamulenge civilians in South Kivu¹². In addition, the terrorist group ADF¹³ has resumed attacks against civilians in the East. In these conflicts, militia groups such as Wazalendo¹⁴, armed and supported by the government, have caused insecurity, killings, and theft.

Meanwhile, MONUSCO has been largely ineffective in providing security in affected zones, leading to calls for its withdrawal (Pietromarchi, 2024). The Congolese government has asked the East African Standby Force to provide protection for civilians. However, the Congolese government accused these forces of colluding with the rebels and

⁹The M23 resurged in 2021 due to failure in respecting the Luanda peace agreements.

¹⁰Virginia Pietromarchi's (2024) article about security concerns in eastern DRC - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/29/eastern-drc-at-breaking-point-as-security-humanitarian-crises-worsen#:~:text=Rwanda%20links,such%20as%20PlayStations%20and%20smartphones.>

¹¹ Aljazeera 2024 – CODECO rebel attack kills 15 people in eastern DR Congo -

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/19/codeco-rebel-attack-kills-15-people-in-eastern-drc>

¹² Independent researcher Innocent Nteziryayo (2023) documents that since 2017, Banyamulenge civilians in Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga have been attacked by various armed groups including the Mai Mai Yakutumba, Burundi armed groups such as RED Tabara, the Forces Nationales de liberations (FLN) and at times soldiers of the FARDC.

¹³ According to the Voice of Africa news, “ Around ten civilians were killed in the attacks blamed on ADF rebels affiliated with the Islamic State group in eastern DRC in May 2024” -

<https://www.voanews.com/a/about-10-civilians-killed-in-dr-congo-rebel-attack-sources-say/7627726.html>

¹⁴ The Wazalendo is a group mobilized to support the Congolese army in North Kivu to fight the M23 rebels - <https://www.theafricareport.com/347634/drcs-wazalendo-tshisekedis-unpredictable-allies/>

failing to provide adequate security. In response, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) deployed South African soldiers to Congo (ibid). The new security forces in Eastern Congo have also failed to protect civilians.

A major political challenge in the region is the pervasive blame game.¹⁵ According to Sten Hanson (2018, p. 548):

When blame games take place in the public eye, both blame makers and blame takers try to persuade particular audiences (various other groups or individuals who observe the players) to side with their position on a question of blame at hand—so the game essentially involves attempts at winning over ‘hearts and minds’ and influencing public opinion.

In the context of the DRC, blame games are used to persuade Congolese who are divided along ethnic lines to take a position and create alliances against the other. In addition, the government has failed to provide adequate protection for its citizens and often resorts to blaming external factors, which serves as an excuse for its ineffectiveness. With more than 130 armed groups active in Eastern Congo, the DRC is far from secure. This blame game exacerbates inter-ethnic hatred and violence against civilians.

Since the first Congo war, the DRC has consistently blamed its neighbours, Rwanda and Uganda, for destabilizing the country. These narratives are prevalent in both the media and Western scholarship (Coulibaly, 2016). In recent years, the focus of blame has shifted primarily to Rwanda, which has been accused of being a critical destabilizing

¹⁵ In an interview with the Voice of Africa, Professor Bojana Coulibaly discusses the intensity of the blame game in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where post-truth and post-reality contexts shape the language used to perpetuate violence. Within this framework, the DRC attributes significant blame to the M23 rebel group, particularly concerning the violence in Kishishe and Kipupu. Reports from these incidents often feature exaggerated death tolls even though over 130 rebel groups have been engaging in violent actions in the region for more than a decade. Professor Coulibaly further asserts that the M23 is a consequence of the DRC state’s mismanagement - <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/m23-is-symptom-of-drc-state-mismanagement-harvard-researcher-/7002993.html>

actor. Despite the lack of concrete evidence to support these allegations, the DRC government has used these accusations to marginalize Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese. This narrative has contributed to increased ethnic hatred and atrocities against these populations.

There is also a tendency to attribute all atrocities to one rebel group, the M23¹⁶, composed partly of Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese. This perspective is also reflected in a recent UN report¹⁷, which highlights the disproportionate targeting of one rebel group. The aim is not to defend the rebel group's violent actions but to understand their impact on Eastern Congo and the roots of the conflict, which are deeply embedded in the colonial legacy¹⁸. The blame game indicates that the Congolese government has no real intention of disarming all rebel groups and reaching a mutual understanding, such as protecting the local population, ending alienation, and ending discrimination against certain groups.

These conflicts have contributed to continued political instability and ethnic tensions in the DRC, resulting in increased intolerance among the local population, extreme poverty, and limited economic development. They have also led to increased inequality and exploitation of the country's natural resources. In terms of the burden of

¹⁶ Interview with Professor Bojana Coulibaly - Githui-Ewart, E. (2023, March 13). *M23 Is 'Symptom of DRC State Mismanagement': Harvard Researcher* [Video]. Voice of America. <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/m23-is-symptom-of-drc-state-mismanagement-harvard-researcher-7002993.html>

¹⁷ UNSC report on the DRC by the group of experts (June 4, 2024) – in the report, more reference to insecurity is made to one particular rebel group, whereas the news documents various instances of violent outbreaks by other rebel groups.

¹⁸ Colonialism in the DRC, as in many African countries, had profound and devastating effects. One of the most significant impacts was the imposition of arbitrary borders, merging diverse ethno-cultural groups into the Congo-Zaire territory without consideration for their historical, social, or cultural differences. This disregard for existing identities and dynamics created tensions that persist to this day. Additionally, the colonial “divide and rule” strategy exacerbated interethnic animosity and fostered negative opportunism, which undermined social cohesion and had far-reaching consequences for the Congolese population as a whole.

conflicts, it is estimated that more than 7.1 million people are internally displaced, and between 1998 and 2007, 5.4 million people died from disease alone¹⁹. Attacks on civilians by armed groups have also continued. This has contributed to a deterioration in the security of the local population in North Kivu and South Kivu²⁰. In addition, there has been increased violence in Ituri, with an estimated death toll of nearly 200 civilians and more than 300,000 displaced²¹. The conflicts in the DRC have involved many actors, and several scholars have criticized the role of MONUSCO for failing to prevent and manage conflict in the Eastern DRC (Bjorkhaug & Boas, 2014; Autesserre, 2011).

Therefore, the following section highlights the chronological context of peace negotiations and agreements in the DRC.

1.2. Peace Negotiations and Agreements in the DRC

The DRC has been the subject of numerous peace negotiations and agreements since 1999, with varying results. The first of these was the Sirte Agreement of 1999²², brokered by the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. This agreement aimed to establish a ceasefire, facilitate the withdrawal of Rwandan and Ugandan troops, and initiate joint monitoring by the then Organization of African Unity (OAU), now African Union (AU).

¹⁹ International Rescue Committee (IRC), *Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: An ongoing crisis* (New York, 2007) reported that some of the epidemiology included Cholera, Malaria and Ebola, among others.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch (2019) reported 130 armed groups actively operating in Eastern DRC, notably the FDLR, the allied Congolese Nyatura Groups, the Ugandan Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Nduma Defense of Congo-Renové (NDC-R), the Mazembe and Yakatumba Mai Mai groups and numerous Burundian armed groups. The reports mention 720 civilians killed and at least 1275 abducted in 2019. Additionally, there is a conflict between Banyamulenge Ngumino and the Bafuliro, Banyindu and Babembe communities (Which is interrelated to the issue of citizenship of the Banyamulenge).

²¹ Ibid

²² UN Peacemaker database - [Sirte Peace Agreement](#)

It also sought to reconcile the warring parties. However, the Sirte Agreement failed to achieve its objectives as hostilities continued.

It was followed by the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement²³, which sought to end hostilities and establish a ceasefire between several countries involved. This agreement led to the creation of the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC), a peacekeeping operation to stabilize the country and prevent further violence. While the Lusaka Agreement contributed to a reduction in violent conflict, its impact was lop-sided, and violence continued. This necessitated the Sun City Agreement of 2003²⁴, which aimed to promote inter-community dialogue among all parties, including state actors, rebel groups, political opposition, and civil society organizations (CSOs). The Sun City Agreement had some positive outcomes, such as the establishment of a transitional government, and the inclusion of women's concerns (which led to changes in the DRC constitution). However, the RCD felt marginalized, leading to the continuation of rebel activities (Lemarchand, 2009) and the eventual formation of the CNDP.

Parallel to these agreements was the 2002 Pretoria Agreement²⁵, a bilateral accord between Rwanda and the DRC. The primary objective of this agreement was the withdrawal of Rwandan troops and the disarmament of Hutu militias (now known as the FDLR). The agreement resulted in a significant reduction of Rwandan troops and partial

²³ UN Peacemaker database - [Ceasefire Agreement \(Lusaka Agreement\)](#)

²⁴ UN Peacemaker database - [Inter-Congolese Negotiations: The Final Act \(Sun City Agreement\)](#)

²⁵ UN Peacemaker database - [Peace Agreement between the Governments of Rwanda and the DRC on the Withdrawal of the Rwandan Troops from the Territory of the DRC and the Dismantling of the Ex-FAR and Interahamwe Forces in the DRC](#)

disarmament of the militias. The failure to fully implement the Pretoria Agreement led to further violent conflict and state collusion with the FDLR, which remains a destabilizing force in the DRC (International Crisis Group, 2003).

Besides these accords, the Global and All-Inclusive Agreement²⁶ of 2003 was followed by the assassination of President Laurent-Désiré Kabila. This agreement aimed to implement a full political transition and is also credited with officially ending the Second Congo War (Stearns, 2011). Despite the successful implementation of the transitional government, it did not address local conflicts. In fact, it led to subsequent negotiations, such as the 2006 Protocol of Non-Aggression and Mutual Defense²⁷ among Member States of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and the 2007 Nairobi Communiqué²⁸, both of which had limited impact.

In 2008, more robust negotiations took place in North and South Kivu, known as the Actes d'Engagement,²⁹ also referred to as the Goma Agreements. After a successful transitional government, it was expected that the new power-sharing systems would be implemented. With the failure to implement these, violent conflicts between the FARDC and rebel groups, particularly the CNDP, continued, leading to the Goma Accords. Although the agreements reduced violence in North Kivu, the DDR processes were poorly implemented (Autesserre, 2010), resulting in some of the CNDP personnel not being fully

²⁶ UN Peacemaker database - [Global and Inclusive Agreement on Transition in the Democratic Republic of Congo \(Pretoria Agreement\)](#)

²⁷ UN Peacemaker database - [Protocol of Non-aggression and Mutual Defence in the Great Lakes Region](#)

²⁸ UN Peacemaker database - [Joint Communiqué on a Common Approach to Ending the Threat posed to Peace and Stability in both Countries and the Great Lakes Region \(Nairobi Communiqué\)](#)

²⁹ UN Peacemaker database - [Acte d'Engagement - Nord Kivu ; Acte d'Engagement - Sud Kivu](#)

integrated. Subsequent conflicts between the CNDP and FARDC (supported by the FDLR and Mai Mai) led to the 2009 peace agreement³⁰ between the DRC government and the CNDP. This agreement called for a ceasefire and the integration of the CNDP into the national government, but only some CNDP members were integrated into the DRC army. The arrest of CNDP leader Laurent Nkunda in Rwanda and the formation of the March 23 Movement (M23) were direct consequences of the unfulfilled agreements.

In 2013, the Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework³¹ was signed by 11 African countries with the aim of addressing the root causes of violent conflict. Addressing these root causes is widely regarded by peace scholars as essential for sustainable conflict transformation (Galtung, 1990; Lederach, 1997; Schirch, 2004; Sharp, 2005). Galtung (1990) argues that true peace requires the transformation of systems that perpetuate inequality and oppression, going beyond the mere cessation of violence to achieve positive peace. Despite its hopeful intentions, it failed to end armed conflict, and state implementation was ineffective due to the failure to address the root causes of the disputes. That same year, the Kampala Dialogue³² between the DRC government and the M23 agreed to integrate the M23 into national politics as a political party. As with previous agreements, however, implementation remained problematic, with power sharing not being executed.

³⁰ UN Peacemaker database - [Peace Agreement between the government and the CNDP \(and the Implementation Plan\)](#)

³¹ UN Peacemaker database - [Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the region](#)

³² UN Peacemaker database - [Agenda for the Dialogue between the Government of the DRC and the M23 on the situation in Eastern Congo](#)

In addition to the conflicts in the East, the conflicts between the Twa and Bantu in Katanga led to another peace agreement, also known as the “Déclaration Finale du Forum sur la Paix dans le Territoire de Nyunzu³³,” which took place in 2015. This declaration aimed to end hostilities in Tanganyika and initially succeeded in reducing violence. However, implementation was lacking, and violence escalated in Katanga (ICG, 2016). Meanwhile, the 2016-2017 crisis, marked by President Joseph Kabila’s refusal to step down, led to the Saint Sylvester Agreement³⁴, which aimed to resolve the political crisis in the DRC. Although elections were delayed, Kabila eventually stepped down, and Félix Antoine Tshisekedi was elected president in 2018, but the results remained controversial (International Crisis Group, 2017), with claims that the elections had been rigged.

Moreover, with the DRC joining the East African Community (EAC), it is subject to observing the treaty of EAC partner states, which includes observing the charter on handling conflict among the partner states. It is in this line that a peace negotiation known as the Nairobi Process³⁵ debuted, which was facilitated by the EAC and other regional actors between 2021 and 2024. The process has had mixed results – initially, the East African Standby Force was deployed, with Kenya taking the lead, but the DRC later demanded its withdrawal. Recent agreements have been notorious, particularly regarding the state’s willingness to negotiate with M23. A few days after the accord was made public in 2022, DRC government officials denied the country’s commitment to observing and

³³ UN Peacemaker database - [Déclaration finale du forum sur la paix dans le territoire de Nyunzu](#)

³⁴ UNSC (2017) - Special Report of the Secretary-General on the Strategic Review of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) (S/2017/206)

³⁵ East African Community (2022). Communiqué of the 4th Heads of State Conclave on the Democratic Republic of Congo.

implementing certain clauses in the agreement (Al Jazeera, 2022). The DRC government's inconsistent stance on negotiations with the M23 has further complicated the process. Moreover, the ongoing conflict between the DRC and Rwanda, both EAC partner states, adds another layer of complexity to these negotiations.

The most recent peace agreement, the Luanda Peace Process³⁶, was initiated in 2022 to broker peace in Eastern DRC and to mediate tensions between Rwanda and the DRC. This process emerged following the failure to implement the commitments of the Nairobi Peace Processes. Within the framework of the Luanda accord, the DRC has accused the Rwandan Defence Forces (RDF) of supporting the M23 rebel group. At the same time, Rwanda has alleged that the DRC collaborates with the FDLR. The Luanda peace process remains ongoing.

This summary of the peace negotiations and agreements highlights the ongoing crisis in the DRC and the challenges of implementation and applicability. The existence of more than 130 rebel groups raises questions about the state's commitment to resolving the conflict, given that negotiations over the past 20 years have mainly focused on a single rebel group. These questions require in-depth research beyond the scope of this analysis.

However, scholarly debates have also identified key challenges to achieving lasting peace. To begin with, there is a lack of local participation in peace agreements (Autesserre, 2010; Coulibaly, 2014). Peace agreements often adopt a state-centric, top-down approach that focuses on elite-level actors while neglecting local disputes and the

³⁶ The Luanda Process is mediated by President Lorenzo of Angola - <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/the-revived-luanda-process-inching-towards-peace-in-east-drc>

needs of the population (Autesserre, 2010, p. 2). Such neglect is problematic, as local populations are primarily involved in the conflict, either as victims or perpetrators. Furthermore, local knowledge and expertise are often overlooked in favour of international perspectives, resulting in agreements that do not reflect local realities (Coulibaly, 2014). Autesserre (2014) further criticizes the “peacebuilding consensus,” which prioritizes power-sharing agreements, elections, and state-building over the needs of the local populations.

In a similar vein, Coulibaly (2014) argues that peace agreements are often westernized and impose notions of statehood and governance that do not align with local realities, leading to mistrust among the population. She further notes that the focus on the state in peace agreements often overlooks the complex experience of governance in the DRC (2015, pp. 58-59). Moreover, when external actors are involved, they may prioritize stability over justice and fail to address the root causes of violence, such as land disputes, ethnic tensions, and resource issues (Autesserre, 2014, p. 121; Coulibaly, 2015, p. 289-290), which are also rooted in the colonial legacy. Finally, peace agreements often emphasize immediate ceasefires without addressing issues of economic marginalization, leading to continued violence (Coulibaly, 2016).

Another reason for the failure to establish peace in the region is that not everyone wants it. The various parties involved in the region — including international actors such as MONUSCO, local actors such as politicians, and the multiple rebellions — have various interests at stake, whether these be related to neo-colonialism, mining, ethno-political tensions, or land disputes. Without addressing all these concerns, it is

unlikely that Congo will achieve sustainable peace. Meanwhile, not everyone is included in the peace processes; the lack of women's participation and representation in these peace agreements is evident. As a result, there is a visible lack of attention given to addressing violence against women and finding ways to overcome it. These issues are discussed in the following section.

1.3. Violence Against Women in DRC

In times of war and violence, all fundamental human rights are violated, and extreme suffering and pain is inflicted on the local populations living in the affected areas. Although both men and women endure the burden of violence and war in the region, the results of these conflicts are disproportionate. That is, while boys and men continue to be the primary victims of frontline deaths, women and girls bear the burden of sexual violence and rape (Sadie, 2015; Pankhurst, 2008; Goldstein, 2001). According to Pankhurst (2008), women face multiple challenges in the post-war period. These include rebuilding their lives and becoming the primary breadwinners for their families, seeking justice for the wrongs done to them, and accessing peacebuilding and restorative initiatives. Thus, when examining the violence against women in Eastern Congo as a result of violent conflict, it is important to understand the impact of cultural, social, political, and economic factors on women's agency.

1.3.1. Impact of Cultural and Social Norms on Congolese Women

Although cultural and social norms continue to impede the progress of Congolese women, there is evidence that such views were entrenched and promoted during colonization. In a study of colonialism, education, and work in colonial Zaire, Barbara Yates (1980, p. 127) notes that the Belgian colonizers “brought with them a set of notions about proper activities for women.” The Belgian education system taught girls to prepare for their future roles as good wives and mothers, instilling values rooted in Judeo-Christian beliefs that emphasized women’s obedience and submission to their husbands. Mulumoederhwa (2021, p. 1192) further adds that the colonizers reinforced fixed patriarchal norms, resulting in persistent gender stereotypes and disparities in access to education.

Like many societies around the world, the DRC is characterized by a patriarchal system with gendered family structures. This system positions men as the heads of households and primary breadwinners, while women are typically seen as procreators and caretakers of the family (Maclin et al., 2014, p. 120; Lwambo, 2013). Women’s roles include all domestic tasks, notably educating children, cooking, and caring for all family members. Outside of the family structure, strict rules govern the roles of men and women, reflecting dominant masculinity as described by Petz et al. (2023). They explain that dominant masculinity, a result of patriarchy, perpetuates the subordination of women to men. This is evident in the different expectations and treatment of boys and girls. Boys are expected to study, find good jobs, and uphold the family and tribal name, which prepares them to become heads of their families. In contrast, girls are reminded that their

primary role is to marry and have children, even if they aspire to significant careers and independence. As a result, they are often discouraged from pursuing career success and autonomy.

In particular, the DRC constitutional family code placed women in a precarious situation due to widespread traditional and religious practices.³⁷ It was only in 2016 that the Family Code was amended.³⁸ However, the application of these clauses at the local level remains an uphill task. Indeed, there are claims that some women in Eastern DRC believe it is fate that requires them to suffer, and that if God decided to end their suffering, he would do so (Sadie, 2010). On the flipside, there are beliefs that men expect women to act according to religious and traditional norms, which most women do (ibid.). While it is not uncommon for African women to adhere to certain traditional and religious beliefs, the problem arises when these norms deny them certain basic human rights, which in turn limit their contribution to peacebuilding and development programs.

1.3.2. Poverty and Exploitation

Although rich in natural resources, the DRC remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with 74.6% of the population living in extreme poverty (Ayivi-Guedehoussou et al., 2021). The persistence of poverty reinforces social norms, leading to increased gender-based discrimination. This disproportionately impacts women, deepening their impoverishment and reducing opportunities for girls. These economic challenges are documented in the World Bank report by Ayivi-Guedehoussou et al. (2021,

³⁷ See Articles 444 and 448 of the constitution of the DRC.

³⁸ Important to note that in 2016, article 448 was amended, giving equal value to spouses

p.9), which highlights the significant disparities and barriers faced by women and girls in the DRC.

Congolese women face significant barriers to economic opportunities and empowerment, including high rates of gender-based violence (GBV) and discrimination. Only 16.8% of women have completed secondary school—about half the completion rate for men.

With fewer educated women and girls, the opportunities available to them are significantly reduced. As a result, early marriage is often encouraged because impoverished families rely on their daughters' dowries to manage household finances. This practice further perpetuates the cycle of poverty and limits girls' potential for educational and economic advancement.

While women were traditionally expected to take care of the household, in rural areas, women were actively involved in farming and agricultural activities (Maclin et al., 2014). As a result, women contributed to feeding their families through their daily activities. Ayivi-Guedehoussou et al (2021, p. 10) noted that:

Women's labor force participation rate in the DRC is estimated at almost 62%. Most women (69.7%) work in agricultural production, with the next-highest category of employment being entrepreneurship (20.5%). While women's labor force participation is relatively high, their earnings are much lower than that of men's. Women own fewer assets, in particular land: only 7.6% of women own land alone compared to 21.8% of men. While women make up most of the workers in the agricultural sector (53%), their access to land and credit remains constrained, limiting productivity.

These social barriers are deeply rooted in the colonial period, during which women in the DRC were “marginalized from economic life and their formal employment often discouraged” (Maclin et al., 2014, p. 121). As a result, women continued to be marginalized in the postcolonial period, particularly in rural areas where many women and girls did not attend primary or secondary school.

Due to limited formal economic opportunities, Congolese women have often turned to selling household products and participating in the informal sector, where opportunities are more accessible (Maclin et al., 2014; MacGaffey, 1991). However, several scholars have noted that the informal economy is sometimes perceived as a threat to men's earning power (Maclin et al., 2014; Lwambo, 2013; MacGaffey, 1991). One such reason is that Congolese masculinity is often defined as the ability to provide financial support and make decisions for their families.

Another significant barrier is the exploitation of women in mining areas. A study by Gabriel Kamundala Byemba (2020) examines the conditions of women engaged in artisanal and small-scale mining, highlighting how stereotypes and social norms contribute to their impoverishment. For instance, women are not allowed to work underground or manage mining pits, relegating them to lower-paying jobs (Byemba, 2020, p. 420; World Bank, 2015). Hence, they are often employed in tasks such as transportation, washing, and crushing, all of which provide uneven income (Byemba, 2020; Bashwira, 2017). These limitations lead some women to engage in prostitution and small businesses around mine sites to generate more income (Byemba, 2020; Bashwira, 2017). All of these factors are due to the limited economic opportunities available to them.

Violent conflict in Eastern Congo has exacerbated gender discrimination and increased poverty throughout the country. For this reason, both men and women live in extreme poverty. Meanwhile, women face the additional burden of sexual violence and rape. This issue is discussed in more detail in the following section.

1.3.3. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

One of the most documented dilemmas in the DRC is sexual violence against women and girls (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). Unsurprisingly, the wars and violence in the country have taken the form of rape and sexual exploitation as a weapon of war by armed groups, law enforcement officers, and civilians³⁹. Although several armed groups have been documented to have committed human rights violations, the FDLR has been particularly notorious for committing sexual violence, rape, abduction, and torture (Lake, 2018, p. 37). According to Lake (2018, p. 37), the FDLR “has routinely been implicated in the abduction of sex slaves, the rape, mutilation, and torture of men, women, and children, and the burning of thousands of houses across the Kivus.” This pattern of abuse is not surprising given that during the genocide against the Tutsi, the rape of women and girls was often used by the genocidal regime. Members of that regime, who later formed the FDLR, continued to perpetrate these atrocities in eastern DRC.

Scholars such as Daudu and Shulika (2019, p. 53) have argued that in many African traditions, rape is considered taboo. As such, the perpetrators aim to break sensitive socio-cultural norms, and the victims fear the societal reactions that may come with reporting such incidents. Consistent with this argument, Daudu and Shulika (2019, p. 53) state:

Perpetrators of sexual violence seek to systematically crush the essence, norms, and values of people by crossing very delicate social ‘boundaries,’ thereby dominating victims and their communities. Similarly, victims maintain silence for

³⁹ MONUC Human Rights Division reported in 2007 that the FARDC committed 54% of rape cases and 43% by the police, members of the Republican Guard and National Intelligence agency, and the rest by civilians suspected of former armed groups combatant. In South Kivu, 70% of rape cases were committed by non-state actors, 16% by the FARDC and PNC and 14% by civilians (13 % of all the cases were young girls under 18). It was reported that the FDLR are significant perpetrators of rape.

the shame of stigmatization, the fear of communal rejection and further victimization, or the lack of faith in structures and institutions that may not serve them justice (Daudu and Shulika 2019, p. 53).

Sexual violence and gender-based violence are particularly prevalent in war zones and areas facing insecurity (Pratt and Werchick, 2004). As Mer and Flicourt (2015) observed, the number of women treated at the Panzi hospital in South Kivu illustrates this trend. Indeed, “sexual violence has a complex nature affecting the socio-cultural and economic context of families and communities” (Daudu & Shulika, 2019, p. 58). This shows why it is essential to study these cases. However, Baaz and Stern (2010) argue that other components of war and conflict, such as mass murders, torture and labour exploitation, are still largely ignored in the process. While it is true that no one is immune to violent acts such as death and exploitation in war zones, what puts women more at risk is rape, which leads to other problems, such as unwanted pregnancies and other acts that denigrate women and their bodies.

In fact, Daudu and Shulika (2019) argue that wartime sexual violence aims to humiliate women, destroy their culture, and mock the communities to which they belong. Such practices are exemplified by other circumstances. For example, armed groups have used witchcraft and stories that require them to hang women alive, arguing that it is a sign of protection in combat (Daudu & Shulika, 2019, p. 59). Others believe that raping virgin girls would protect them from bullets (*ibid.*). These concerns were also captured in the United Nations report published in 2018. It reads:

In 2017, the Twa militias in Tanganyika were responsible for the highest number of documented cases of sexual violence perpetrated by a non-state armed group. Conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated with extreme brutality has also spread to the three Kasai provinces. In that context, anti-government Kamuina Nsapu militia and pro-government Bana Mura militia have both targeted civilians

believed to support their adversaries. Deliberate attacks against communities along ethnic fault lines have included the use of taboo practices, such as victims being raped in front of relatives, a pregnant woman having her fetus ripped out, and at least one victim being forced to perform sex acts on a family member before being executed. (UNa,2018, para. 1)

The Congolese Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Dr. Denis Mukwege, who has been at the forefront of treating rape victims in the DRC, has, for instance, commented that victims have signature marks, gun wounds on their private parts, burn marks on their backs, and limb paralysis (Mukwege, 2009). These actions clearly demonstrate the political and cultural role that rape plays in war. Worst of all, rape victims often become a symbol of shame within their communities, and once pregnant, they are evicted from their homesteads (Daudu & Shulika, 2019). Moreover, previously married women are abandoned by their spouses or families (*ibid.*). Therefore, capturing the full picture of wartime sexual violence is not a straightforward path, as many women prefer to remain silent for fear of social shunning or shame unless they are pregnant or have sexually transmitted diseases.

To address sexual violence and rape, significant legal reforms were undertaken in 2006. These included the adoption of Law No. 06/018 of 20 July 2006, which amended and supplemented the Decree of 30 January 1940 on the Congolese Penal Code, and Law No. 06/019 of 20 July 2006, which amended and supplemented the Decree of 6 August 1959 on the Code of Criminal Procedure. A national strategy to combat sexual and other forms of violence was also introduced. These new laws are commendable initiatives that demonstrate a commitment to fighting sexual violence and rape. However, their implementation has proven to be challenging and has failed to ensure adequate protection for victims of sexual violence and rape (WILPF, 2013). As a result, even when women

report these cases, the justice system is still lacking, as most perpetrators of sexual violence are rarely held accountable for these acts (Sadie, 2010; Kilonzo et al., 2009). As Daudu and Shulika (2019) observe, the Congolese justice system is minimal, unable to handle all cases of sexual violence, and sets high fees for access to the courts.

Although armed groups are often reported as the main perpetrators of sexual violence and rape (Lindsey, 2022; Hilhorst & Douma, 2018; Baaz & Stern, 2009), it is noted that violence against women is also entrenched in everyday life and occurs beyond interactions between armed groups and civilians (Lindsey, 2022, p. 192). For instance, the World Bank 2024 gender data shows that the proportion of women experiencing intimate partner violence in the DRC is 47 %. This compares to the global average of 27 % for sexual violence.

Domestic violence is a chronic problem in the DRC. Allouche et al. (2023) report that women in North and South Kivu often do not talk about the violence they experience, especially if it is perpetrated by a family member. This silence can have both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, women may resolve the issue within the family, involving in-laws or elders to mediate the conflict. This approach can provide solutions for the victims and protect them from shame within their families and communities. However, there are also negative consequences. These mediation tactics sometimes fail because the perpetrator may be protected by his family, leading to the continuation of domestic violence. This dynamic is crucial to this study because it provides insight into the challenges women facing domestic violence must overcome in order to exercise their agency.

1.4.Context of Women-led peace efforts in the DRC

Historically, policy and academic research on the Congo have focused primarily on sexual violence and rape, emphasizing the victimization of women in times of conflict and violence. While this focus is critical to understanding the reality of women in conflict contexts, it inadvertently contributes to the perception of women as passive victims. It minimizes other critical issues, such as the trauma experienced by other victims of violent conflict (Autesserre, 2012). As Séverine Autesserre (2012, p. 205) states:

The dominant narratives have oriented international programs on the ground toward three main goals – regulating the trade of minerals, providing care to victims of sexual violence, and helping the state extend its authority – at the expense of all the other necessary measures, such as resolving land conflict, promoting inter-community reconciliation, jump-starting economic development, ensuring that state authorities respect human rights, and fighting corruption (Autesserre 2012, p. 205)

While Autesserre acknowledges the positive impact these dominant narratives have had in addressing issues related to sexual violence, she also highlights that they have come at the expense of other important issues. In addition, these narratives influence how women's agency in peacebuilding is perceived and welcomed. Therefore, in this section, I will highlight the role of women in peacebuilding in the DRC using available resources. It is essential to acknowledge that most of the literature focuses on women's agency following the First Congo War, often overlooking women's informal and grassroots actions that have historically occurred in Congo.

1.4.1. Congolese Women's Actions in Peacebuilding

After the Second Congo War, dialogues and peace negotiations were initiated. A study conducted by the Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative (2017) on women in the peace and transition process in the DRC highlights two key roles that Congolese women played during the Sun City negotiations of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. These roles were direct representation at the negotiation table and participation in a high-level women's problem-solving workshop. Although the Lusaka Peace Agreement established the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, it did not address women's issues in the peace agreement and lacked representation and/or participation of women's organizations. In fact, the participation of women's organizations in these negotiations had a positive impact on the country. One such example is the gender-related recommendations⁴⁰, which included the amendment of laws that discriminated against women. This resulted in the 2006 amendments to the Criminal Code regarding sexual violence and discrimination, as well as the Family Code, in the DRC Constitution. In addition, numerous campaigns against child marriage have gained considerable visibility over the past 20 years.

During the high-level problem-solving workshop, 64 women from a variety of backgrounds, including government officials, members of armed groups, members of civil society organizations (CSOs), and organized women's groups, participated and

⁴⁰ The gender-related recommendations were added to the agreements reached in Pretoria. These are the creation of rehabilitation centers for war-affected women and girls, the introduction of a 30 percent participation quota for women in all national-level decision-making sectors, the modification of laws discriminating against women, and the increase of the marriageable age of girls to 18 years.

represented women⁴¹. Initially, each participant aimed to represent the views and positions of their respective groups. As noted by IPTI (2017, p. 6):

Positions softened as the workshop progressed, and the women increasingly abandoned their party alliances and started to work together for a common agenda. Women from civil society and the churches notably played a bridging role between government and armed group participants.

Working together as a collective group helped Congolese women adopt a common agenda.⁴² Despite the progress made, some agreements from the peace negotiations remain unfulfilled. For instance, the goals of ending all hostilities and withdrawing all foreign rebel groups have not been fully realized. Foreign rebellions are still present in the DRC, including groups such as RED Tabara (Burundi), ADF (Uganda), and FDLR (Rwanda), among others. Moreover, the cessation of hostilities has not been achieved, and armed groups, militias, and the FARDC continue to be the primary instigators of violence and atrocities in the region.

Consistent with these views, the role of women's agency in peace-related work goes beyond representation and participation at the negotiation table. In 2010, the Ministry of Gender, Family, and Children adopted the National Action Plan to implement UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)

⁴¹Female representatives of every party to the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, except the MLC, participated in the high-level problem-solving workshop in Nairobi in 2002.

⁴² The agenda included: • End all hostilities and withdraw all foreign troops. • Respect the country's territorial integrity and the DRC's reunification. • Democratize the country. The Declaration elaborated further on gender provisions, which the women demanded, among other things: • The inclusion of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in the constitution's preamble. • Equal access to land and resources. • A 30 percent quota for women in all governmental institutions. • Internal commitment among the women in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue to ensure that there is no impunity for criminal acts and that rape is legislated as a crime against the humanity of women.

policies (WILPF, 2013). This step provided a framework for women's inclusion, participation, protection from gender-based violence, and social reform. Women's NGOs played an important role in developing monitoring reports based on political and practical indicators of inequalities and areas of progress (WILPF, 2013, p. 7). In addition, these organizations facilitated the application of Resolutions 1325 and 1820 (on the inclusion of youth in peace and security) at the provincial level, demonstrating the active participation of women in peace-related work.

The achievements of women's organizations during peace negotiations and their active participation in the WPS policies have led to widespread campaigns to ensure that these policies are applied throughout the DRC. A notable example is the work of community leader and human rights defender Julienne Lusenge, who has fought for the rights of women and girls for over 40 years (OHCHR, 2024). In response to ethnic divisions in Ituri, Lusenge and other women founded the NGO Solidarité Feminine Pour la Paix et le Development Integral (SOFEPADI), recognizing that women are the first victims of war but also hold the key to peace. Lusenge's work is emblematic of the many women working to promote peaceful solutions in the DRC. For more than a decade, SOFEPADI has organized women's marches against sexual violence to raise awareness and demand action against its widespread use in conflict zones.⁴³ This highlights the importance of women's organizations and their roles in advocating for peace and security in the region.

⁴³ SOFEPADI stands for Female Solidarity for Integrated Peace and Development. Every year, they carry out various activities to support women victims of SGBV and mobilize other women to join the networks of women peacebuilders.

Moreover, Congolese women are finding their voices in grassroots projects and community-based organizations, where they can exercise their agency in ways that speak to everyday experiences. UN Women documents the impact of grassroots women's organizations in Eastern DRC, highlighting the socio-economic reintegration of women in Mushinga to consolidate peace in the Walungu Territory of South Kivu. These projects aim to “reinforce local female leadership and peacebuilding by improving human rights knowledge among communities and enhancing women's economic empowerment in post-conflict environments” (UN Women, 2021). Women in South Kivu are coming together to mobilize others, utilizing community-based approaches, such as dialogue circles, to promote peacebuilding and gender equality. These initiatives create a sense of ownership among women, enabling them to see themselves as active agents of change. This approach fosters local women's leadership and empowers women to take on proactive roles in their communities, which has a significant impact on regional peace and development. Women's active roles have not been without challenges and obstacles. The following section provides more information on the challenges faced by Congolese women in peace-related activities.

1.4.2. Challenges Facing Women-led Peace Efforts

Since the beginning of the war in the DRC, women have faced several challenges, including but not limited to sexual violence, lack of opportunities, cultural and institutional barriers, and limited political representation (Le Roux et al., 2020; Sadie, 2010). Several peace agreements have been signed, various peace projects have been adopted, and development projects have been established. However, women have

remained underrepresented, especially during the negotiation of peace agreements, such as the 1999 Lusaka Peace Agreement, the 2003 Sun City Agreement, and the North and South Kivu Agreement (Sadie, 2010). To make sense of the lack of inclusion of women at the negotiation table, some have argued that representation and participation are dependent on the cultural setting and institutional mechanisms that constantly limit women's ability to intervene in post-conflict reconstruction (Sadie, 2010). Another reason for the exclusion of women in the Lusaka Peace Agreement is that it was a cease-fire agreement, prioritizing immediate cessation of hostilities, engaging the leading actors only.

Table 1 shows some of these gaps in the inclusion of women.

Agreements	Women Signatories	Women Lead Mediators	Women Witnesses	Women in negotiating teams
Lusaka Peace Agreement	NA	NA	NA	NA
Sun City Agreement	5%	0%	0%	12%
Acte d'engagement – Nord Kivu	5%	20%	0%	NA
Acte d'engagement – Sud Kivu	0%	20%	0%	NA

Table 1 Women's participation at the peace table Diaz et al. (2012)

The statistics in Table 1 above are borrowed from a UN Women study on women's participation in negotiations. Given the low numbers of women participating and being represented in peace negotiations, Diaz et al. (2012, p. 6) note that:

Given that so few peace agreements include any reference to gender, let alone treat gender-related issues comprehensively in the provisions of the accord, it is difficult to assert with confidence the specific conditions under which women's participation in peace agreements can result in better outcomes for the sustainability of peace or for the representation of women's interests.

Indeed, issues related to women's participation in peacebuilding are not new. For example, Hilhorts and Bashwira (2014, p. 23) remind us that women's movement groups in South Kivu began campaigning for a ceasefire in the 1990s, raising concerns about sexual violence and rape. Continuously, in 2002, other regional and international women's groups, such as the Femmes Afrique Solidarité and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), continued to organize marches to influence policy around these issues (Sadie, 2010). For instance, UNIFEM invited an additional 40 women to participate in the Sun City agreements, bringing the total number of participants to 340 (Hilhorts & Bashwira, 2014). Here, the argument is not centered on the number of women participating at the negotiation table but the quality of women present. To achieve meaningful peace, it is crucial to have women working with grassroots groups or involved in finding solutions to local problems at the negotiation table. Such women hold the potential to influence decision-making in a way that serves the interests of women and girls, while also advancing gender equality.

While there is growing awareness of the challenges faced by women in conflict situations, unfortunately, the tendency is to portray women as victims, which further isolates their agency. To mitigate the victim narrative challenges, recent studies on the

topic increasingly portray Congolese women as actors in violent conflicts (Sadie, 2010). This is because women have also served as active members in violent conflicts through livelihood-related activities such as mining, farming, and running businesses (Bashwira et al., 2014). The challenges that have arisen from these roles are that former combatants have been reintegrated into society through peace agreements, including the DDR process (Sadie, 2010). Unfortunately, women who participated in the conflict have limited access to DDR programs and face social exclusion (Sadie, 2010).

Paradoxically, the combination of social exclusion, gender inequality, and post-conflict challenges faced by women has facilitated the creation of local women's NGOs, small businesses, humanitarian relief, social counselling, and other educational activities aimed at empowering women (Sadie, 2010). However, most of these projects lack adequate funding to reach their potential. Sadie attributes these failures to the state, arguing that the lack of emancipatory opportunities for local indigenous women has profound implications for peacebuilding initiatives and women's rights.

Overall, existing studies on the role of women in peacebuilding emphasize the importance of representation, respect for human rights, and economic empowerment. However, most of the studies often fail to acknowledge some of the local initiatives led by women in fighting violence and injustice due to what Richmond (2009) calls an "Orientalist perspective"⁴⁴. It is important to add that the absence of traditional knowledge in the literature on women peacebuilders marginalizes women's contributions at the

⁴⁴ Orientalist perspectives involve the application of Western frameworks and methodologies to understand conflicts, often rooted in Global North paradigms. Scholars such as Richmond, Mac Ginty, Autesserre, and Coulibaly have critiqued these approaches, arguing that they marginalize local perspectives and frequently propose peace initiatives that are misaligned with the realities and needs of those most directly affected by the conflicts.

domestic level, making it difficult to acknowledge their participation in post-conflict reconstruction more broadly. The next section highlights the dilemmas of women as peace agents and takes a more general perspective of women's agency in peacebuilding.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section focuses on the literature review of this study. Specifically, it foregrounds the literature on women's agency in peacebuilding, while paying particular attention to community-based approaches to peacebuilding, including the formality and informality of women's roles. The chapter also unpacks key concepts used in the study in order to illustrate the meaning attached to them in this dissertation. As such, the primary purpose of this chapter is to highlight existing research on topics similar to this study and to identify and address potential gaps in the literature.

2.1. Conceptual Clarification

This study draws on several concepts, such as the notion of agency in peacebuilding and community-based approaches to peacebuilding. It also explains the meaning of formal and informal peacebuilding, which is key to understanding the rationale and objectives of this study.

Before delving into the key concepts employed in the study, it is important to explain why it focuses on women-led peace efforts in eastern Congo. Peace efforts refer to a broader form of peacebuilding which includes everyday peace, local, grassroots and community-based peacebuilding—all of these aim to create sustainable and durable peace, or, to put it simply, positive peace, as Galtung explains. According to Mac Ginty (2014), these forms of peacebuilding are often led by ordinary citizens (from local or grassroots communities) who engage in small, daily acts of peace in divided communities. In this

study, ‘women-led peace efforts’ refers to the peacebuilding work of local women involved in both the formal and informal sectors.

2.1.1. Agency and Peacebuilding

This study uses the term agency borrowing from the works of Naila Kabeer, where it highlights people’s choices and will to act on different things (Kabeer, 1999). The notion of agency is thus useful in this study because it emphasizes the choice of women-led peace efforts in taking action and impacting change. One way to think about agency is to understand one’s ability to make a choice. This definition is further complemented by the works of Barnes (2000), who describes agency as an internal power and capacity possessed by individuals, and which manifests itself through actions in response to events they are undergoing. In his view, these actions are voluntary based. Barnes contends that agency becomes problematic when blame interferes with individual choices and actions (2000). In the voluntary choice to act, individuals are blamed when their actions lead to negative outcomes. In a more explicit explanation, blame occurs when an individual is told that (s)he could have done better, or (s)he could have avoided the event (ibid).

Despite Barnes’s interesting perspective, his conception of agency focuses on individual voluntary action in social theories that fail to recognize the power of collective action. For this reason, the definition proposed by socio-economist and feminist scholar Naila Kabeer is more appealing for the purposes of this study. Kabeer (1999) explains agency as “an ability to define one’s goal and act upon it” (p. 438). She suggests that the exercise of agency involves individual and collective action. Thus, agency can have a

constructive or destructive meaning. The constructive meaning involves one's ability to choose or, in other words, to exercise agency through personal choice. Contrary to the destructive meaning, which implies implicit actions of using someone else's agency for destructive purposes (Kabeer, 1999, p. 436). Similarly, Kappler (2014) notes that destructive purposes occur when the fundamental values that are ingrained in people's lives are undermined.

Whether constructive or destructive, the conception of agency occurs whenever people's fundamental values are in place. Without further elaborating on the multiple conceptions of agency, it is important to clarify that this part of the chapter focuses on the peacebuilding agency. Consistent with this view, Kappler (2014) describes the peacebuilding agency as the manifestation of agency expressed by implicit or explicit actors who primarily focused on peacebuilding. In her argument, the peacebuilding agency reflects steps to change and improve cohabitation in everyday life. It is thus neither fully liberal nor neoliberal (ibid) the latter of which focuses on institutionalisation, democratisation, and power-sharing. Kappler's argument for a peacebuilding agency is born out of necessity: ordinary citizens working on initiatives that help them coexist and build a system that works for them. In this regard, peacebuilding is seen as an ongoing process that takes place from the micro- to the macro-level for the agency to be successful. Before diving into peacebuilding agency, it is necessary to first define the concept of peace.

The concept of peace has many different connotations for different people (Jeong, 2000, p. 19). The traditional definition includes peace as the absence of war; peace can

be the presence of security, equality, social justice, or economic stability. A peaceful society is characterized by various aspects, such as having peaceful dialogues and negotiations, respect for the rule of law, and having a stable and secure environment (Daley, 2006, p. 304). The need to understand peace stems from the existence of violence and conflict, as well as social cohesion and harmony. Moreover, Jeong (2000, p. 23) argues that the best way to understand peace is to prevent the loss of life and maintain human security by eradicating poverty and malnutrition. Hence, the conceptualization of peace are necessary to understand processes that contribute to peacebuilding in different contexts.

The term “peacebuilding”, especially from a policy point of view, first appeared in the 1990s when former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992) provided a comprehensive definition of peacebuilding as a process aimed at fostering sustainable peace, addressing the roots of violence and paving the way for reconciliation, democratic governance, and economic and political transformation. This definition is directly aligned with the works of prominent peace theorists John Paul Lederach and Johan Galtung, both of whom have made significant contributions to the field of conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

According to Lederach (1997), peacebuilding is a dynamic process centred on the resolution of ongoing conflicts and the creation of transformative frameworks for the establishment of sustainable peace through human interaction. Galtung (1976), on the other hand, characterizes peacebuilding as an effort to achieve sustainable peace by identifying and mitigating the root causes of violence, coupled with the prevention of future conflict by creating alternative measures where war might occur. Put simply,

peacebuilding is commonly understood as both a process and a practice designed to develop lasting solutions, address the underlying triggers of violence, and facilitate a seamless transition to harmonious coexistence.

Another way to understand peacebuilding agency is to understand it from a macro and micro level perspective. Macro-level peacebuilding consists of international peacebuilding operations and state-building (Bercovitch et al., 2005). It focuses on the liberal peacebuilding of peaceful negotiations and a transition from war to peace in a democratic manner (Daley, 2006, p. 305). Similarly, Bercovitch et al. (2005, p. 135) argue that from a macro-level perspective, peacebuilding processes prevent the escalation of violence by ensuring that all basic needs are met. In this context, the state and other peacebuilding partners tend to focus more on *negative peace* in order to provide citizens with the means for safety, security, and economic development. From a micro-level perspective, peacebuilding processes take place at the local level and within grassroots communities, using indigenous knowledge and local initiatives rather than international agencies (Richmond, 2010, p. 682).

Consistent with this argument, Daley (2006) points out that traditional initiatives such as the Gacaca court in Rwanda and the Ubashigantahe in Burundi serve as examples of local and non-political affiliations that use traditional knowledge to facilitate post-conflict reconstruction. Similarly, Millar (2020) argues that peacebuilding agency in everyday experiences is explicit, and those who practice it believe in the actions undertaken and are motivated to participate in traditional initiatives. Furthermore, everyday experiences involve multiple dimensions (e.g., social, cultural, economic,

religious, etc.) and are not derived from politics (Millar, 2020). Also, Mac Ginty (2014) adds that “everyday peace” is likely to be authentic and legitimate. It offers solutions that are accessible and acceptable to ordinary citizens, unlike other forms of macro-level peace processes.

2.1.2. Community-Based Approaches and Peacebuilding

In recent years, questions of agency in peacebuilding have been associated with locally-led peace initiatives – broadly captured by the “local-turn” debates (Paffenholz, 2015), which highlight the role of local population agency in peacebuilding to build sustainable reconciliation. Debates around the “local-turn” in peace studies emerged in the mid-2000s, providing new critical insights and responding to the crisis of liberal peacebuilding and its failure to sustain long-term peace (Randazzo, 2016; Mac Ginty, 2013; Richmond, 2013). According to Eliza Randazzo (2016), the local-turn emphasizes a shift away from top-down approaches and recognizes the importance of local agency. This shift prioritizes locally led initiatives that foreground community-based practices that reflect the realities of affected communities. Such approaches are responsive to the specific needs of the people involved.

This perspective is also reflected in Séverine Autesserre’s recent work, “*The Frontlines of Peace: An Insider’s Guide to Changing the World*” (2021). Autesserre underscores the importance of adopting a bottom-up/local-turn approach to peacebuilding. She illustrates this with stories from Idjwi Island in the DRC and Somaliland. In these regions, local communities actively prevent the escalation of violent conflict by

addressing minor tensions before they escalate. In Somaliland, these grassroots techniques have been formalized into “community policing systems,” in which communities report incidents of tension or suspicious activity to prevent outbreaks of violence (Autesserre, 2021, p. 137).

However, understanding local agency in peacebuilding is complex, especially in contexts where hostile communities, often divided by tribal differences, coexist in the same spaces. Examining the impact of community-based approaches (CBA) on peacebuilding raises the question of how these communities can coexist without escalating violence. John Paul Lederach’s concept of the “moral imagination” provides insight into such coexistence in his work *“The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace”* (2005). He defines the moral imagination as follows:

The moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes even our enemies; the ability to embrace complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown. (Lederach, 2005, p. 5)

Lederach advocates for prioritizing local knowledge, relationships, and creative solutions to find durable and sustainable peacebuilding strategies. He believes that when locally led initiatives are based on aspects of rebuilding and restoring communities, while addressing the root causes of violence, there is an opportunity to build lasting peace.

Lederach offers numerous examples of how conflict-affected communities are navigating violence and using the moral imagination to address their complex realities. One such example is the peacebuilding role of Wajir women in Northern Kenya. These women used their strategic positions within their families to influence peacebuilding

through the use of local knowledge, networks and mediation techniques (Lederach, 2005). In sum, Lederach argues that transformative solutions to peacebuilding are achievable by fostering empathy, embracing creativity, and maintaining hope for a more peaceful community. His approach highlights the importance of empathy, creative problem-solving, and a visionary outlook in developing effective and sustainable peacebuilding practices.

Overall, this study considers these concepts central to understanding women's efforts to strengthen a culture of peace among/within communities. In addition, this project examines peacebuilding initiatives from a community-based perspective, which, according to Haider (2009), refers to:

Approaches seeking to empower local community groups and institutions by giving the community direct control over investment decisions, project planning, execution and monitoring through a process that emphasizes inclusive participation and management (Haider, 2009, p. 4)

Indeed, the primary purpose of community-based peacebuilding is to provide space for local communities to transform peace processes into long-term peaceful relationships (Akande et al., 2021; Ramnarain, 2015; Haider, 2009). Accordingly, several scholars have argued that community-based peacebuilding is effective in restoring interpersonal relationships, including overcoming cohesion and identity-based violence (Ramnarain, 2015; Sentama, 2009; Weihe, 2004). Such approaches create a sense of ownership by the communities involved, hence the centrality of the local-turn dynamics in community-based peacebuilding.

2.1.3. Distinction between Formal and Informal Peacebuilding

Since this study focuses on the formal and informal aspects of women's agency in peacebuilding, it is important to explain the differences between these two concepts. In the above section, I discussed different scholarly perspectives on peacebuilding⁴⁵. These perspectives emphasize the formal and institutionalized nature of actors' approaches from either a top-down or bottom-up perspective. Conversely, peacebuilding theories that argue for a local-turn perspective⁴⁶ emphasize locally led initiatives that draw on indigenous and grassroots knowledge and practices. These latter approaches often involve more informal actions that are less legalistic or institutionalized.

Olaitan and Isike (2019) offer a nuanced distinction in understanding formal and informal peacebuilding. They argue:

The distinction between formal and informal peacebuilding is on two levels: the nature of the process and the approach employed to achieve peace. Formal peace processes generally use widely recognized methods such as peacekeeping, peace-making, Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR). These processes are usually top-down, male-dominated, and exclusionary, rooted in liberal notions of justice. On the other hand, informal peacebuilding employs persuasion, arbitration, mediation, conciliation, and reconciliation of conflicts at the micro and macro levels of society. It is bottom-up and inclusive of women and youths (Olaitan & Isike, 2019, p. 139).

Based on these explanations, formal peacebuilding is more visible in terms of representation and participation at the peace table. It also involves governmental agendas to ensure stability, in line with Galtung's concept of negative peace. In contrast, informal peacebuilding is more localized. Olaitan and Isike posit that these African processes are

⁴⁵ See Lederach, Galtung and Jeong

⁴⁶ see Mac Ginty, Randazzo, Gizelis, Richmond

rooted in restorative justice. They point out that peacebuilding can use both formal and informal methods. A specific example is the Gacaca court in Rwanda, which draws on traditional Indigenous knowledge and has been formalized at the national level, reflecting the community's understanding of restorative justice.

In summary, peacebuilding is difficult to define, as peace is a socially constructed and context-dependent concept. For some, it may mean economic stability; for others, security through military strength; and for still others, peace emerges from living in a society rooted in care and mutual respect. Based on my virtual fieldwork, women peacebuilders in Goma consistently emphasized their desire to live free from the fear of violent eruptions, to have food security, access to justice for women victims of SGBV, and harmonious neighborhood relations. For these women, peacebuilding is therefore understood as the pursuit of peaceful coexistence, economic stability, and fair access to justice.

The following section explores the role of women agency in peacebuilding.

2.2. Women and Community-based Peacebuilding

Although several studies have examined the impact of war and conflict on women, women-led peace efforts remain poorly understood. There are several reasons for this. First, there is limited research on the relationship between gender, conflict, and peace, particularly on issues relative to the impact of gender equality on peacebuilding efforts (Gizelis, 2018). Second, the complexity and dynamics of women's peacebuilding experiences in varying social contexts are rarely captured (Mueller-Hirth, 2019). This is

because gendered responsibilities shape peacebuilding institutions and/or organizations, and women's actions are set by their communities to complement social norms. Third, the informal roles of women in the peacebuilding sector are visibly neglected (Bukhari et al., 2021). One possible reason for this is that women involved in informal peacebuilding are primarily ordinary, uneducated women who are involved in everyday peace processes but are rarely recognized due to their social status.

For the purposes of this study, I will focus on four core areas: First, I will provide the context of women-led activities in wartime to provide a fresh perspective of women's realities during and in the aftermath of violent conflicts. These perspectives help us understand the opportunities and challenges that women face in post-conflict societies. Second, I will conceptualize the role of women in community-based peacebuilding in the context of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) policy. This is important because it sheds more light on women's formal and informal roles in community-based peacebuilding. In addition, the WPS policy emphasizes the impact of gender equality on peacebuilding. Third, I examine the impact of culture on women-led peace efforts. This will bring to the fore some of the discussions surrounding gendered responsibilities in peacebuilding. Finally, I study the ways in which women's caregiving roles contribute to the promotion of everyday peace at the community level.

2.2.1. Role of women in wartime

Historically, women's roles in war and violent conflict have been underrepresented. Media, literature, and cinema have predominantly portrayed women as

passive agents, while men have typically been depicted as warriors and the main heroes (Pankhurst, 2003; Pierson, 1989). These dominant narratives have significantly influenced perceptions of women's agency in both peace and war. In recent years, however, there has been a notable shift in the portrayal of women in the Global North. Television shows and movies increasingly portray women as superheroes or villains, reflecting changing perceptions of women as capable and active agents. Despite these improvements in visibility, significant factors in the Global South continue to portray women primarily as passive, innocent victims in media and literature. Providing examples of the shows people watch is crucial for understanding cultures and worldviews, as media often reflects societal beliefs, values, and preferences. Consequently, media portrayals can offer valuable insights into the prevailing belief systems within a given context. In line with this study, women's roles are dominated by similar narratives. Hence, it is essential to recognize women's active engagement in war and the various significant roles they play (Pankhurst, 2003) in order to fully capture their agency.

Scholarly work proves that women are not only victims of war but also play an active role in periods of wartime as combatants, primary caregivers, and conflict mediators (Tripp, 2015; Gizelis, 2015; Pankhurst, 2003). For instance, during the Algerian War of Independence against France (1954-1962), women played an active role, and many of them became freedom fighters (Tripp, 2015). In Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Rhodesia in Zimbabwe, women served as fighters in the struggle for liberation. Other women served as primary caregivers, providing food and shelter to the revolutionaries (Tripp, 2015; Salhi, 2010; Daoud, 1996). These activities help shape the understanding of women's active engagement in conflict, highlighting that, while only a minority of women

serve as combatants, the majority play a crucial role in supporting their communities. The perception of women as victims of violent conflict often means they can move around war zones with less suspicion. This is because they are not expected to play an active role in warfare, so they can carry messages and transport food to shelters and fighters.

Moreover, women also take on antagonistic roles in conflicts, such as participating in acts of terror, providing logistical support to terrorists, or even abducting young girls to be offered to terrorist groups, as evidenced by the actions of Boko Haram⁴⁷. Jessica Stern (2003) examines how women are recruited and radicalized to serve organizations such as Al-Qaeda, arguing that recruiters often exploit women's experiences of grievance to persuade them to engage in terrorism. She suggests that these groups provide women with a sense of purpose and identity, which is particularly appealing to those who feel alienated. In addition, more antagonistic roles were evident during the genocide against the Tutsi, where women participated in mass killings (Power, 2002). These examples illustrate the dual roles of women as both protagonists and antagonists in war.

Despite these active roles, women are often relegated to their traditional roles once the war has ended (Tripp, 2015; Ahmed, 1982). Feminist scholar Donna Pankhurst (2003) calls this a backlash against women in the post-conflict period. She argues that "rather than receiving support at the end of wars, women usually suffer a backlash against newfound freedoms" (2003, p161). Women's needs and rights are considered less important because it is assumed that there are much more pressing matters to attend to.

⁴⁷ As presented in the video [Captive](#), the stories highlight women who were once abducted by Boko Haram and later coerced into abducting other girls for the group's sons and combatants. The video illustrates how these women endured the trauma of captivity and the profound toll of conflict on their lives.

This neglect puts women back into their traditional roles and pushes them out of public life (Tripp, 2015). When these issues arise, women are expected to adapt to their previous roles and return to what the patriarchal system calls their biological duties.

In fact, some societies with strong patriarchal values dictate that women should be happy about it. The literature of some scholars has analyzed the relationship between gender-based violence and patriarchy (Ball, 2019; Pankhurst, 2008, 2004, 2003). According to patriarchal norms, a woman's value lies in her ability to give birth, marry, and manage the household. Looking at a woman from such a perspective, it is clear that her role in outbreaks of violence is limited to one of a passive victim. In fact, society's embrace of toxic masculinity determines how a woman should behave and her value and worth. Therefore, women's roles are generally not recognised in wartime and are highly neglected in the aftermath, as demonstrated in the work of Tripp and Pankhurst. This is a backlash against women.

A backlash against women is not just a consequence of post-conflict societies. Several scholars argue that armed conflict offers opportunities that empower women as hierarchical gender norms are disrupted (Lindsey, 2012; Lazarev, 2019; Berry, 2018). However, these opportunities are also met with a distinct form of backlash, as men resist the disruption of patriarchal systems, sometimes with deadly consequences (Lindsey, 2022; Pankhurst, 2008). Specifically, Lindsey notes:

A micro-level theory of backlash suggests that rather than valuing women's contributions to community protection, men will largely resent the destabilization of patriarchal norms. As women take on new roles, men may adopt more permissive preferences for violence against women to counteract ongoing challenges to the gender hierarchy (Lindsey 2022, p. 191).

This theory illustrates the oppressive actions women face when men re-assert their dominance in post-conflicts settings.

Not only have women suffered from a backlash in post-conflict reconstruction, but they also face significant exclusion in formal peacebuilding processes. Olaitan and Isike (2019) highlight the issue of women's low representation in formal peacebuilding, using Africa as an example. They argue that African women continue to face exclusion due to dominant narratives that prioritize men as the main combatants during war, thus justifying their primacy in peacebuilding negotiations. While it is true that men are often the primary combatants, Shepherd (2016) argues that women also engage in combat and contribute in numerous other ways, as previously discussed. Women's roles are often visible in the informal sector, but these contributions often go unreported, leading to further marginalization. Isike and Uzodike (2018) argue that this misrepresentation is deeply rooted in post-colonial patriarchy. In post-colonial Africa, political structures often undermined women's genuine political agency, perpetuating the non-recognition of their informal roles.

Meanwhile, there have been advances in national and international policies that advocate for the status of women in the aftermath of violent conflict and war. The following section highlights the evolution of these policies.

2.2.2. Conceptualizing the role of women in community-based peacebuilding

Since the 1995 Beijing Declaration on the implementation of gender equality and the effective inclusion of women in all development activities (UN, 1995), there has been

an increased focus on women's agency in various fields, including peacebuilding. In particular, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on WPS increased the visibility of women in peace efforts and urged all member states to adopt this resolution (UNSC, 2000). The resolution reaffirms the full respect and implementation of international humanitarian law and advances the urgency of protecting women and girls from sexual violence and rape in armed conflict. In paragraph 8 of the resolution, the Security Council urges all parties to a peace agreement to include a gender component, including:

- (a) The special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement and for rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction.
- (b) Measures that support local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution and that involve women in all of the implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements.
- (c) Measures that ensure the protection of and respect for the human rights of women and girls, particularly as they relate to the constitution, the electoral system, the police and the judiciary (UNSC, 2000).

Resolution 1325 has been instrumental in raising awareness of the roles of women in peacebuilding, while advocating for women's position in peace agreements, and representation. It gives full attention to women's agency from macro- to micro-level peacebuilding. In particular, paragraph 8 (b) emphasizes local women's peace initiatives, which in most cases are community-based practices. The WPS policy therefore encourages peacebuilders to increase women's participation and representation and to strengthen women-led peace efforts. This has increased scholarly debates on the role of women in peacebuilding.

Looking at the African Union 2020 report on the implementation of the WPS agenda, it is argued that these policies have gained high visibility in African countries.

However, challenges remain in terms of grassroots ownership and effective ways to monitor and report on improvements (AU, 2020). One way to look at implementation at the country level is through the adoption of the National Action Plan and its implementation. In 2019, a total of 25 African countries adopted the NAPs on the WPS agenda, with Uganda, Nigeria, and Mali transitioning to the third generation, and seven other countries developing their second-generation NAPs. Globally, as of November 2019, only 82 UN member states had adopted the NAP (Basu et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, implementing the WPS agenda appears to be a challenge for many countries. A study conducted by the UN Women on the inclusion of women in peace efforts found that between 1992 and 2018, only 3% of mediators, 4% of signatories, and 13% of negotiators were women (UN Women, 2019). Such a low number of active participants and representatives speaks to why member states are hesitant, as women's issues are not yet a top priority on their development agendas. Furthermore, advocates of the WPS agenda continue to fight for the inclusion and full participation of women in peacebuilding initiatives.

One of the more notable voices is that of feminist scholar Carol Cohn (2008), who argues that for the first time, issues of women's participation, representation, and agency in peacebuilding are being considered important peace and security matters at the international level. She adds that the debates have shifted not only from perceiving women as victims to seeing them as active agents who contribute to ending armed conflicts and enhancing sustainable peace. As such, the WPS policies promote the adoption of gender perspectives in peace processes. This means adopting strategies that allow women to participate in the reintegration and rehabilitation processes while supporting their local

agency. Meanwhile, the implementation of these policies remains subject to criticism. Scholars such as Nicola Pratt (2013) claim that the dominant narratives of a neo-liberal imperium⁴⁸ are increasingly visible in the WPS policies. In particular, she mentions that the way these policies are implemented excludes women who are not bound by them, thereby creating a form of imperialist-gendered agenda⁴⁹.

Others argue that the failure to implement the WPS policies continue to reinforce inequality, impoverishment, and exclusion at the peace table (Basu et al., 2020; UN Women, 2019; Manchanda, 2005). In a similar vein, Manchanda (2005) has argued that the exclusion of women from peace processes hinders their formal and informal participation in post-conflict peacebuilding. This is mainly due to the fact that a gendered perspective is completely ignored. Despite these concerns, recent research provides a lens through which the WPS policies could work and generate impact, and this is found in the work of Caitlin Hamilton (2020) and other scholars. The authors argue that when care is at the heart of the strategies to implement the WPS policies, transformation and sustainable peace become possible. This idea stems from empirical evidence that organizations with care at the core of their values increase commitment and productivity (Hamilton et al., 2020).

Despite the robust framework of the WPS agenda, its implementation in the DRC⁵⁰ faces significant challenges, particularly at the grassroots level. These include inadequate funding, weak institutional support, and cultural barriers that hinder women's

⁴⁸ Gramsci (1971, p. 12) defines “neoliberal imperium” as a hegemony that is dependent upon the dialectic of consent and coercion, of material and discursive practices, and of elites and non-elites.

⁴⁹ An imperialistic gendered agenda is a program advanced in Westernized views, which undermines other unrelated views.

⁵⁰ This gap is further elaborated in the findings and analysis chapters of this dissertation.

participation. Furthermore, the agenda often prioritizes formal mechanisms over informal, community-based approaches, which limits its relevance in contexts like Eastern Congo where grassroots peace efforts play a pivotal role.

These views underscore the questions and approaches used to examine the formality and informality of women-led peace efforts, as I explain in the next section.

2.2.3. The formality and informality of women's agency in community-based peacebuilding

Several studies have examined various challenges and obstacles related to women's agency (Machanda, 2005; Goetz & Jenkins, 2016; Nagel, 2021). According to Goetz and Jenkins (2016), these obstacles have a social, economic, legal, and cultural bearing. They stem from the neglect of women's agency, thereby impeding the social transformation of women's roles (Goetz & Jenkins, 2016). For instance, human rights scholar and activist Rita Manchanda (2005) argues that women's agency has been widely affected by the discrimination of women as agent-free victims and gendered relations in wartime. She claims that the portrayal of women as victims plays a crucial role in disempowering the agency itself (Manchanda, 2005).

On the issue of gender relations, Nagel (2021, p. 434) asserts that gender relations affect women's agency by imposing restrictions such as "access to economic, political, and educational opportunities." It is important to clarify that the challenges to women's agency in peacebuilding are not limited to the obstacles encountered within society, but can also come from the peacebuilding agency itself. This is anchored in Kappler's

statement that peacebuilding agency should not be romanticized because they can become constructive or destructive processes. She goes on to suggest that sometimes destructive activities create new nuances of conflictual peacebuilding processes. Therefore, women's agency can also generate negative meanings based on the actions taken. Indeed, Kappler (2014) suggests that peacebuilding agency is not consensual, especially when it interacts with cultural norms. A similar argument is made by Goetz and Jenkins (2016), who describe this as a challenge of the political environment that exacerbates conflict while increasing tensions in the context of cultural norms.

Nonetheless, women's agency is not only subject to obstacles; there are multiple ways in which agency operates that have equally received the attention of scholars (Justino et al., 2018; Goetz & Jenkins, 2016; Buvinic et al., 2012; Manchanda, 2005; Kabeer, 1999). Importantly, this study embraces the idea of women's agency in line with how it operates alongside the notion of opportunity (Goetz & Jenkins, 2016), resilience and caregiving roles at both the macro and micro levels of peacebuilding. The macro-level dimension outlines women's agency in participation and representation, while the micro-level dimension focuses more on the informal actions within traditional roles such as women's caregiving and other domestic roles within communities. Women's experiences during violent conflict and in the post-conflict period are likely to influence the operationalization of their agency. This explains the rationale for considering agency in the context of opportunities and resilience borne out of inequality and oppression.

2.2.3.1. Formality of Women's agency in Peacebuilding

While there has been much research focused on the interconnections between women and peacebuilding, much of the discussion has emphasized the formal roles. One such discussion revolves around the place of women at the negotiation table (Reilly, 2018; Manchanda, 2005). Here, the main question has been whether participation at the negotiation table extensively contributes to the adoption of a gendered agenda for peacebuilding.

Although the active role of women in peacebuilding has been demonstrated by scholars and practitioners, research in this area remains minimal. Little has been done to understand the cultural norms at community level that influence women's participation in peacebuilding. As Sadie (2010) mentions, cultural norms dictate women's actions, often limiting their ability to intervene in peace and security matters. One such scenario is the assertion that some women in Eastern DRC believe that it is fate that requires them to suffer and that if God decided to end their suffering, he would do so.

Another area of discussion regarding women's formal roles in peacebuilding is the idea of 'embracing opportunities', which is found in Goetz and Jenkins's (2016) study. The authors argue that national and international actors should pay more attention to providing opportunities and safe working environments for women's organizations to flourish. These ideas find meaning in the WPS policies that require United Nations (UN) member states to protect women's rights, increase women's representation and participation in peace talks, and strengthen their community-based peace initiatives. As such, women embrace these roles and use them to increase the visibility of their agency.

Consistent with these views, Mueller-Hirth (2019) argues that Kenyan women living in communities affected by post-election violence (PEV) actively participated in the development of early warning systems. Women played an important role in facilitating dialogues, resolving disputes within their communities and providing peace-related training to encourage more women to take action at the community level. However, there is little research on how such actions lead to sustainable peace.

Meanwhile, Kabeer's (1999) view of women's empowerment as dependent on opportunities is reflected in Goetz and Jenkins's view of opportunities at the peace table and in negotiations. Kabeer contends that providing women with opportunities is not a guarantee of empowerment, but it is sufficient to inform social transformation processes. Indeed, Goetz and Jenkins drew from Kabeer's conception of resources and opportunities as preconditions for the exercise of agency (i.e., women's participation in conflict resolution, post-conflict elections, and economic reconstruction). According to them, women's agency still suffers from implicit structures and inadequate methods for the full operationalization of the agency (Goetz & Jenkins, 2016). Some of these structures and methods include strong patriarchal norms that devalue women's agency while setting out the specific roles that women should hold within society. For instance, in some areas, women are not permitted to voice their opinions in public. Recently, there was news from Iran of a 17-year-old who was murdered for not covering the part of her hair. Other inadequate methods include tokenistic representation, whereby women are given a place on committees and in institutions without any real power to influence decision-making, as Goetz and Jenkins refer to it.

Although Goetz and Jenkins consider the limitations of opportunities to influence women's participation more broadly, it is important to note that other studies have highlighted the centrality of women's participation and representation in influencing social transformation. A good example is the UNSC Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, which urges all member states to involve women in the prevention, protection, and participation in peacebuilding and peacekeeping missions (UNSC, 2000). It places special emphasis on the status of women and challenges social and cultural norms that limit women's participation or practices that give less consideration to women.

The creation of the WPS policies was considered a milestone in the implementation of Resolution 1325. The WPS policies have four pillars: prevention, participation, protection, and relief recovery (UNDP, 2019, p. 5). These four pillars emphasize the importance of including women in all stages of conflict. The first pillar, 'prevention,' aims to prevent all types of violence against women and girls during and after conflict. The second pillar, 'participation,' refers to equal participation and representation in decision-making (ibid). The third pillar, 'protection,' ensures that women and girls are protected from rape and sexual violence. The final pillar, 'relief and recovery,' ensures that women's peace agency is supported (ibid).

In addition to this resolution and related WPS, there are a growing number of global initiatives. For instance, through Agenda 2063, the AU seeks to empower women at all levels and promote effective gender equality (AU, 2014). As such, the African Union has encouraged member states to fulfill Resolution 1325 through the NAP. The problem, however, is that only 25 out of 55 countries have adopted the NAP (Tawiah, 2021). This

slow progress shows the limited willingness of the member states to include women in peace efforts. According to Tawaiah (2021), this may explain why African women still face gender-based discrimination and violence, poverty, and lack of political representation, especially at the sub-regional level. Nevertheless, the emergence of WPS can be partly linked to the growth of women-led peace initiatives. Indeed, these initiatives have the potential to serve as a foundation for women's participation and representation at the national and international levels.

Accordingly, some believe that increasing levels of participation and representation have gained attention in women's peace activism more broadly (Reilly, 2018; Manchanda, 2005). For example, the Liberian Women's Initiative and the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace Movement, effectively contributed to peace agreements and ceasefire calls by advocating for women's inclusion and participation in the peace negotiations (Shulika & Muthuki, 2021, p. 27). Since then, there has been a growing number of women-led initiatives advocating for full implementation of the UNSC Resolution 1325 and the full observance of women's rights in Liberia (ibid). In other words, these actions are not insignificant to the overall peacebuilding effort. Women-led peace efforts in Liberia, as exemplified by Leymah Gbowee's (2011) mobilization during the country's civil war, provide a compelling parallel to the initiatives in Eastern Congo. Both contexts reveal the transformative potential of women's grassroots movements in addressing deeply entrenched conflicts.

In fact, authors such as Ringera (2014) have argued that the inclusion of women's views brings a different perspective to the peace agenda – one that goes beyond the

narratives of power-sharing and ceasefire to include issues that transcend vulnerable groups such as women, children, elders, and persons with disabilities in the post-conflict period. Ringera (2014) suggests that the active roles played by women's grassroots projects during the 2007/8 PEV in Kenya helped to address some of the issues that vulnerable groups faced during the PEV. These roles included women working as activists, educators, peacebuilders, and formal and informal mediators. A similar view is expressed by Tawiah (2021), who argues that women's local initiatives serve to advocate for peace and social transformation while observing the fluidity of cultural contexts. As argued in the following sections, culture is a crucial element in establishing women's agency in the overall peacebuilding process. Thus, the next section explores how women's agency intersects with cultural meanings.

2.2.3.2. Understanding Informal Peace Processes Through Cultural Meaning

In addition to the inconsistencies regarding women's formal roles in peacebuilding initiatives, policy and academic debates have equally shown that there is a lack of consensus regarding women's informal roles. Such debates can be found in Rita Manchanda's (2005) study on women's agency in peacebuilding. According to the author, women's informal roles in community-based peacebuilding revolve around domestic tasks. These arise from resilience, motherhood, the practice of care and empathy, and the use of traditional knowledge to inform peaceful coexistence within communities. For such transformation to take place, Manchanda (2005) and Alaga (2010) remind us that women must become resilient to certain traditional norms and outbreaks of violence. These

perspectives are important because they allow us to acknowledge the power of agency to challenge the perception of women as victims and see them as capable of making significant contributions to conflict transformation.

Collectively, these concepts highlight the central role of informality in culturally grounded peace efforts. Such processes have been shown to facilitate women's empowerment because they build on actions of resilience and opportunity. At other times, women's agency in peacebuilding operates in ways that contradict culture and gendered norms. For example, Nagel (2021) explains that in societies where men and women have different roles and responsibilities, masculinity is favoured over femininity. Therefore, when women respond to conflict and emphasize social change, they force the same change within their gendered norms. Similarly, these actions go beyond seeking justice but restoring unity and reconciliation through women's peacebuilding agency.

Impact of Culture

While there is no consensus on what culture means, it generally refers to the historical significance of values and knowledge that inform human actions and beliefs (Hammersley, 2019; Sewells, 1999; Geertz, 1993; Swidler, 1986). Given the ambiguities surrounding culture, scholars such as William Sewell (1999) highlight two points to consider when attempting to conceptualize culture. First, culture is seen as a set of social life that expands ontology of human existence. The first point refers to culture as a web of social life that adds depth and meaning to human existence. Second, it alludes to the idea of belonging to a social group through beliefs and cultural artifacts. These can be material,

symbolic or contemporary artefacts. Material artefacts are things like traditional clothing that have meaning to a certain group of people. Symbolic artefacts could be a language spoken by a specific group, and contemporary artefacts could be a flag that people refer to as their political symbol.

As a result, culture informs traditional norms to which individuals and collective groups refer in their everyday lives. In this sense, people's actions and responsibilities are rooted in their meaning of culture. Although Trend (2007) believes that these meanings are ignored and undervalued — partly because of colonial hegemony creating a hierarchy in which imperialist culture is valued more highly than local indigenous culture⁵¹, which is often portrayed as primitive — it is important to note that moral values find meaning in this aspect of culture. It is also important to note that societies find meaning in this aspect of culture through their moral values. This also influences how cultural violence is perceived.

Peace theorists such as the late Johan Galtung (1990, p. 291) define *cultural violence* as “the symbolic sphere of our existence used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence.” He goes on to suggest that cultural violence operates by changing “morality and making reality opaque” (p. 292). For instance, society shapes both unacceptable and acceptable behaviours, making certain crimes legitimate while tolerating structural violence based on the context of violence. In a related work, Galtung (1975) explains structural violence as systemic exploitation by powerful agents. Caprioli

⁵¹ Local indigenous cultures refer to the practices and beliefs of local communities in a given area. These are viewed in terms of material, symbolic, or contemporary artefacts. Understanding these cultures, especially when studying a group of people, can help non-indigenous people adapt and learn to communicate with that group.

(2005) also believes that structural violence feeds cultural norms and ensures their sustainability from one generation to another. This may explain the exclusion of women from various peace agreements, gender profiling, and the use of rape and other forms of sexual exploitation as a tool of war. When cultural norms are similar to state policies, certain decisions seem impossible to implement, namely, the fulfillment of gender equality. In situations of violent conflict, whenever cultural norms determine people's everyday behaviours, both men and women are likely to develop resilience mechanisms to protect themselves, which may require overriding cultural meanings.

Women's Resilience

Although the concept of resilience has long been debated, few studies have explored its role in peacebuilding, and even fewer have examined the agency of women. David Chandler (2014, p. 9) is one scholar who defines resilience as an 'emerging framework that facilitates the adaptation of policymaking to a world in which politics seems to require radical renewal and rethinking'. In this context, resilience is not a fixed concept; rather, it provides a new understanding and way of thinking. According to Chandler's definition, resilience is about shifting from radical points of view, control, or ways of thinking, and embracing flexibility, adaptation, and learning. Politically speaking, given that traditional politics manifests as more top-down, state-centric approaches, this definition of resilience leads to an understanding of different forms of governance that adapt to changes, making space for bottom-up approaches and managing risks rather than eliminating them in order to find suitable solutions to existing problems. Chandler's definition of resilience provides a shared understanding of the concept and its potential to

drive societal change. While the meaning of resilience in Chandler's terms helps to contextualise this study, it does not fully capture how resilience informs the informal actions of women's agency in peacebuilding, as most of these actions are community-led.

However, the European Commission (2012, p. 5) provides a more adaptable definition. Accordingly, resilience is defined as "the ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, to adapt, and to quickly recover from stresses and shocks" (EC 2012, p. 5). Studies on issues of resilience primarily aim to examine the different ways in which individuals or groups of people navigate through challenges and chaos. In the context of peacebuilding, resilience theories are increasingly gaining attention due to the limited efforts other theories, such as liberal peace, offer in understanding local dynamics. In this line, Juncos and Joseph (2020, p292) argue that due to the failure of liberal peace to achieve sustainable peace, peacebuilding organizations have attempted to find alternatives to existing peacebuilding mechanisms; this is where resilience comes into place. The purpose is to study past failures and find new ways that can provide other perspectives in peacebuilding. Indeed, resilience finds its meaning in the local-turn debates, where it is perceived as a way of adapting and finding solutions to protracted crises.

Meanwhile, studies on resilience have mostly focused on ecological, disaster management and health crisis resilience, rather than women's agency in peacebuilding per se (see Kruk et al., 2015; Alexander, 2013; Folke, 2006). Other discourses, such as those of Chandler (2014) and De Coning (2016), have also conducted extensive research on resilience and peacebuilding, albeit with less of a gender focus. Nevertheless, they provide

a good understanding of resilience which contributes knowledge on how women demonstrate resilience through adaptability and social transformation. Fewer studies, such as those by Gizellis and Björkdahl (2015) and Hudson (2017), offer interesting perspectives on the intersection of resilience, gender, and peace and security studies.

For the purposes of this study, resilience is understood as a process that explores the informality of women-led peace efforts. Similarly, this study posits that resilience empowers women to recognise the nature of the problem, comprehend the conflict within their societies, and challenge traditional norms by venturing beyond their comfort zones. The concept of resilience contributes to our understanding of women's agency in everyday situations. Essentially, understanding resilience as defined by Chandler leads to social transformation and change in everyday reality, which is what women's agency tends to achieve. Yadav (2021) builds on this view, contending that everyday reality creates nonlinear social change through the influence of active societal events.

Accordingly, Yadav (2021) argues that conflict creates opportunities for women to build resilience and effect change. Following her extensive research on women's agency in Nepal, she highlighted the lived experiences of various groups, including tempo drivers, war widows, women ex-combatants, and female politicians. She argues that the war in Nepal led to a rupture in gender norms, allowing women to take on roles and responsibilities that would not otherwise have been accessible to them. However, this enabled women to assert their agency and challenge traditional norms. Manchanda (2005) observes that the Maoist movement in Nepal in the late 1990s and early 2000s forced men to join the movement and take shelter with women and children. Such events are

significant for peacebuilding as they allowed women to protect their families by taking a leading role in the conflict and campaigning against human rights abuses (Manchanda, 2005). According to Manchanda, these events enabled Nepali women to become more visible and campaign for reconciliation among and within different groups.

Furthermore, Bukari et al. (2021) examine the resilience of women peacebuilders in the Ekufmi-Narkwa market in Ghana, following the 2012 ethnic crisis. Market women, including their traditional queen, used traditional knowledge – such as communal greetings, forming associations, and using traditional dispute resolution methods – to restore balance and rebuild stability in their community. Bukari et al. (2021) note that these women engaged in daily peacebuilding efforts, transcending ethnic divisions and influencing their spouses to choose dialogue over violence, often leveraging their roles as mothers to dissuade men from orchestrating violent actions.

The next chapter expands on the theoretical underpinnings of this study, furthering the resilience of women in traditional African contexts and other ways of understanding women's agency in peacebuilding.

CHAPTER THREE: A THEORETICAL BLEND BETWEEN AFRICAN FEMINISM, UBUNTU AND THE ETHICS OF CARE

3.1. Chapter Summary

This chapter examines the role of African women in fostering a culture of peace within their communities. While existing WPS policies provide a robust framework for including women in peace processes, scholarly research indicates a significant gap in their practical application. Despite these limitations, women continue to demonstrate resilience by advancing transformative solutions for community development. Notably, the cases of women's rallies in Liberia and grassroots interventions in Kenya illustrate how African women utilize both formal and informal means to support their communities as demonstrated in chapter two of this dissertation.

Additionally, the analysis of African feminism explores how women challenge social norms, decolonize policies that position women as inferior, and contribute to post-conflict reconstruction. These perspectives are supported by the work of African feminist Njoki Wane on understanding African feminism, Hudson's (2009) research on post-conflict reconstruction in Rwanda, and Pamela Machakanja's (2015) analysis of the application of African traditional knowledge and culture in dispute resolution.

Furthermore, this chapter discusses how the intersection of Ubuntu philosophy, the Ethics of Care, and African feminism enriches the understanding of women-led peace efforts. Ubuntu emphasizes the significance of communalism, peaceful coexistence, and reconciliation, all of which are critical to women's roles in peacebuilding in Africa. The

Ethics of Care, as articulated by Virginia Held (2005) and Joan Tronto (1998), underscores the importance of nurturing relationships within society and setting debates on this form of ethics as a moral and a political philosophy. This theoretical synthesis highlights peacebuilding approaches likely to foster lasting peace, although they require full commitment to be effective.

This chapter reviews the literature that supports women-led peace initiatives in Africa, and some of the existing gaps. Indeed, further research is necessary to fully capture the extent of women's involvement in community-based approaches. Current studies often overlook informal roles women play at the community level, deeming them less significant. Additionally, existing literature reveals limited opportunities for women's inclusion at peace negotiation tables, despite various policies intended to promote their participation. Cultural factors are frequently cited as barriers that perpetuate gender inequality; however, nuances within some cultures also reveal how women have historically served as powerful mediators. Continued research in this field is essential to effectively demonstrate the impact of women-led peace efforts.

In summary, a nexus of African feminism, Ubuntu, and the Ethics of Care provides a decolonial lens for rethinking peacebuilding, particularly in challenging dominant methodologies and mainstream literature that often marginalize local perspectives. While conventional approaches, such as liberal peacebuilding, tend to adopt top-down strategies—frequently promoted by international actors like the UN—this nexus foregrounds the value of local knowledge, relational practices, and community-centered solutions. It emphasizes bottom-up approaches, collective agency, and care-centric practices that sustain peace in everyday life, rather than solely relying on formal

institutions or elite negotiations. Moreover, by integrating African feminist insights, Ubuntu, and care ethics, this perspective highlights how gendered, culturally embedded, and relational practices contribute to durable and context-sensitive peace, offering an alternative to universalized, externally imposed models.

3.2.Theoretical Foundation

Adopting African feminism as the foundational pillar of this theoretical framework is based on the assumption that indigenous knowledge and culture are fundamental to understanding women-led peace efforts in Africa (Steady, 1989; Wane, 2011-2012; Nkealah, 2016). Furthermore, African feminism delves into historical texts on the role of African women in the pre-colonial period and further challenges how women's agency was shaped during and after colonization. This branch of feminism offers interesting ways of understanding women's agency and the value they held into society.

Relatively, African women, in pre-colonial Africa contributed to all aspects of the society, including political, social and economic participation (Adjepong, 2000; Weir, 2006; Ajyeampong and Fofack, 2012; Moagi and Mtombeni, 2020). They held senior positions and were able to contribute to decision making. In addition, this theory probes the resilience of women in post-colonial Africa, where not only they had to challenge the newly established systems that accentuated gender inequality but also finding ways to intervene despite the obstacles and barriers faced. Recent debates also examined how this theory contributes knowledge in shaping women-led peacebuilding efforts (Hudson, 2009).

In addition to African feminism, this chapter incorporates insights on the Ubuntu philosophy and the Ethics of Care. Ubuntu philosophy serves as an African humanistic philosophy that puts empathy and forgiveness at the core of its principles (Murithi, 2006). While the Ethics of Care, espouse the idea of putting caring principles as moral values that every society should follow (Held, 2005). These moral values enlarge the prospects of care, empathy, communalism and solidarity within community-based peacebuilding discourse. In light of the complexities and opportunities surrounding women's roles, this chapter considers the proposed theoretical framework a useful and comprehensive way of understanding the meaningful ways in which women contribute to the transformation of their societies.

While Ubuntu philosophy and the Ethics of Care may appear to offer utopian solutions, it is important to recognize the complexities involved in applying these theories. They should not be viewed as simplistic or idealistic frameworks; rather, they should be understood as alternative perspectives on society that provide valuable insights into achieving sustainable peace.

The following sections, further delve into African Feminism, Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care.

3.3.Setting Stage for African Feminism

Before delving into African feminism, it is important to outline the broader feminist lens, which encompasses various forms of feminism and their distinct goals. Feminism, as an evolving movement, initially gained prominence in Europe and America, where its early stages were marked by the fight for women's legal and voting rights, often

referred to as the first wave. This period, spanning the 19th and early 20th centuries, was characterized by suffragists advocating for basic legal recognition and voting rights for women (Lerner, 1993).

The second wave emerged in the 1960s, focusing on improving women's social, cultural, and reproductive rights in response to longstanding marginalization. Prominent figures like Betty Friedan (1963) highlighted the dissatisfaction many women felt with restrictive domestic roles, pushing for broader social change. The third wave, which began in the 1990s, arose partly as a critique of the earlier waves, particularly for their lack of inclusivity regarding race, class, and sexual orientation. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality became central to this wave, acknowledging the interconnected nature of various forms of discrimination.

Currently, the fourth wave of feminism emphasizes the use of digital tools for mobilization and social advocacy. Emerging in the early 21st century, this wave employs online platforms to address issues like sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and body image, reaching a global audience with feminist messages (McRobbie, 2009).

While these waves offer an overview of feminist evolution, African feminism does not neatly fit within the third and fourth waves. Scholars such as Filomina Steady (1982), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) have critiqued these waves for their Western-centric bias, which often universalizes women's experiences and overlooks the specific socio-political realities of African women. Central to these critiques is the failure to acknowledge the importance of local cultures, the legacies of colonization, and the distinct historical experiences that shape African women's lives.

Recent scholarship by African feminist thinkers seeks to ground feminism in policy and local contexts, recognizing the complex socio-political realities faced by African women. Scholars like Awino Okech (2019), Amina Mama (1997, 2007), Sylvia Tamale (2011, 2017), and Njoki Wane (2007, 2008, 2010, 2011) have contributed to this body of work, emphasizing the need for a feminism that is rooted in African cultural practices, history, and experiences.

3.3.1. A Feminist Lens: Different Theories

The debates surrounding the four waves of feminism, have been enriched by discussions on the different theories of feminism and their implications. In the field of international relations, peace and conflict studies, topics touching on feminism have advanced ideas of liberal feminism, standpoint feminism, difference feminism, African feminism or even womanism. To start the discussion let's set the context of women's roles in conflict times.

During conflict times, the roles of women often shift significantly. Singh (2010) argues that women's agency in both violence and peace is context-dependent, shaped by the nature of the conflict. For instance, in regions like South Asia, women may abandon traditional roles to become combatants during wartime, only to revert to their previous positions once peace is restored. Singh challenges the conventional narrative that portrays women primarily as victims or vulnerable actors in conflict, emphasizing their capacity for agency. The fact that women's roles shift back to domestic responsibilities put women in precarious conditions because acting in previous roles and responsibilities becomes harder and increases GBV.

Meanwhile, there are other cases where women perform heroic actions in conflict times, which in return is mythologized and embraced by some feminist peace activists (Goetz and Jenkins 2016, p. 214). Such scenarios are usually found in places where some women act as combatants or hold special roles in the liberation fights like in the case of Algeria's cessation wars. These views are critiqued by feminist scholar Diane Otto, who claims that the idealization of women's wartime contributions, often disrupt conventional expectations of femininity, and undermine the nurturing roles associated with mothering (Otto, 2006).

Despite these critiques, other feminist theories such as the liberal feminism tend to be in favor of such views as they demonstrate the ability of women to act like men. Liberal feminists advocate for equal representation and opportunities for all genders, challenging traditional gender roles that limit women's participation in politics, military service, or other domains (Hudson, 2009; Vincent, 2003; Goldstein, 2001). They argue that exclusion based on gender constitutes discrimination, with some feminists specifically targeting the military as an institution that should not be viewed as inherently male-dominated. Liberal feminists also emphasize equal pay for equal work across all sectors, including the armed forces (Goldstein, 2001). However, Harding (1986) critiques this approach, suggesting that liberal feminism's focus on assimilation into male-dominated spaces perpetuates patriarchal norms by requiring women to conform to behaviors valued in men.

In contrast, difference feminism argues that disparities between men and women should only be viewed negatively when "sexist cultures devalue feminine qualities instead of valuing, celebrating, and promoting them" (Goldstein, 2001, p. 41). Difference

feminists maintain that women excel in peacebuilding and decision-making while being less inclined toward war. This perspective is often echoed by standpoint feminists, who characterize women as inherently peaceful, nurturing, and more connected to life-giving roles, in contrast to men who are depicted as aggressive and dominant (Bakker, 1997). However, gender-relational feminists advocate for a peacebuilding approach that adheres to feminist principles of equality, rather than reinforcing gender binaries (Porter, 2016).

In addition to these views, Donahoe (2019) critiques the dominance of Western feminist discourses, noting their limited reflection of indigenous voices, particularly in Africa. As she argues, a feminist lens that acknowledges diverse identities and cultural contexts enables a more nuanced understanding of women's roles in social, political, and economic stability, as well as in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. In essence, these feminist views, help set stage for African feminism and also contribute to the understanding of the evolution of feminism and the different meanings it holds across generations.

In line with these views, the following section dives more into understanding African feminism.

3.3.2. African Feminism

Filomena Chioma Steady, a distinguished African feminist scholar, has been a prominent advocate for women's rights, with a particular focus on gender, development, and environmental sustainability. She has made significant contributions to the discourse on African feminism, challenging Western feminist paradigms and emphasizing the need for a context-specific approach. In her definition of African feminism, Steady writes:

African feminism, as defined in 1981, outlined the value of African women in the ideological, institutional, and customary realms. Women's power bases are partly derived from cultural values that stress the potency of a female principle governing life and reproduction through motherhood and the centrality of children. Women can also control political and ritual spaces. Women's indigenous groups can provide critical leveraging mechanisms for women and are instrumental in promoting sustainable development projects. So rather than dismiss African cultures as archaic, we need to conduct more studies using culture as the paradigmatic framework that can produce action-oriented research capable of transforming society and empowering women (Steady 2005, p. 320).

This definition is employed in this dissertation to establish the foundation of African feminism. This branch of feminism highlights two essential aspects for understanding and studying the roles and contributions of African women. First, it encompasses the ideological, institutional, and customary realms, whereas other branches of feminism often focus exclusively on political or social dimensions. Based on the meaning of African feminism, these roles are interconnected. Second, this definition underscores the intersectionality that exists between cultural and political roles in Africa, particularly during the pre-colonial period. This intersection suggests that cultural attributes significantly influence the political positions individuals occupy in public spaces. These contexts contribute to the understanding of African feminism as a decolonial feminist theory, bridging gaps between the socio-political realities of society. As Steady notes, cultural knowledge of African societies is important in deconstructing western-centric biases and can be used to transform society and empower women.

Historically, African feminism draws its theoretical stipulations from women's experiences in the pre-colonial period (Machakanja, 2015; Wane, 2011; Mikell, 2011; Steady, 2005). Thus, to examine women's agency, is seeing African feminism as "part and parcel of African women's lived experiences," drawing from the works of scholar and

black feminist Njoki Wane (2011, p. 7). In her view, African feminism is a decolonization process, focusing on communalism and cooperation (Ibid, 9). Women used traditional knowledge to empower other women by means of collective work. This sense of communalism is embedded in African cultures (Ibid, 10), which differs from Western feminism – focusing on individualism and highlighting men as the major challenge for women’s inclusivity. Wane asserts that African feminism does not exclude men in the process, as they are perceived as essential allies.

To understand African feminism, it is essential to examine the literature regarding the role of African women during the pre-colonial period. Numerous scholars assert that women were actively engaged in the development and politics of their societies in pre-colonial Africa (Adjepong, 2000; Weir, 2006; Akyeampong & Fofack, 2012; Moagi & Mtombeni, 2020). Their involvement included participation in decision-making, dispute resolution, and economic development (Adjepong, 2000). For example, in the Zulu Kingdom, women occupied senior positions that enabled them to contribute to political processes and actively mediate conflicts (Weir, 2006, p. 8; Moagi & Mtombeni, 2020, p. 8). Additionally, women in sub-Saharan Africa were engaged in agriculture, trade, weaving, basket-making, bead-making, and ceramics, all of which significantly contributed to their societies’ economic development (Gimba, 2012).

Despite this active involvement, Gimba (2012) argues that African women were often marginalized and perceived as the inferior gender. This perception stemmed largely from the societal preference for male children, which was attributed to the anticipated division of labor as children grew. Moreover, customs and taboos maintained women’s

subordinate status to men, while traditional ideologies frequently regarded women as property of their husbands. Akyeampong and Fofack (2012) further note that colonial constructs reinforced these norms, exacerbating barriers to women's participation in the economic development of their societies.

Although gender relations in pre-colonial Africa were problematic and frequently deemed the feminine gender as inferior, one could argue that, in the absence of colonization, there was potential for societies to progress organically. In many communities, women's roles were valued and acknowledged (Moagi & Mtombeni, 2020; Akyeampong & Fofack, 2012).

While there is limited literature on the agency of women in pre-colonial Africa, it is clear that African women held important roles and were actively engaged in society. Going back to African Feminism, this theory poses a challenge to the effects of colonization. African Feminism bring to the fore the texts and enlighten the consciousness of women's agency while advancing social transformation and inclusion of women in issues affecting their societies (Osha, 2006 p. 191; Mkegwe, 2006 p. 11). Part of the social transformations is addressing societal problems. Wane (2011, p. 8) argues that African feminism draws on traditional cultural knowledge to embrace the communal spirit embedded in African culture.

In relations to these, Wane (2011, p. 8) develops two sets of ideas: the first is the notion that problematic colonial institutions led to the rise in inequality. The second is based on the idea that long-term solutions are achieved by addressing the oppression African women face. Wane readily concedes that inequalities between men and women

are not only the outcome of dominant views on patriarchy in Africa. Instead, they were borne out of colonial settings, which affected both men and women. The system of oppression created a sense of resilience through empowerment, self-reliance, and determination. In a sense, this feminist perspective focuses on women's societal issues and strives to find a solution through community-based initiatives, including fostering peacebuilding.

Hudson (2009) also sees this branch of feminism as having the ability to foster peacebuilding through gendered relations. To strengthen Wane's views, Hudson proposes an African feminism that reflects a balance between "universal norms of gender equality and traditional values" (Hudson 2009, p. 293). Hudson goes on to suggest that an African feminist peacebuilding approach requires an understanding of the position of women during violence and peacebuilding. To expand more, the position of women during conflict and peacebuilding is crucial because ignoring where women are in conflict ultimately influences the recognition processes in peacebuilding (Hudson, 2009). For instance, in the DRC, various peace agreements included the DDR process, but it was beneficial for men than women (Sadie, 2010). This could be that women were not recognized as active agents in the conflict, nor were they fully considered in the DDR process.

These limits contribute to creating opportunities and resilience for many women who seek participation and representation. African feminism suggests that women understand the complexities within cultural settings of societal values and functioning. As such, this approach requires one to balance the calls for affirmative peacebuilding actions

and gender-sensitive cultural frameworks (Hudson, 2009). Hudson (2009) thus proposes that having women fully recognized and included in such initiatives will make a peacebuilding process successful. She also contends that for participation to be guaranteed, women need representation through communalism. This is because social groups tend to influence the peace agenda more than individual-based actions. This sense of communalism is at the center of African feminism and resonates within Machakanja's (2015, p. 209) views on peaceful societies. Precisely, Machakanja notes that African indigenous societies valued peaceful coexistence and that conflict, like in other places, happened from time to time but was handled through traditional knowledge shared by the community.

Considering these perspectives, it is undoubtful that women had essential roles in encouraging a peaceful coexistence within their families and the community at large. They achieved this through facilitation and mediation of conflict, with establishing peaceful coexistence with nature and occupying a central role in facilitating that process (Machakanja, 2015). Few examples include the *Intararibonye* of Burundi that intervene in conflicts by engaging women, the traditional mediation processes in Cameroon which consider women as the main actors in peacebuilding while concentrating on girls' education on cultural peace (Ibid). Machakanja goes further to suggest that African traditional societies not only respected women but also valued them highly. This sense of communalism finds deep meaning in the South African Philosophy of Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care explored in the next section.

3.4.Ubuntu Philosophy

In some African countries, there has been a growing emphasis on cultural values reflecting collective action, economic development, peace and reconciliation, such as the Tanzanian Ujaama, the Kenyan Harambee and the South African Ubuntu among others. Ujaama's vision emphasised African socialism, communal cooperation and rural development (Sheikhheldin, 2015, p. 79).), Harambee emphasises local participation and resource mobilisation (Mbithi and Rasmussen, 1977, p. 9). These cultural values do not necessarily touch on peace and reconciliation, which is why Ubuntu comes into play as a philosophy that teaches people to coexist and engage in communal work by supporting one another, advancing reconciliatory methods.

Therefore, this section sets the context for the philosophy of Ubuntu by highlighting its essence and providing a brief definition. It then explores the intersection of Ubuntu with peacebuilding and reconciliation. As a philosophy, Ubuntu addresses both reconciliation and sustainable peace through its emphasis on truth, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

3.4.1. Essence of Ubuntu

Ubuntu stems from the South African philosophy that “a person is a person through another person” (Desmond Tutu, 2019). In the academic literature on peacebuilding, “the idea of Ubuntu sheds light on the importance of peacemaking through the principles of reciprocity, inclusivity and a sense of shared destiny between people”

(Murithi, 2006, p. 29). As such, Ubuntu lends itself as a culturally adapted form of the broader peacebuilding approach.

Early uses of the Ubuntu philosophy were associated with reconciliation. The end of Apartheid inspired South African leaders to use reconciliation methods that reflected the cultural view of humanity. At the core of Ubuntu was the idea that without forgiveness, there was no future for South Africans (Tutu, 1999). Accordingly, Ubuntu is a concept, a theory, and a philosophy. It expresses an idea embraced by nonviolent activists such as Gandhi, who championed *satyagraha* and communalism, all of which found meaning in African Feminism⁵², because it values “communal life” (Murithi 2006, p. 29). In a similar line of thoughts, Mungi Ngomane (2019) discusses Ubuntu as an African way of living better together. She notes:

There is certainly a time and place for self-examination. However, Ubuntu teaches us to look outside ourselves to find answers. It’s about seeing the bigger picture; the other side of the story. Ubuntu is about reaching out to our fellow men and women, through whom we might just find the comfort, contentment and sense of belonging we crave. Ubuntu tells us that individuals are nothing without other human beings. It encompasses our differences and celebrates them (Ngomane, 2019, p. 14).

Perceived as such, an evolving conflict within society becomes a matter of concern to the whole community. If members of the community embody the principles of Ubuntu, then each member sees the humanity in one another. In the process, each person acknowledges his/her responsibility, whether as a perpetrator or victim (ibid). Ubuntu requires the ability to forgive and reconcile. In peacebuilding contexts, Ubuntu targets the

⁵² Although the Ubuntu and Satyagraha philosophies are not feminist theories, some of their concepts, such as communal living, have great significance in African feminism, which values women’s communal spaces and collaboration.

long-term goals of sustainable peace by strengthening a sense of “humanity, compassion, and mutualism” (Akinola & Uzodike, 2018, p. 98).

Ubuntu as a philosophical way of life requires people to accept it, and once accepted, it must be practiced in the everyday phenomena for peaceful coexistence. Within psychology, scholars such as Hanks (2008, p. 125) argue that Ubuntu is related to African humanism worldviews, which perceive an “African as a social being who cannot be separated from the community in which they belong.” This, however, does not mean all African cultures fall under this conception. Rather, it reflects how most African communities operate and the views that strengthen how society functions. African humanism views an African as compassionate and caring, one with the ability to share with others. Hanks notes that such a view values harmony with the living nature, which is interconnected with Ubuntu because of its fundamental value of togetherness and humanness (Hanks, 2008).

As an Afrocentric philosophy, Ubuntu accentuates the drawing of knowledge from cultural sources, especially on matters of peacebuilding, reconciliation, and social transformation (Akinola & Uzodike, 2018; Morris, 2006). However, scholars such as Tom (2018, p. 76) argue that practitioners have also endangered the usage of Ubuntu. For instance, South African capitalists are believed to have promoted neoliberal views, policies, and marketization within the discourse of Ubuntu, which has questioned the original view of humanness and communalism.

Furthermore, there are ongoing debates about how Ubuntu intersects with social justice⁵³ principles, which are essential for peacebuilding. For instance, in their research on South African education, Enslin and Horsthemke (2004) critique the adoption of Ubuntu as a model for citizenship education. They argue that the application of Ubuntu philosophy may conflict with individualistic values and rights-based justice. Regarding the role of educators, Enslin and Horsthemke suggest that they should draw on Ubuntu to foster a sense of belonging and social responsibility, while respecting cultural traditions without compromising democratic values (2004, p. 553).

In response to these critiques, Moeketsi Letseka (2012) provides a counterargument in his article “In Defence of Ubuntu.” He defends Ubuntu against the criticisms raised by Enslin and Horsthemke, highlighting that Ubuntu is often romanticized and viewed as entirely positive, overlooking its capacity to accommodate essential ideologies in democratic societies, including individualism. Letseka argues that understanding Ubuntu fundamentally as a philosophy centered on human dignity is crucial, particularly within the South African education system. He states,

The kind of learner envisaged by South Africa’s educational policy framework is one who will act in the interests of a society based on respect for democracy, equality, human dignity, life, and social justice (2012, p. 57).

⁵³ Social justice scholars John Rawls (1971), Amartya Sen (2009), Nancy Fraser (2009), and Martha Nussbaum (2011) each approach the principles of social justice in ways that emphasize different but related aspects. Rawls discusses “justice as fairness,” where equity is about fairly distributing opportunities, resources, and burdens to address inequalities. Sen emphasizes the importance of expanding access to fundamental capabilities like health and education, enabling people to pursue the lives they value. Fraser focuses on the idea of “participatory parity,” advocating for equal opportunities for everyone to participate in social and political life. Nussbaum highlights the need to recognize and protect human rights, framing social justice around securing the capabilities necessary for a life of dignity.

Thus, the assertion that integrating Ubuntu into the education system diminishes individual rights and democratic values⁵⁴ overlooks the strength and relevance of Ubuntu as a philosophical framework. Letseka contends that rather than dismissing Ubuntu as incompatible with democratic values, it can be understood as a philosophy that values human dignity, thereby establishing a coherent link between democratic principles and individual rights within the context of Ubuntu.

This confrontation between Ubuntu, individualistic democratic values and neo-liberal views raises questions on whether it could be modified or upgraded to a new set of ideas. However, as Tom (2018, p. 78) observes, Ubuntu can influence post-liberal peacebuilding formed from communalism, harmony, care, tolerance, and solidarity rather than it being transformed from within. For Hailey (2008), Ubuntu should remain an indigenous philosophy and maintain its original meaning. In the following section, I further discuss the intersection between Ubuntu, peacebuilding and reconciliation.

3.4.2. Ubuntu, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

The intersection between Ubuntu, peacebuilding and reconciliation is rooted in philosophies and practices putting emphasis on communalism, collective support and healing, and restorative justice. In the book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) writes about the establishment of South Africa's Truth and

⁵⁴ Whereas both Ubuntu philosophy and democratic values emphasizes human dignity, they differ in their foundations, focus and expression. Democratic values focus on individual rights and freedoms, whereas Ubuntu's focus is on collective support, mutual care and shared humanity.

Reconciliation Commission. He argues that true reconciliation cannot be achieved if the past is denied. This echoes Lederach's (1997, p. 27) explanation of what reconciliation means. He noted:

Reconciliation, in essence, represents a place, the point of encounter where concerns about both the past and the future can meet. Reconciliation-as-encounter suggests that space for the acknowledging of the past and envisioning of the future is the necessary ingredient for reframing the present (Lederach, 1997, p. 27).

Based on this explanation, for reconciliation to happen, people should find ways to face themselves, their enemies, their hopes and their fears (Galtung, 1976; Lederach, 1997). Reconciliation is inherently linked to the necessity of addressing the root causes of conflict, as this forms the foundation for its successful realization. It is crucial to note that reconciliation is not an easy pill to swallow, as demonstrated by Tutu (1999, p. 270), true reconciliation is costly and requires forgiveness in order to be achievable. Tutu writes:

Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make it worse. It is a risky undertaking, but in the end, it is worthwhile, because in the end dealing with the real situation helps to bring real healing. Spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing (Tutu 1999, p. 270).

In Tutu's writing, forgiveness and reconciliation go hand in hand, one leads to another, for reconciliation to happen, there must be a process of facing the truth, the atrocities and evil that happen, ask for forgiveness for the wrongs done, and be forgiven in return. These require processes that are not easy and are hugely risky. Some of those risks are denial and defensiveness from the ones who wronged others, and revenge and anger for the ones who were wronged. For truth and reconciliation to be attained, Ubuntu

suggests that it is people's relationship centred on empathy and humanism towards others that can make it materialise.

Authors such as Akinola and Uzodike (2018) argue that Ubuntu tends to succeed as a peacebuilding initiative in Africa since most African states went through similar conflicts during colonization and in the post-colonial period. Ubuntu serves as a means to reunite and rebuild societies. Although Ubuntu takes its origin from a South African philosophy, the authors observe that it has found meaning in various parts of Africa and beyond. The authors give the example of the Yoruba community in Nigeria that embodies a similar concept called 'omoluabi,' which is linked to humanness, the Gacaca traditional court in Rwanda, and the Ma'at in Egypt, all of which served as forms of restorative justice and emphasized forgiveness and reconciliation (ibid, p. 98-99). These discussions help set a stage for understanding the interconnections that exist between Ubuntu and peacebuilding. The following section highlights more about the Ethics of Care.

3.5.Ethics of Care

This section begins with conceptualizing care as a moral theory. It then delves into the debates surrounding the evolution of the Ethics of Care, which in the early stages was argued as a gendered ethic due to the nature of gendered divisionism dictating the roles of women and men in the society.

3.5.1. Conceptualising Care

The concept of care has been a fundamental part of human languages throughout history. Whether referring to the act of caring for others or the experience of being cared for, the term captures profound human emotions. Fisher and Tronto (1990, p. 40) define care as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible.” This definition suggests that care transcends mere goodwill; it is an active response to rectify injustices in our world, seeking redemption through actions that promote a safe and nurturing environment for all. Tronto (1998, p. 16) further posits that the manner in which individuals care for one another defines our humanity. By framing care as both an action and a practice, some scholars⁵⁵ have explored it as a moral philosophy, which has led to the development of discussions surrounding the Ethics of Care. This approach emphasizes the relational aspects of care and its significance in shaping ethical frameworks and social responsibilities.

The Ethics of Care as a moral theory, is an approach that involves harmonious relationships, putting the needs of others as an integral part of ethical decision-making (Gilligan 1982; Flanagan & Jackson 1993; Botes, 2000; Held, 2005). According to Held, this form of ethics differs from other traditional moral theories⁵⁶, it is based on

⁵⁵ Joan Tronto (1987; 1990; 1998); Elisabeth Bubeck (1995); Virginia Held (2005); Carol Gilligan (1982)

⁵⁶ By traditional moral theories, Held meant the dominant moral theories of the twentieth century. These includes the deontological such as Kantian theories and consequentialist utilitarian theories. Put simply, these are theories of right action, relying on universal norms and principles of what is right or wrong. Both

human relations and experiences of practicing care (p. 3-4). The Ethics of Care provides standards in which care should be practiced. These includes values based on caring relations, trust, mutual responsiveness, attentiveness and effectiveness in meeting needs.

As Held (2025, p. 42) writes:

Care is both a practice and a value. As a practice, it shows us how to respond to needs and why we should. It builds trust and mutual concern, and connectedness between persons. It is not a series of individual actions but a practice that develops, along with its appropriate attitude. Care is also a value. Caring persons and caring attitudes should be valued, and we can organize many evaluations of how persons are interrelated around a constellation of moral considerations associated with care or its absence.

Given the above observation, it is unsurprising that Ubuntu's caregiving role finds particular meaning in the attributes of women and their role in some societies. The Ethics of Care extends to communalism, binding people together politically, socially and globally. Held argues that caring relations emphasize being attentive, sensitive and responding to the needs of others. This can be emotional, psychological, or cultural. She suggests that care should be integrated into more practical work such as the police. This could be implemented through building trust and preventing violation of the law (p. 31 & p. 39).

Held also discusses care as a moral quality that values emotions and rejects dominant moral theories (e.g., claims that the more human beings are detached, the more they are likely to make good and impartial decisions). She explains that since human beings are dependent on others, there is a moral claim for the care one is supposed to

the Kantian and utilitarian theories advance that rational reasoning should make moral decisions. See Virginia Held (2006, p. 4).

receive (2005, p. 10). Unlike the dominant moral theories that value public space as independent, individualistic, and self-sufficient, the Ethics of Care considers aspects of private life and social groups as mere components of humanism.

In addition to Held's conceptualization of care as both a practice and a value, Tronto (1998, p. 17) delineates four distinct phases of care, forming the basis for a foundational moral theory. The first phase, **caring about**, involves recognizing and becoming attentive to the needs that require care. This phase emphasizes the moral significance of awareness and attention to others' needs. The second phase, **caring for**, addresses the assumption of responsibility for meeting those identified needs, highlighting the ethical obligation to act. The third phase, **caregiving**, focuses on the skills and knowledge necessary to provide care effectively. Finally, **care-receiving** acknowledges the complexity of care, as it requires the recipient to recognize the care provided and the caregiver to anticipate some form of feedback regarding the adequacy of the care given.

Tronto's framework offers a comprehensive approach to integrating care into public life. For instance, Nguyen et al. (2017) examined how care is embedded in public policy using the example of family devotion in China, where children are expected to care for aging parents. Although traditionally seen as a domestic responsibility, this expectation has been institutionalized in state policies. Similar examples can be found in the current Canadian social welfare policies for the elderly and people with disabilities, where social services not only deliver care but also solicit feedback to assess their effectiveness. These examples illustrate how Tronto's four phases of care extend beyond

personal relationships, informing broader societal and policy discussions about the role of care in public life.

Another important topic raised by scholars about the Ethics of Care, is the need to compare it with the ethics of justice. This is due to the conflicting views about the ethical reasoning and decision-making that both draw from some forms of moral values. As Held (2005, p. 17) puts it:

Care is probably the most deeply fundamental value. There can be care without justice: there has historically been little justice in the family, but care and life have gone on without it. There can be no justice without care, however, for without care, no child would survive and there would be no persons to respect.

Based on these views, Held denotes that without care humanity is next to impossible, whereas for so long, people have lived without justice. These views are also echoed in Nel Noddings' (2015) study about care ethics and "caring" organizations. She notes that the Ethics of Care not only recognizes the roles of the caregivers but also the ones of those cared for as important roles in establishing and maintaining caring relations (Noddings, 2015, p. 73). And it is these caring relations that makes it a relational ethic, whereas the ethics of justice is argued to serve individual rights, duties and liberty. It is unsurprising that these two ethics conflict in terms of the moral values they stand for, as the Ethics of Care focuses on communal relations, whereas the ethics of justice emphasises an individual and facts surrounding that individual. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of whether or not the Ethics of Care is a gendered ethics.

3.5.2. A Brief Overview: Women and Care

Although the concept of care is widely understood across societies, extensive research into how it can be institutionalised or politicised remains limited. This is partly because care has been under-theorised politically. Another reason lies in the dominance of concepts such as justice and freedom, which are framed as rational and objective forms of understanding, whereas care challenges these abstract systems of thought (Nguyen et al., 2017, p. 199; Reich, 2004, p. 359). From this perspective, care is associated with deep emotions, rendering public life irrational. As a result, care often remains opaque and marginalised within political theory. Accordingly, debates on care are domesticated, and supposedly shall be confined at household level. It is not until the mid 1980s that debates on the importance of thinking about care in the public spaces started gaining attention. These debuted with scholars such as Carol Gilligan, Mary Field Belensky, Nel Noddings, Elisabeth Bubeck and Joan Tronto who introduced discussions on care as gendered theory, a moral theory or as a practice.

The debut of discussing care as a moral ethic, was following the 1984 essay by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. In his essay, Kohlberg explains the moral reasoning and different stages of human development while maintaining a universalised (also critiqued as western-centric) approach of what is right or wrong. Gilligan's critique was that Kohlberg's essay reflected gender bias and failed to include women's perspectives. During the mid 1980s, Gilligan and other scholars⁵⁷ introduced the Ethics of Care as a

⁵⁷ See Belensky, Sherry Langdale, and Nona Lyons

moral ethics that women tend to prioritize. In their empirical study, Gilligan (1977, 1986) and Lyons (1982) argue about the differences between how men and women react morally. They argue that men view themselves in the absorption of the self-whereas women are more interconnected, resulting in men expressing themselves in the voice of justice, and women are more likely to use care.

In a similar vein, debates on whether caring comes more naturally to women than men continued in the 1990s. One such debate is drawn from Elisabet Bubeck's (1995) book on care, gender and justice. Bubeck's (1995, p. 160) studies on women's lives, psychologies and morality came to a conclusion that since it is women who mainly care, this makes caring in all aspects deeply gendered. She notes:

Caring as an activity, disposition, and attitude forms a central part of probably all cultural conceptions of femininity and is virtually absent from, or even incompatible with, conceptions of masculinity. In these conceptions, woman the carer or nurturer is opposed to and contrasted with man the hunter or fighter. Caring is part of what it is, or even entirely what it is, to be a woman: caring supposedly comes naturally to women, hence the care for husband, children, parents, relatives, neighbors, and more generally the needy is supposed to be the ultimate fulfilment in women's lives. Men, by contrast, are supposed to be fighters. If they are not involved in physical fight or war and can express their masculinity in this way, they express it by being competitive and more generally by having, and being in, power.

This observation alludes to issues of social norms defining the features of femininity and masculinity. In this context, women and men hold different positions in the society which also influences their actions. In Bubeck's view, culturally speaking, women hold caring roles at the domestic level, making care come to them naturally. It is in this sense, that Bubeck explains the Ethics of Care as deeply gendered. It is not surprising that until now in many patriarchal societies, the roles of women and men at household level fits within

Bubeck's views. Specifically, in this study the majority of women (including the peacebuilders) share some of these views, an aspect discussed in chapter four and five of this dissertation.

Nevertheless, these views have been criticized by scholars who contends that care should not be argued as innately feminine (Held, 2005; Kittay, 1999; Robinson, 1997; Rudick; 1995, Tronto, 1993), especially as such views further exacerbates gender-based discrimination (Tronto, 1998). Specifically, Joan Tronto (1987) in *beyond gender difference to a theory of care*, critiques Gilligan's views about the Ethics of Care as a feminine ethics. Tronto notes:

The equation of "care" with "female" is questionable because the evidence to support the link between gender difference and different moral perspectives is inadequate. It is a strategically dangerous position for feminists because the simple assertion of gender difference in a social context that identifies the male as normal contains an implication of the inferiority of the distinctly female. It is philosophically stultifying because, if feminists think of the ethic of care as categorized by gender difference, they are likely to become trapped trying to defend women's morality rather than looking critically at the philosophical promises and problems of an ethic of care (Tronto 1987, p. 646).

This passage suggests that considering the Ethics of Care as merely gendered or women-centric is inaccurate and provides justification for undermining women. In her article, Tronto contends that the same critiques Gilligan⁵⁸ mentions towards Kohlberg's research, could easily be applied to her research as it lacks the point of views of minorities. In addition to these critiques, in another study, Tronto notes:

⁵⁸ Gilligan's empirical research is constrained by its focus on women occupying specific social positions. Tronto critiques this perspective, arguing that it is biased and fails to adequately represent Black communities and other marginalized groups, who often find themselves relegated to underpaid care work due to their socio-economic conditions.

Because we tend to follow the traditional division of the world into public and private spheres and to think of care as an aspect of private life, care is usually associated with activities of the household. As a result, caring activities is greatly undervalued in our culture – in the assumption that caring is somehow women's work in perceptions of caring occupations, in the wages of salaries paid to workers engaged in provision of care, in the assumption that care is menial (Tronto 1998, p. 16).

In this text, Tronto explicitly explains the danger of seeing care as a feminine attribute, and how it contributes to undermine the work women do and the salaries they are paid. Although Tronto's study was conducted in 1998, it still reflects some of the realities of the 21st century. The recent report of the World Health Organization and International Labour Organization (WHO & ILO, 2022) on gender pay gaps in the health care sector support Tronto's argument. The report highlights that women in these sectors approximately make 20% less than men. Which is even amplified when women are taking a maternity leave. These statistics showcase some of the critiques raised in the above text.

Moving forward, Tronto (1987, p. 662) asserts that an analysis of the Ethics of Care should not be celebrated as a factor of gender differences from which to outshine women's superiority, rather it should be constructed as a moral and political theory. In addition to Tronto's suggestions, Held (2005) notes that an Ethics of Care should be interpreted broadly and situated as a foundational ethical theory applicable to all people, regardless of their gender. These authors perceive the Ethics of Care to not only embrace women's moral values but to incorporate all, which makes it a more inclusive theory where people from all walks of life can find themselves.

Despite the fact that the Ethics of Care writers argue against putting this form of ethics as merely a feminine ethics, they acknowledge some ways from which it puts value

on women's care-centric roles. For instance, Held (2005) explained the Ethics of Care as a form of feminist ethics that value women's experience in the private and societal spheres. According to her, the Ethics of Care values mothering (2005, p. 26). That is, practicing mothering inculcates essential virtues such as humility and resilience, and that feminist ethics require care at the center, as it makes mothering valuable (Held, 2005, p. 26).

The debates on whether the Ethics of Care should be confined to a gendered framework or expanded into a broader moral and political theory enrich discussions about women's roles in society. This study engages with the perspectives of scholars such as Tronto and Held. By incorporating their theoretical contributions, this study not only affirms the significance of women's care-centric roles but also resonates with aspects of African feminism, which emphasizes a decolonial agenda that involves all genders. The following section expands more on the nexus between African feminism, Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care.

3.6. Nexus Between African Feminism, Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care

To study women's agency in community-based peacebuilding, this study proposes a theoretical framework that blends African feminism, Ubuntu and Held's "Ethics of Care". Although Ubuntu does not focus solely on women, it has more attributes within the framework of cultural duties and responsibilities mostly attributed to women. As Gouws and Van Zyl (2015) note, African women have always been characterized by their ability to care compared to men, but such characteristics are not limited to African women. In some societies, care is considered a feminine attribute. Scholars such as Gouws and

Van Zyl underscore the care-related tasks women have practiced over the years. This includes “taking care of the family, sick people, children, people with disabilities and aged communities” (Gouws & Van Zyl 2015, p. 166). In this sense, one could see care as a function of women’s informal agency. It restores the balance lost during violent conflict and helps marginalised communities.

In a similar vein, Ubuntu values care because care is among the virtues of humanism. A person that practices Ubuntu values “the other”⁵⁹ and works toward the common good. Such practices are impossible to achieve if there is no care or empathy towards each other. To be more explicit, if women are ignored, their actions are undermined. This means there is a lack of care and empathy towards women’s agency. Therefore, practicing Ubuntu requires recognition of women agency – whether overt or covert. Taking an example from DRC, Sadie (2010) believes that activities carried by women in Eastern DRC such as teaching other women to read, investing in local businesses, offering counselling and therapy to those in need are some of the informal roles’ women played in post-conflict reconstruction. It is important to note that the Ethics of Care or Ubuntu are not considered here as a sanctuary for women. Rather, they help rethink how ordinary citizens, often seen as victims, can produce desirable results in terms of peacebuilding.

Put simply, both Ubuntu, the Ethics of Care, and African feminism share the idea that societal transformation is not a result of one individual, but community led. Of course, not all community actions reflect the spirit of Ubuntu or the Ethics of Care. Nonetheless,

⁵⁹ The concept of “the other” refers to individuals or groups distinct from oneself

linking Ubuntu, the Ethics of Care, and African feminism is likely to provide interesting ways in which one can probe the role and agency of women in peacebuilding. In essence, care is at the center of these frameworks as it finds meaning in both African Feminism and Ubuntu. As Held (2005, p. 42) puts it, “allowing a person to suffer is seen as part of the process of dehumanization”. To add to Held assertion, Gouws and Van Zyl (2015, p. 179) also suggest that combining Ubuntu and feminist Ethics of Care can facilitate gender equality. If the indigenous African woman is seen as an agent of peace and care in certain traditions, it is then essential to study how Ubuntu can help sustain that traditional role. This chapter therefore sought ways in which Ubuntu and an Ethics of Care fits into African feminism to nurture a culture of peace.

Few studies on African feminism have taken this path. Wane’s (2011) research conducted among Embu rural women in Kenya is one of the emerging works to this end. She notes that women use actions stemming from indigenous knowledge, most of which “emphasized collectivism, sharing, holism, and interdependency with nature” (Wane, 2011:18). Such knowledge practice aims to adopt strategies that guarantee inclusivity, participation, and recognition into communities. Similarly, Hudson (2009) used African feminism tools to study women’s collective actions in Rwanda. She argues that the community-led initiatives based on communalism and sharing allowed women to contribute thoroughly to peace efforts. In fact, Hudson contends that women’s community-led initiatives eased cooperation along ethnic identities. These examples illustrate the relevancy of African feminism to probe women’s agency, essentially, it advances the spirit of togetherness and care at the core front of every action.

Overall, the theoretical position this study takes is that the attributes of African feminism combined with those of Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care are key to understand the constructive ways in which inclusivity can be strengthened in peace agendas while spearheading the idea of humanness. This is because, African Feminism emphasizes collective responsibility and interconnectedness, aligning closely with Ubuntu's principle of shared humanity. When applied to peacebuilding, these frameworks underscore the importance of communal solidarity and caregiving roles, particularly in contexts where formal governance structures are weak. The Ethics of Care complements these principles by prioritizing empathy and relational responsibilities, providing a holistic lens to analyze Congolese women's roles in fostering social cohesion. By integrating Ubuntu and Ethics of Care to African feminism, there is a possibility of crafting peace agendas that emphasize togetherness and well-being of people through indigenous knowledge (Wane, 2011). The outcome of this indigeneity and cultural adaptation could help shape a culture of peace, as Steady (2005, p. 320) suggests.

This chapter concludes the first part of setting the context, concepts and theories governing this study. The next chapter is the research methodology, and it provides ways from which this study was conducted.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4. Research Design and Methodology

In this chapter, I explore the different stages of research methods and design. The chapter begins with the epistemological approach used to make sense of how I approach peacebuilding as a form of reality and knowledge. I explain the centrality of social constructivism in making sense of the reality of women's everyday experiences in peace-led efforts. This sets the stage for understanding how the formality and informality of women-led peace efforts in Eastern Congo is construed in this dissertation. The section also explains the type of research adopted (i.e., qualitative case study), the methods of data collection, sampling techniques, and procedures for data analysis. The section also reviews some of the ethical considerations observed and challenges associated with data collection, as most of the data was collected during COVID.

4.1. Epistemological Orientation

This study is influenced by my epistemological belief that knowledge is co-created, and that the meanings we draw from an object/subject of study are also found in the interactions we have with these objects/subjects and the environments in which they are situated (Kovach, 2021). Specifically, it borrows from social constructivism with a tilt toward feminist epistemologies (Ashton & McKenna, 2020). In addition, the study believes that situatedness and territoriality are important components of knowledge acquisition (Kurki, 2015; Malfatti, 2021). This position draws from other works of

scholars such as Guba and Lincoln (1985), who argue that reality is complex and subjective, and that it is influenced by individual perspectives seeking to understand a phenomena within their authentic and real-life context. Similar views are advanced by Von Glasserfeld's (1995), who observes that reality is what people make of it, a network of things and relationships in the belief system of those living it. In adherence to these meanings, one must consider reality as complex and in constant mutation, at least for human relations. Reality emerges from a multitude of events and experiences, and its interpretation varies among those who perceive it.

In its broadest sense, the constructivist epistemology is based on the assumption that "one cannot make the world as one wishes" but can instead learn from history and the evolution of things, which inform the present course of action and what human beings refer to as their reality (Weber 2007, p. 97). Equally, constructivism views the world as an ongoing project emphasizing evolution concepts (Adler, 2005). Reality is thus the outcome of past events, which dictates human actions in the present. Meanwhile, constructivist theorist Von Glasserfeld (1995) offers an interesting approach to understanding reality and knowledge. He sees knowledge as actively constructed. Knowledge is adaptive and allows humans to learn from experiential things, not objective reality. Although these views offer interesting perspectives on understanding constructivism, they do not fully capture how people living in communal spaces understand their reality. Meanwhile, it is often challenging to capture the formality and informality of women's experiences in peacebuilding, given that women historically have long been marginalized as a result of gendered social differences. Thus, employing a feminist social constructivist epistemology offers a valuable insight through which these

perspectives can be understood and illuminated within their broader social contexts. This explains the study's tilt toward feminist social constructivism.

In essence, feminist social constructivism bridges the principles of feminism and social constructivism, as both epistemologies engage with the construction of beliefs systems (Fiaccadori, 2006; Locher & Prügl, 2001). This theoretical perspective posits that gender identities are shaped by social norms, positioning social constructivism as an ideological framework that challenges the notion of women's inferiority as innate. It provides empirical evidence illustrating how knowledge is co-created (Fiaccadori, 2006, p. 12). Historical examples support this, such as the case of physicist and chemist Marie Curie, whose exceptional achievements in the 19th century defied the socially constructed limitations imposed on women, particularly in the sciences. As the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, Curie's legacy challenges the perception of an inherent, natural order.

The existence of women who continuously defied societal norms reshaped feminist scholarship, providing an alternative epistemological lens through which to understand the co-creation of gender identities. Feminist social constructivism, therefore, argues that the so-called "natural order" is a myth; instead, individuals are shaped by signifying practices, ideological discourses, and power dynamics. This entails that identities are contingent, constructed through political, cultural, and historical contexts (Fiaccadori, 2006, p. 12). This epistemological approach is crucial for this dissertation as it uncovers how social constructivism elucidates the lived realities of Congolese women, their coping mechanisms in the face of systemic barriers, and their determined contributions to peacebuilding within their communities.

This project draws on feminist social constructivism to examine and understand women's roles, agency, and experiences in peace-led efforts and how they are socially constructed and culturally situated. From a social constructivist perspective, one needs to focus on the historical and cultural context in which people live, as this increases the understanding of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2003, p. 8). In a similar vein, Adam (2006) notes that grasping what is defined as reality stems from approaching learning as a journey of building knowledge and comprehending the world following this perspective. Adopting feminist social constructivism is thus useful in gaining insights into the realities of Congolese women in order to uncover the subtleties in women-led peace efforts. It also helps to understand the strategies women use, the challenges encountered, and the centrality of culture to peace initiatives.

4.2. Research Design

The research design of this dissertation highlights the meaning of using a qualitative case study, its significance and challenges of using this approach. It also explains the measures adopted to address challenges associated with a qualitative case study. In addition, the section also outlines the choice of research site which focuses on the selection of participants.

4.2.1. Qualitative Case Study

As already mentioned in the previous section, this study draws primarily from qualitative approaches. It addresses two central questions: 1) In what ways are women-

led peace efforts in Eastern DRC informed by the policies of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)? and 2) How do the challenges of victimization and cultural constraints experienced by Congolese women help shape their engagement in peace efforts at the community level? In addition, the project proposes to address two sub-questions: 1) How do women's caregiving roles inform their approach to community-based peacebuilding? and 2) How has the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda transformed women's agency in community-based peacebuilding?

To address these questions, I draw from a qualitative case study to explore the role of women in peacebuilding in Goma, Eastern Congo. A qualitative case study is essential for the nature and context of this study because it provides grounds to effectively understand people's everyday reality (Gay & Airasian, 2000). In addition to allowing the use of a qualitative approach and gaining a holistic understanding of a phenomena, qualitative case study is appropriate for this study because of its descriptive faculties that enable researchers to situate their study in the actual context of participants and understand their worldviews and how these are interpreted (Yin, 2014).

Simply put, this study's research design is meant to deepen our understanding of how women in peacebuilding contexts make sense of their everyday realities. This is because women are often seen as victims and passive agents in wartime, which portrays them as agent-free victims (Pankhurst, 2008). Thus, examining the role of women at the frontline of peace challenges such views and influences policies and decision-making through a gendered peacebuilding agenda. In addition, by adopting the proposed research design, informal women-led peace efforts, too often neglected in the mainstream peacebuilding literature, are likely to receive a thorough assessment, which could

ultimately help fill the gaps in the existing literature on the importance of informality in peace processes.

While a qualitative case study design is recognized for its utility in research, it comes with inherent challenges and limitations. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers must address two primary challenges when employing this approach. The first challenge is identifying the case to be studied, which can be complex as researchers may choose a broad or narrow scope (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 102). In addressing this challenge, I first evaluated which specific area within the DRC should be examined. Given the vastness of the country and the diverse nature of conflicts across its regions, selecting an appropriate case was crucial. My research balanced between broad and narrow scopes by considering the DRC as a whole but focusing specifically on the conflicts in Eastern Congo. This led to determining whether a single case or multiple cases would be more suitable. The final decision was to use a single case study approach, as this effectively aligned with my research questions and objectives. The second challenge outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) concerns the decision to study a comprehensive context versus focusing on specific instances within it. This consideration involves assessing resource limitations, case selection, and the feasibility of cross-case analysis. Opting for a single, detailed study of Eastern Congo allowed me to address the research objectives without overstressing resources or compromising depth.

Equally, Yin (2018) adds further insights by identifying six challenges inherent in using qualitative case studies. The first challenge is constructing validity; this requires researchers to clearly identify and operationalize the concepts under study (Yin, 2018, p. 42). Reliability poses another challenge due to the flexible nature of qualitative methods,

necessitating thorough documentation to ensure consistent information (p. 46). Third, Yin (2018) highlights the issue of generalizability, noting that qualitative case studies often face criticism for providing limited bases for scientific generalization. Fourth, data overload is a common problem, as qualitative research can yield a vast amount of data that complicates analysis and presentation (p. 167). The fifth challenge is researcher bias and subjectivity; as the primary instrument of data collection, researchers must be aware of their biases. Finally, qualitative case studies are time and resource-intensive, demanding substantial investment compared to other methods (Yin, 2018, p. 56).

To navigate these challenges, I implemented several strategies:

a) Triangulation of Data Sources: Following Yin's (2018) recommendation, I used multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, historical narratives, documents, peer-reviewed articles, reports, and archives. This strategy, as detailed in this dissertation, helped enhance the reliability and validity of my findings. I maintained a transparent chain of evidence by clearly documenting the origins of each data point.

b) Case Study Protocol: I established a comprehensive case study protocol that included sampling techniques, interview phases, systematic reviews of documents, and analysis methods. This protocol is demonstrated in the subsequent sections.

c) Analytical Strategy: Although generalization is often useful, I aligned data with my research questions and applied an analytical strategy that contextualized findings within specific references to the lived experiences of women peacebuilders in Eastern Congo who were interviewed. This focus provided meaningful insights into the local context and could help understand the broader issues women are faced with in eastern DRC rather than generalizing these lived experiences.

d) Data Management: Audio recordings were transcribed using transcription software “Transcribe by Whearly” – a software providing a multi-lingual transcription ability. I organized the data using Excel to create categories based on research questions and developed themes accordingly. In addition, the interviews were conducted in both French and English. For those conducted in French, I initially used Google Translate, which provides approximately 80-90% accuracy, to produce the initial translations. Given my full bilingual proficiency, I subsequently reviewed and revised all translated materials to ensure accuracy and clarity. The use of Google Translate proved helpful in terms of saving time during the transcription and translation process. Moreover, a few participants incorporated Swahili words during their interviews, which I translated manually, as Swahili is my native language.

e) Data Triangulation: To ensure a comprehensive understanding, I compared and integrated findings from transcriptions, policy documents, archival data, peer-reviewed articles, and reports. This multifaceted approach helped strengthen the overall analysis.

As such, qualitative research design still remains the most appropriate for this study and its overall objectives, which are to (1) explore the formality and informality of women’s agency to advance peaceful solutions in Goma and Eastern DRC at large; (2) probe the significance of culture in shaping how Congolese women engage in everyday peacebuilding activities within and between communities; and (3) understand the implications of the WPS agenda on community-based peacebuilding.

4.2.2. Choices of Research Sites

The choices of research sites focus on the area where primary data was collected. First, I provide a detailed explanation of the selection of participants of this dissertation. Second, I delve more into the choice of Goma in Eastern Congo as a research site and reason behind doing a remote research site.

4.2.2.1. Selection of Participants and Documentary Research

In terms of the timeline within which this study was conducted, the DRC has been in a precarious condition since colonial times. As mentioned in Chapter One, the post-colonial period has been marked by a series of continuous violent conflicts to the present day. Therefore, in order to examine and explore women-led peace efforts and given that the study is interested in everyday peacebuilding, the participants were first active agents in peacebuilding. To capture their daily experiences, the period analyzed for their roles spanned from 1999, following the first peace agreements, to August 2023. The virtual fieldwork was conducted between April and August 2023.

This study captures the current experiences of women's agency in peacebuilding in Eastern Congo. The intractable conflicts in DRC have created conditions in which SGBV continue to play a role in women's lived experiences. It is not only limited to SGBV; the conflict also strengthens social norms and belief systems that put women as second-status citizens. This information informed some of the procedures used to select participants, such as the centrality of gender, defined here as a socially constructed identity shaped by power relations, cultural norms, and practices (Butler, 1990). This perspective

encompasses the behaviors, activities, and attributes associated with men and women, which, as Connell (2002) notes, vary across cultures and historical periods.

While traditional conceptualizations of gender were limited to binary categories of men and women, contemporary debates expand this framework to include gender minorities, reflecting a more inclusive understanding. In this dissertation, gender identity is conceptualized as socially, culturally, and politically constructed, influenced by intersecting factors such as class, age, profession, urban or rural context, kinship, and marital status (Myrntinen et al., 2014, p. 10). This nuanced approach provides a foundation for exploring the complex interplay of gender, women and peacebuilding in the context of Eastern Congo.

Since this dissertation touches on women's roles and participation, most participants were women who shared their everyday experiences in the pursuit of peace. The study was also interested in gaining the views of women who have been affected by violence (including SGBV), women in leadership positions, and young women peacebuilders. Another sampling criterion used was the type of organization for which the participants worked for. The study mainly targeted community-based organizations and associations that aim to build a culture of peace among local communities. To complement the views of these research groups, I included participants from international organizations engaging directly with women and whose mandate is to follow the WPS policies. In this study, participants were comfortable with the language; they either spoke French, English or Swahili, and there was no need for an interpreter. Participants sometimes mixed French and Swahili, which was an asset because I speak both languages.

With regard to demographics, the study did not focus on participants' age; however, all participants were over the age of 18. This criterion was established to ensure the inclusion of individuals who had been actively engaged in peacebuilding, development, and the promotion of social cohesion. Participant selection was based primarily on their roles and influence within their respective communities. I selected three 14 women and 3 men based on their specific roles in peacebuilding and the support they offer to women in general. Whereas 13 of the women are ordinary locals affected by the conflict, like everyone else in eastern DRC, their perspective enriched the discussion, showing their endurance and interest in peacebuilding. The other woman is the female peacekeeper mandated to work on issues related to SGBV. Her primary role is to support women peacebuilders in their work and to support victims of SGBV.

The 3 men include a male peacebuilder who primarily trains rural women to become Ambassadors for Peace. Three female peacebuilders strongly suggested I interview him. Another is a male peacekeeper who has worked alongside the peacekeeper in the eastern DRC for several years. His understanding of the field and the challenges the women peacebuilders face significantly impacted this research. Lastly, the political influencer is involved in work affecting women and advocates for the issues they face. All of these participants contributed extensive knowledge to this study.

Moreover, I selected archival data, reports, and policy documents based on the credibility of the organizations that produced them, and the reliability of the information provided. For example, reports from civil society organizations known for their impactful work in Eastern Congo, publications from United Nations agencies, and archival materials that could be authenticated and verified for accuracy were included in the data set. In

addition, I reviewed and selected peer-reviewed research articles that examine women's roles in Eastern Congo. Although these studies did not directly address my specific research question, they engaged with themes relevant to my inquiry, as reflected in the findings and discussion chapters. For instance, in relation to women's formal and informal roles, while these studies may not use the same terminology, their analysis of the opportunities and challenges facing women's organizations provides important insights into the dynamics of formality and informality in women's experiences.

4.2.2.2. Research Site

Although violence is prevalent in almost all provinces of the DRC, the North and South Kivu suffer disproportionately. It is this disproportionality in the consequences of war in the DRC that informs my choice of Goma – largest urban dwelling in Northern Kivu – as an appropriate research site. There are other factors that played a role in my choice of Goma as a research site.

First, the pre-interview phase highlighted challenges regarding accessibility and the modality of conducting research—whether in-person or virtually. Each approach presented advantages and disadvantages. Physical research allows for in-person interaction with participants, facilitating the observation of non-verbal cues, environmental context, and relational dynamics. However, security constraints in the DRC rendered physical accessibility impractical. The COVID-19 pandemic brought health risks and lockdowns also meant that I could only conduct qualitative interviews virtually, even though this has raised debates on such approaches (Shah et al., 2020; Douedari et al.,

2021). Nonetheless, strategies for remote virtual field research in conflict-affected zones have long been conducted, and the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced other frameworks. For instance, Douedari et al. (2021) emphasize that qualitative remote research offers opportunities to address challenges related to security for both researchers and participants while also increasing accessibility in hard-to-reach groups.

This dissertation embraced such opportunities, utilizing virtual methods to reach participants in ways that ensured their safety and convenience. Virtual accessibility also allowed for scheduling flexibility, enabling participants to engage from their preferred location. Goma proved ideal for this approach because pre-interview communications revealed that most contacts in the area had reliable access to internet services, including WhatsApp calls, audio messages, and text, which they preferred as primary communication tools. This, of course, raises other questions in terms of the power imbalances that may characterize those who have access to online platforms versus those who do not, and the views that these individuals may have on topics of interest. However, the context within which the data was collected could not allow the researcher to be on the ground.

Second, Goma's strategic location in Eastern Congo influenced its selection. The city hosts a multitude of local NGOs, women's groups, the provincial government of North Kivu, international NGOs, and institutions such as MONUSCO and other regional organizations. These entities facilitate numerous activities, including seminars, workshops, and advocacy events, some of which are led by women's groups. Goma serves as a hub for peacebuilding and security initiatives, providing access to stakeholders and

enhancing the effectiveness of snowball sampling techniques. Participants in the study often had collaborative networks, making it easier to identify additional respondents.

Third, Goma's relative security compared to other areas in Eastern Congo also contributed to its selection. The city's relatively stable environment makes communication and movement more feasible. This stability has fostered increased activism against gender-based violence, facilitating access to participants actively engaged in peacebuilding.

Fourth, Goma's multi-ethnic composition offers a unique lens for understanding peacebuilding efforts. While this study does not focus on ethnic conflicts, the diversity of women's groups, shaped by their ethnic identities, provides insight into the varied realities and approaches of peacebuilders. This diversity enriches the understanding of how peacebuilding is practiced across different cultural and social contexts. In addition, the city is a mixture of urban and rural areas, which provides the opportunity to capture the livelihood of women in rural areas and interesting ways to understand the meaning of conflicts and experiences from various groups.

Finally, Goma is home to numerous women's support centers, often associated with churches, communities, and neighborhoods. These centers play a vital role in supporting women affected by violence, providing another layer of engagement for this study. Their presence underscores the active participation of women in addressing conflict-related challenges, further justifying Goma as a focal point for this research.

4.3.Data Collection Procedures

As a qualitative case study, this project draws primarily from interviews, archival data, reports and policy documents on women's agency in peacebuilding. I conducted two sets of interviews: one with peacebuilders, to understand how they cope with patriarchal structures that serve to protect perpetrators, enhance gender-based violence and thus limit lasting peace. As the study focuses on women's experiences and roles, the majority of participants were women peacebuilders. In this set of interviews, there was a male peacebuilder, which led to a slight modification of the guide. For instance, in cases where I would ask women about their experiences working as peacebuilders in a male dominated environment, the male peacebuilder was asked about his observation on how women cope with working in such environment. The purpose of the interview guide was to address all the research questions of this dissertation, which centers on women's experiences, their roles and perceptions. It also looks at the impact of the WPS policies and how local populations welcome these policies. Lastly it touches on the impact of patriarchal condition to their work, challenges and way to overcome these.

The second set of interviews were with other expatriates – international, regional and political influences – all involved in various peacebuilding activities. The purpose of this second set of interviews was to explore policy options and what is currently being done to bring about long-term solutions to endemic conflict with the community - or locally led solutions. These two sets of interviews helped addressed the research questions and objectives of this dissertation.

4.3.1. Sampling Technique

To identify participants, the purposive and snowball sampling technique were employed due to the specific focus on women engaged in both formal and informal peacebuilding efforts in Goma, Eastern Congo. Several factors influenced this methodological choice. First, the complementary use of these two methods proved effective. In particular, purposive sampling was sometimes insufficient for identifying women involved in informal peacebuilding efforts, as many of these roles are undocumented and less visible. In such cases, snowball sampling provided a valuable strategy for accessing this hidden population through existing networks and personal referrals. Second, while some potential participants are vocal on digital platforms, they often withhold contact information, and unsolicited outreach can foster suspicion and mistrust. Third, many local NGOs, associations, and women's groups lack comprehensive online presence, including websites or publicly available information, making snowball sampling the most practical approach for reaching this population. It is important to note that although snowball sampling was instrumental in identifying participants, the final selection was done purposefully. Thereby ensuring that both sampling strategies effectively complemented and reinforced one another.

The recruitment process began in the pre-interview phase, as detailed in the subsequent section. Initial participants were identified through community leaders, individuals, and external contacts familiar with peacebuilding initiatives. As Yin (2016, p. 95) notes, snowball sampling involves “selecting participants as an offshoot of existing ones.” This approach was not intended to yield random participants but rather to

purposefully select individuals who could guide the researcher to others within the study's scope. Specifically, the method facilitated the identification of women engaged in community-led peacebuilding efforts. During interviews, participants were asked if they knew others involved in formal or informal peacebuilding. Upon obtaining a referral, I researched the prospective participant's background, affiliation, and potential contribution to the study before reaching out and arranging a meeting. The results were highly successful, with many participants occupying leadership roles in their organizations, which enriched the discussions and yielded valuable insights.

Despite its utility, snowball sampling can produce selection biasness and issues of representativeness as noted by Yin (2018) and Heckathorn (1997). This happens when interconnected networks result in a relatively homogenous sample. To mitigate this, I intentionally reached out to individuals with diverse roles and experiences within the peacebuilding sector. This approach helped ensure I reach a broader range of perspectives from participants. Additionally, while this dissertation focuses on local women's roles and experiences in peacebuilding, other individuals working in adjacent fields contributed valuable insights through their recommendations.

It is important to note that this dissertation is based on an exploratory research with the aim to examine and showcase the experiences of women peacebuilders, rather than generalizing findings to represent all women engaged in peacebuilding. The goal is to illuminate the diverse realities and contributions of these women, emphasizing the nuanced and context-specific nature of their work.

4.3.2. Data collection methods

This section introduces the data collection methods used in this dissertation. It begins by highlighting the interview process and then explores the documentary research.

4.3.2.1. Interviews

The interviews were conducted with two primary categories of participants: (1) individuals actively engaged in peacebuilding and fostering social cohesion, including women directly involved in these efforts and a male peacebuilder and advocate for the inclusion of women as peacebuilders; and (2) international and regional experts, as well as political influencers, collaborating with marginalized local women involved in peacebuilding initiatives. My approach to interviewing was influenced by Yin's (2016, p. 142) methodology of a qualitative interview, which, according to him, "follows a conversational mode." In addition, open-ended interview guides were used with the two categories of respondents, all of whom were interviewed online (see section 1.5. on "the limitations of this study" for explanations).

Interviews with women actively engaged in peacebuilding and fostering social cohesion focused on exploring and probing their formal and informal roles in these processes. The objective was to understand women's experiences, starting with their journeys as peacebuilders to becoming champions of advocacy for women's rights, inclusion, participation, and representation at the peace table. Additionally, the interviews aimed to showcase women's active roles and participation, as well as their navigation of challenges such as cultural shocks, insecurity, and patriarchal norms at both community and national levels. Although not many men are actively involved in promoting and

supporting women's peacebuilding groups, one male participant offered valuable insights. His experience greatly contributed to understanding women's roles as peacebuilders, the challenges they face, and the opportunities to foster transformative change in their society.

Interviews with international and regional experts, as well as a political influencer, were conducted to shed light on their collaboration with local women involved in peacebuilding initiatives. The purpose was to gain diverse perspectives on the importance of women's roles in peacebuilding and their effectiveness in these efforts. These participants highlighted critical information about the conditions under which women peacebuilders operate.

Overall, these interviews allowed me to explore and question the ways in which women-led peace efforts in Goma, Eastern DRC, are shaped by policies addressing SGBV. They also provided insights into the challenges of victimization and cultural constraints faced by Congolese women, and how these challenges influence their engagement in peacebuilding. These discussions further elaborated on women's formal and informal roles, with formal roles emphasizing the use of the WPS policies and informal roles highlighting care-centric contributions.

To conduct these interviews, I used open-ended questions that allowed for a natural flow of discussion. This approach encouraged storytelling and provided opportunities for participants to give detailed explanations of their experiences. Using this type of interview enabled me to connect with the emotions and perspectives of the participants. To this end, I relied on the interview guides developed during the project's initial phase.

The first interview guide⁶⁰ was designed to gather the views of local women's groups in Goma on their active involvement in community-based peacebuilding and the implementation of WPS policies. This guide was also used when interviewing the one male peacebuilder. The second interview guide focused on collecting insights from individuals engaged in peacebuilding and peacekeeping missions, including a political influencer, regional experts, and international expatriates. Conducting interviews with diverse groups provided a multifaceted understanding of community-led peacebuilding, allowing participants to share their experiences and define what this concept means to them.

Before discussing the structure of the interviews in more detail, it is important to describe the pre-interview phase.

Pre-Interview Phase

Before initiating the interviews, I followed Burke and Miller's (2001) framework for conducting qualitative case study research, beginning with their proposed sub-phases: "planning the interview, pre-testing the questionnaire, and organizational skills" (p. 2). I developed a set of questions and, given the open-ended nature of the interviews, allowed for new questions to emerge naturally during the discussions. A pilot study was conducted informally with individuals living in Goma. These preliminary conversations, which Burke and Miller describe as a "pilot study," involved participants similar to the intended

⁶⁰ see Annexes: Interview Guides

sample. This process clarified how to phrase questions effectively and how to refine their formulation for better understanding.

Interview Phase

To interview participants, I adopted Burke and Miller's (2001) suggestions for interview protocol, striving to be friendly, courteous, conversational, and unbiased. Recognizing that the topics discussed could be deeply personal, particularly as a woman and a feminist originally from the region, I maintained a neutral stance and approached the field with the curiosity of a learner. This facilitated data collection while allowing participants to share their experiences openly and without judgment.

When participants recounted acts of bravery or resilience, I encouraged them to elaborate, often using affirming statements such as, "That sounds interesting. Could you explain further?" This approach fostered a sense of appreciation and trust, prompting participants to provide more detailed responses. The participants' openness and resilience were deeply inspiring. Most interviews were conducted in French, with some incorporating English and Swahili. I translated the French and Swahili responses into English, using tools such as Google Translate for initial drafts and refining them as needed.

To fully capture the experience of women's peacebuilders in the whole of Eastern Congo, I also employed a secondary desk-based research that is explored in the following section.

4.3.2.2.Documentary Research

In terms of documentary research, the study drew from archival data, peer reviewed articles and policy documents. Their value and quality were assessed based on Scott's (2014) criteria for handling documentary research (i.e., authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning) before including them as sources of data.

To control for authenticity of a document, I thoroughly examined its source to determine whether the information was genuinely collected or fabricated. For instance, peer-reviewed articles, archival documents, official reports, and policy briefs often provide detailed and verifiable information. However, I encountered instances where reports presented contradictions. For example, a contact shared that while one report featured images of houses built for victims of violence, a field visit to the supposed project site revealed that no houses had been constructed. In such cases, I opt not to proceed with the document.

To ensure the credibility of the data, I evaluated whether the information directly addressed my research questions. This involved scrutinizing the content for evidence of unexplained biases or distortions. Additionally, I considered the timeline of data collected, recognizing that the experiences of women in the 1960s, 1990s, and 2000s differ significantly. As I was probing women's agency in peacebuilding, my role as a researcher is to contextualize these historical narratives and contrast them with contemporary experiences. For instance, my fieldwork contributes insights into the status of women in 2023, offering a comparative lens against the period of the First Congo War in 1996.

Representativeness was another critical consideration in collecting and analysing data. Eastern Congo is home to diverse groups, cultures, beliefs, and socio-political positions. The experiences of a woman from a marginalized community, for example, differ markedly from the experience of a woman pursuing a government position. Ensuring that the documents reflect these varied perspectives was essential for capturing the complexity of women's experiences and ideations in peacebuilding.

Lastly, I focused on interpreting the meaning of the documents reviewed. I sought to determine whether the information was clear, comprehensive, and contributed value to my research. Specifically, I prioritized data that highlighted women's roles and participation in peace-led projects at negotiation tables and their active agency in care-based initiatives.

To gather this data, I collected verifiable and publicly accessible materials from projects and organizations working on peace and conflict issues. I dedicated time reviewing articles and peer-reviewed journals online and at the Saint Paul University Library to ensure accuracy and relevance. Additionally, I utilized Google Alerts to track documents, data, blogs⁶¹, and media posts related to women, gender, and peacebuilding in Congo. This multifaceted approach provided a robust foundation for analyzing women's agency in peacebuilding.

To add relevant data from documentary research, I selected 21 documents from local and international NGOs, statements and publications from multilateral agencies and

⁶¹ Although blogs often present personal perspectives, they can provide valuable insights and serve as a source of important information. In this dissertation, blogs were utilized as tools to explore various dynamics of conflicts and the complex realities faced by women. While they are not directly cited, they contributed significantly to personal understanding and learning.

peer reviewed articles. Moreover, to search for the dissertations' related documents, I used Semantic Scholar, the University of Ottawa e-library, and Google Scholar. These documents include academic studies, reports, policy briefs, and a statement from the United Nations Security Council meeting. In addition, the selection of documents was based on how the data contributed to answering the research questions.

In terms of archival data, I selected organizational reports from local NGOs that focus on women's contributions to peacebuilding, advocacy for women's rights, and efforts to combat gender-based violence. These documents are instrumental in understanding the work and impact of women-led peacebuilding organizations and institutions. Meanwhile, peer-reviewed articles served as scholarly secondary sources, providing insights into issues such as victimization in the DRC, women's social positions within Eastern Congolese communities, and the opportunities and challenges faced by women peacebuilders. These articles offered critical data that supported the study's findings. Lastly, for policy documents, I utilized publications, official statements, and policy briefs that highlighted women's active roles in peacebuilding. Many of these policy briefs were sourced from international NGOs, while the statements originated from local women peacebuilders participating in United Nations Security Council meetings. Together, these three categories of data—archival reports, peer-reviewed articles, and policy documents—allowed me to triangulate findings, validate evidence, and develop a comprehensive understanding of the historical, cultural, contextual, and contemporary dynamics explored in the findings of this dissertation.

Table 2 shows the documents used to complement the fieldwork.

Document, year	Source of information	Types of study	About the study
Maclin et al., 2015	Semantic Scholar – connected paper and University of Ottawa e-library	Field research in Goma, Bukavu and Kalehe	The study explores community attitudes towards and the impact of conflict, specifically sexual violence, in eastern DRC.
Selimovic et al, 2012	Report from the Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation	Field research in Bukavu (South Kivu) and Kinshasa (capital city of the DRC)	The study addresses the endemic sexual violence during the conflict in the DRC and the challenges faced by women's organizations. The reports also touch on the importance of international collaboration in improving women's participation and security.
Allouche et al., 2023	Semantic Scholar – connected paper and Google Scholar	Field research conducted in Shasha and Bweremana in North Kivu and Cirunga, Kalulu, Bushwira, Miti and Bugorhe in South Kivu	Exploring the challenges faced by women in the Democratic Republic of Congo due to a protracted conflict and restrictive norms, focusing on women's agency to break the culture of silence and protect themselves.
Solidarité Femine pour la Paix et le Developpement Integral (SOFEPADI), report of 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022	Annual reports of the SOFEPADI – a local feminine NGO in the DRC	Documentation of activities conducted in North Kivu, Ituri and Kinshasa	Reporting about the organization's successes and barriers encountered.

Mulumeoderha, 2022	Semantic Scholar – Connected Paper uOttawa e-library	Qualitative field research in urban and rural areas in South Kivu	The study explores how traditional gender roles impact women's opportunities, aspirations, and decision-making within the family and society
Hilhorst and Bashwira, 2014	Occasional publication at the Wageningen University	Qualitative Field research in Bukavu and Walungu in South Kivu	The study aims to understand the overall situation of women in the country, the history and composition of the women's movement in South Kivu, observable trends, strengths, weaknesses, and the impact of women's organizations on local women's associations.
Ignatius et al., 2022	A policy brief by ActionAid UK	Consultation with International and Local NGOs and academics. Research conducted in North and South Kivu	The brief highlights women's agency in peacebuilding and suggests a path from seeing women as passive victims to seeing them as active actors.
Sandrine Lusamba – Coordinator of the SOFEPADI	UN website	Statement by Sandrine Lusamba at the UNSC briefing on the DRC	Statement about the insecurity in the DRC, the status of women and girls and the absence of women and youth in important meetings.
Mulenga-Byuma, (2023).	CARE Rapid Gender Analysis in the DRC – Care DRC	Qualitative field research in Mudja, Munigi, and Kanyarucinya IDP camps in North Kivu	The study focuses on understanding the impact of the crisis in North Kivu, DRC, on gender relations, GBV, and social norms.
Actions Pour la Conservation de la Nature et le Developpement Communautaire (ACNDC)	Annual reports of the ACNDC – published on the ACNDC website	Operations in North and South Kivu – reports of activities carried out by the ACNDC	The annual reports outline activities carried out by the ACNDC and successes and challenges encountered.

2020, 2021, and 2023			
Van Houten, 2020	Semantic Scholar – connected paper uOttawa e-library	Ethnographic research in Bukavu in the province of South Kivu	The article explores women’s contributions to peacebuilding in South Kivu, DRC, through civil society organizations (CSOs).
Jamaa Grand Lacks Report of 2022 and 2023	Annual reports published on the Jamaa Grands Lacs organization website	Annual reports showcasing activities of the organization in engaging women and youth in peacebuilding	Most of the activities carried out by Jamaa Grands Lacs are trainings, seminars, workshops and dialogues on peace-related topics

Table 2 Secondary Data

4.4. Data Management and Analysis

This section focuses on the methods used to analyze data collected from interviews, archival sources, and policy documents. Three analytical approaches were employed: thematic analysis, framework analysis and qualitative content analysis.

To manage the data, I organized it in a Word document containing key details such as the date of the interview, participant’s initials, occupation, contact information, and content. After identifying preliminary themes, I used Excel to facilitate the coding process. Initially, I performed manual coding by referencing the Word document, then entered the coded information into an Excel spreadsheet, ensuring that each piece of data aligned with its corresponding theme. Data from interviews was recorded, and the transcripts were anonymized, encrypted, and securely stored in password-protected files.

For transcription, I utilized the *Transcribe by Wreally* tool, which offers an estimated accuracy rate of 94% for converting audio recordings into text. This tool also allowed manual adjustments for verbatim transcription in cases of errors or missing words. To ensure the transcription is accurate, I cross-checked the text by simultaneously listening to the recordings. Although the tool provided a high level of accuracy, I occasionally completed or revised the text manually to ensure alignment with the original audio.

Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, was the primary method for analyzing interview data. The process began with familiarizing myself with the data by thoroughly reading the transcripts and making side notes to identify initial patterns (Step 1). In Step 2, I generated codes and labels to capture key issues and topics. In Step 3, these codes were grouped into broader potential themes. Step 4 involved reviewing these themes to ensure they were accurate, coherent, and relevant to the research questions, with the interview guide serving as a reference to maintain alignment. In Step 5, I refined and clearly defined each theme to ensure they were specific and descriptive. Finally, in Step 6, I structured the findings in a password-protected Excel sheet, organizing themes and sub-themes systematically.

While thematic analysis was instrumental in identifying and organizing themes, elements of framework analysis were also integrated. This method allowed for the summarization and categorization of data into a matrix, tagging relevant excerpts according to the thematic framework. Framework analysis was particularly useful for analyzing documentary research (i.e. archival data, peer review articles and policy

document). Using 21 documents, this approach facilitated the development of sub-themes presented in the findings and analysis.

Simultaneously, qualitative content analysis was applied to analyze secondary data obtained through documentary research. To delve into the context, depth, and meaning embedded within the textual data, I adopted Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) conceptualization of content analysis, which emphasizes understanding both the content and context of the information and its relevance to the study. Using the rich, detailed information obtained through documentary sources, I employed content analysis frameworks to systematically interpret the text, identify key themes, and extract meaningful topics that enriched the study's findings and analysis. This process enabled the integration of insights from secondary data, which were carefully interpreted to complement and enhance the primary data collected through interviews, creating a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the study.

For both data from interviews and documentary research, manual coding was performed line by line. I assigned codes and paraphrased segments of data to describe their interpretative meaning, ensuring they fit within the identified themes and sub-themes. This rigorous process ensured that the analysis was comprehensive, systematic, and aligned with the research objectives.

4.5. Limitations and challenges

The initial plan was to select participants through purposive sampling only, drawing from Creswell and Plano Clark's (2017) work. That is, choosing participants based on their roles and expertise on the subject matter. I intended to select 20 women representatives from women-led peacebuilding organizations (two government representatives, one UN representative, one representative in East African Stand-by Force, three international representatives of non-profit organizations - e.g., Search for Common Ground, Solidarite Internationales and Hands at Work - and three community leaders – i.e., one religious leader and an elder. Similarly, I had planned to conduct three focus group discussions with women's community-based organizations and associations to gauge their interventions in conflict and their efforts toward restoration and reconciliation processes. Overall, I intended to spend a month in Goma to carry out interviews and focus groups discussions in-person. However, due to security concerns, I adapted the study by conducting interviews online. Focus group discussions, remained challenging to implement because of anonymity issues. Consequently, I decided to forgo focus group discussions, particularly since the necessary information was successfully obtained through the interviews.

After two months of attempting to reach individuals and organizations through purposive sampling methods, only a few responded, and securing meetings proved challenging. This difficulty was primarily due to the suspicions surrounding data collection in active conflict environments and prevalent trust issues. To ensure the collection of a substantial and meaningful dataset for this study, I complemented the initial

sampling method with snowball sampling following the initial contacts I had. This approach allowed the initial participants to refer me to other potential contacts for interviews, whom I then screened based on their level of involvement in peacebuilding efforts.

Although I consider this research to have run smoothly and successfully, I encountered a few challenges. The ongoing conflict in the DRC, particularly in Eastern Congo, impacted the research process conducted in Goma. While conducting online fieldwork, I was not physically affected by the insecurity, the instability influenced participant engagement. Initially, trust issues were prevalent, with participants expressing discomfort and requiring reassurance that the research was not for surveillance purposes. In the initial plan, it is this mistrust that posed challenges to the effectiveness of purposive sampling. To address this, the ethical approval documents from the university and consent forms were instrumental in addressing some of these concerns; however, six potential participants declined to participate due to fear, despite assurances of anonymity.

Technical challenges also emerged during the data collection process. Although Zoom was initially proposed for interviews, participants were generally uncomfortable with this platform, preferring WhatsApp calls instead. In some cases, connectivity issues disrupted these calls, necessitating rescheduling to ensure the interviews could proceed smoothly.

Further complications arose in contacting organizations. Many organizations lacked updated websites or functional contact information, making it difficult to establish communication. Emails often went unanswered, and in some cases, bounced back entirely. Only three responses were received, and scheduling appointments proved unsuccessful.

To address these challenges, a colleague at Saint Paul University assisted by connecting me with an organization in South Kivu, which provided a list of emails and phone numbers for other peacebuilding organizations based in Goma. Additionally, another contact helped me connect with international and regional peacekeepers, facilitating the recruitment of new participants. On top of that, Facebook profiles became a useful tool for identifying and reaching out to organizations. Participants frequently inquired about how their contact information had been obtained, and clarification was provided that the South Kivu organization had shared these details.

Accessing online resources also posed obstacles, particularly in retrieving reports on past events. Although participants were asked for assistance in providing relevant documents, many were hesitant to share internal or classified materials. Nevertheless, some participants provided supplementary information and resources that were instrumental in advancing the research.

Finally, ethical challenges arose during the interviews. Three participants requested financial support for their projects, which fell outside the scope of the research. In one instance, a participant withdrew from the study due to the absence of compensation. These challenges highlight the complex interplay of ethical, technical, and contextual factors in conducting research in conflict-affected environments.

4.6. Ethical consideration

To meet the methodological and ethical requirements of this dissertation, I adhered strictly to principles of ethical research as outlined by Saint Paul University. This involved

conducting the study with integrity, respecting participants' rights, and ensuring their anonymity, safety, and security. Key ethical practices included obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and minimizing any potential risks associated with participation.

Prior to initiating the research, I provided all participants with a detailed consent form, sent via email or WhatsApp messaging system. The form clearly explained the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Participants had sufficient time to review and understand the document. At the start of each interview, the consent form was verbally reiterated, confirming their willingness to participate. Interviews only proceeded after explicit consent was granted, resulting in 100% agreement from participants.

As outlined in the consent form, participant anonymity was rigorously maintained throughout the research. While presenting the data in subsequent chapters, no identifying information was disclosed unless participants explicitly agreed otherwise. Several participants expressed comfort in having their perspectives shared anonymously, which was consistently respected.

Given the ongoing conflict in Eastern Congo, particular precaution was taken to ensure participants were not placed at risk. Questions were designed to avoid exposing participants to harm. In cases where sensitive information emerged, I sought confirmation from participants regarding its inclusion in the study. Notably, some participants demonstrated resilience and expressed a desire for their experiences to be documented, emphasizing the importance of ethical sensitivity in such cases.

Recognizing the sensitive nature of the study, which delves into experiences that deeply impacted participants' lives, respect and empathy were central to the research process. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Interview protocols were carefully designed and adhered to, ensuring the discussions flowed naturally while respecting participants' boundaries. These measures collectively ensured a rigorous, respectful, and ethically sound research process.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter presents research findings on women-led peace efforts in Eastern Congo, drawing from fieldwork conducted in Goma and desk-based research involving systematic reviews of existing data. It includes demographic information on the participants interviewed and provides supporting study evidence on women-led peace efforts in the region. Here, the primary objective is to capture women's roles and experiences in peacebuilding, the opportunities for engagement, challenges encountered and ways they navigate these challenges. To organize and manage data from the findings, five themes are adopted to address the research questions. These themes focus on policies regarding SGBV, and the impact of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 –WPS agenda on women-led peace efforts. In addition, attention is paid to the influence of cultural factors on women's agency and their strategies for overcoming barriers and opportunities. Each theme also includes sub-theme established through framework analysis resulting from the research findings.

5.1.Demographics

The study involved a total of 17 participants, comprising 14 women and 3 men, all actively engaged in peacebuilding initiatives in Eastern DRC. The majority of their projects and activities are based in Goma, with outreach extending to other areas within the region. While factors such as ethnicity, age, and educational background were not explicitly part of the selection criteria, the diversity of participants provided valuable

insights into the varying perspectives of individuals from different social and generational contexts. Additional considerations included the alignment of the participants' organizational missions with peacebuilding objectives and community problem-solving mechanisms. To protect the confidentiality of all participants, their identities remain anonymous in this research.

5.1.1. Occupation of participants

Although the study focuses on Eastern Congo, all participants interviewed were based in Goma. The role and mission of the organizations with which the participants were affiliated were critical considerations in their selection. This research prioritized individuals whose work centers on advancing social cohesion, transformative peacebuilding and reconciliation methodologies within communities in Eastern Congo. Consequently, all participants were actively engaged in peacebuilding initiatives.

The participants were categorized into three distinct groups. The first category comprised individuals involved in local women-led NGOs and associations dedicated to promoting peacebuilding initiatives and advocating for women's rights and inclusion. The second category included participants engaged in informal advocacy efforts, such as denouncing violence against women and combatting hate speech. The third category consisted of peacekeepers working with multilateral organizations. These individuals primarily focused on monitoring and evaluating interventions, as well as collaborating with women-led NGOs to support survivors of SGBV in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

These categories are reflected in Chart 1:

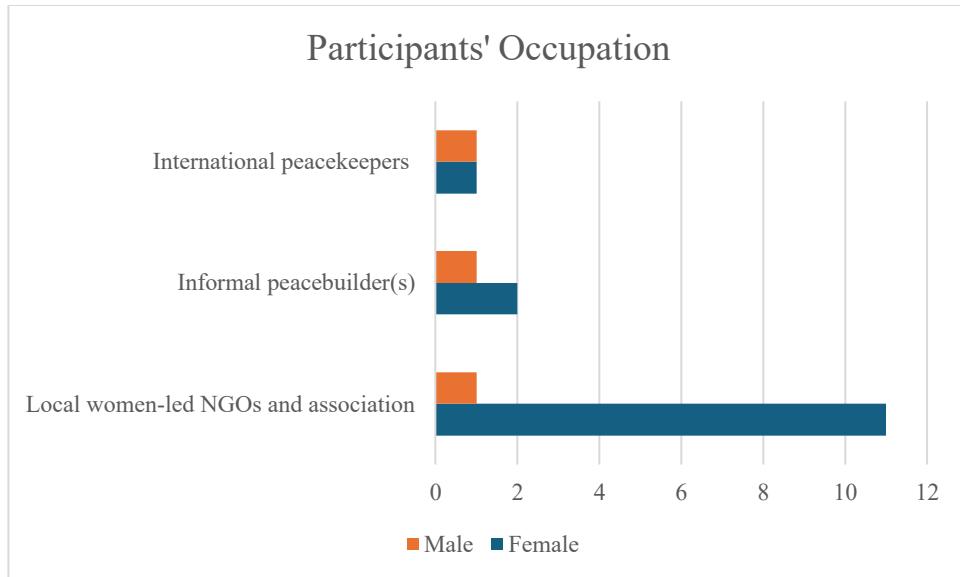


Chart 1 Participants' Occupation

Moreover, the participants' occupations were a central focus of this dissertation, as they provided valuable insights into their experiences and worldviews. For instance, participants in leadership positions have navigated multiple eras of conflict in the DRC and have witnessed a gradual evolution in policies supporting gender equality and women's rights. Their expertise and perspectives contrasted with those of younger peacebuilders, many of whom occupy junior to mid-level roles. Specifically, younger women peacebuilders demonstrated a notable degree of creativity and innovation, frequently identifying themselves as feminists—a trend that reflects the increasing willingness of women to embrace and articulate feminist ideologies.

Another significant observation pertains to participants from rural areas, who possess a nuanced understanding of local conflicts due to their daily exposure to these

issues. Additionally, the two male participants (the peacebuilder and the political influencer) exhibited awareness of women’s peacebuilding agency but differed from their female counterparts in their critical analysis toward women who are not actively engaged in peace activities. This divergence may be attributed to the distinct lived experiences of men and women in the DRC, with women peacebuilders offering more personal and nuanced insights into the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society.

Finally, the two peacekeepers contributed valuable perspectives on their professional experiences and their observations of women’s agency in peacebuilding. Collectively, these diverse viewpoints enriched the study and underscored its success in capturing the multifaceted dynamics of peacebuilding in the region.

Chart 2 illustrates the professional experiences of the participants.

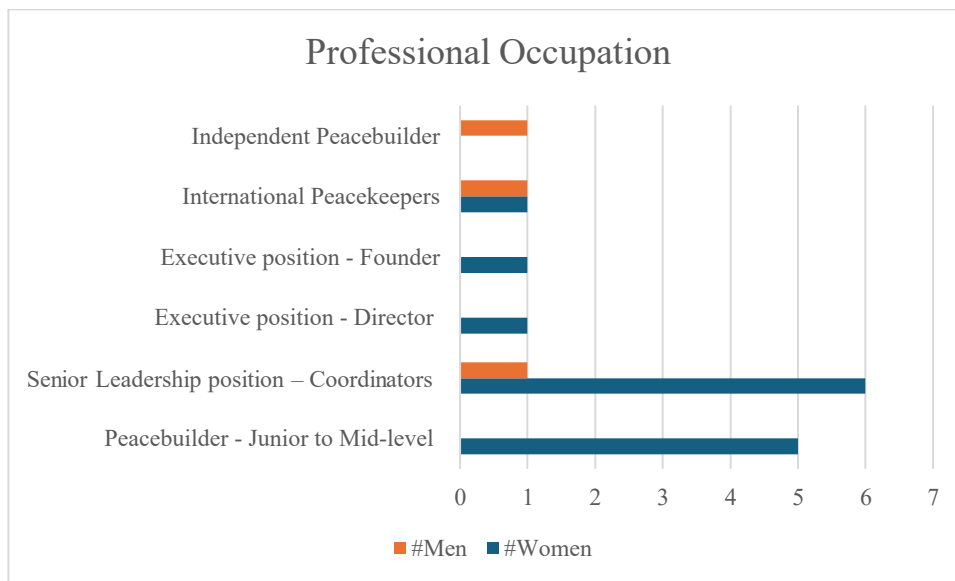


Chart 2 Professional Occupation

5.1.2. Supporting Study Evidence on Women-led Peace Efforts in Eastern Congo

This dissertation also integrates a desk-based systematic review to complement and enhance its findings. As outlined in the research methodology chapter, the study systematically reviewed 21 documents (refer to Table 2 in the research methodology chapter). These documents include a diverse range of sources, such as reports, publications, policy documents, peer-reviewed articles, statements, and archival data. The insights derived from this documentary research are instrumental in addressing the research questions and offering a broader perspective on women's formal and informal roles in Eastern Congo. While the virtual field research provided valuable insights, incorporating systematically reviewed documents adds an additional layer of depth to the analysis, further enriching the discussion and ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the topic as demonstrated in the following sections.

5.2. Women-led peace efforts in Eastern Congo

This section presents the findings of the virtual field research and documents reviewed. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that women's organizations in Eastern Congo are actively involved in peace-led actions and navigate the policies of SGBV by promoting its application at the local and national levels. Women organizations monitor and report incidents of violations of women's rights and advocate strongly for the full implementation of these rights. Consistent with this is the understanding of WPS policies among the peacebuilders interviewed. They claim that implementation is still a challenge and note that these policies help shape women's active participation at both

local and national levels. The findings also provide information on the impact of culture and social norms on women's agency in peacebuilding. These are presented in terms of challenges and ways to overcome them. Finally, the findings highlight the ways in which women express their opinions in the face of ethnopolitical challenges.

5.2.1. The journey towards becoming a peacebuilder and key motivation

This section explores the experiences of women prior to their engagement in peacebuilding, with a dual purpose. First, it seeks to understand the personal and social experiences that led women to become active agents of peace. Second, it examines how these roles influence the formal and informal roles of women-led peace initiatives. Additionally, this section delves into the factors that motivated and shaped their journey into peacebuilding.

The findings indicate that issues such as resilience in the face of SGBV, insecurity, and persistent gender inequalities were significant drivers encouraging women to pursue peace-led activities. However, the findings also highlight that many women were inspired by a personal desire to make a difference, with their feminine instincts (as a participant argued) also played an important role in becoming peacebuilders. As one participant noted:

Women's instincts often drive them towards peace. Moreover, women participate in peace efforts because they are the primary victims of conflict. For example, in displaced persons' camps, women typically outnumber men. When we asked them about their husbands, many women explain that their husbands stayed behind to seek solutions, promising to send any resources they might find to their families in the camps. Consequently, it is primarily women and children who bear the heaviest burden of conflict's repercussions. Even in situations where they feel powerless, the atrocities and enduring consequences of war compel women to act.

For instance, women constitute the majority of those subjected to sexual violence during conflicts. This stark reality highlights not only their maternal instincts and inherently peaceful nature but also their profound awareness of the devastating effects of war on their lives and those of their families. This awareness compels them to stand up and say: No, this must change.

This testimony underscores the complex interplay between women's vulnerability to conflict and their agency in responding to it. The findings suggest that women's peacebuilding efforts are not only shaped by their lived experiences but also driven by their unique understanding of the social and human costs of war. This combination of resilience, maternal instincts, and a commitment to change reinforces their critical role in fostering peace.

5.2.1.1. Sexual and gender-based violence

One of the most documented cases of research on women's agency in the DRC is in relation to sexual and gender-based violence. It has even been labelled the "rape capital" of the world, with high rates of sexual violence perpetrated by militias, security forces, and even peacekeepers (Selimovic et al., 2012 p. 13). Unsurprisingly, SGBV appeared to be one of the primary motivations for women to engage in peacebuilding activities in Eastern Congo. Participants identified violence against women and the lack of respect for women's rights as the tipping point for their involvement and active participation. Even more distressing for women was the absence of laws that even sanctioned atrocities committed against women during armed conflict. One woman peacebuilder in Goma recalled her experience in 1998, before she became a peace ambassador:

I was in Saké, one of the villages of DRC where we were deprived of almost everything, and we saw how armed groups were recruiting children. We lost our families, brothers, sisters who died. It was then our wake-up call, especially after seeing how women were raped in masse and sexual violence had become a weapon of war. So, we started our work. In that period, no law could sanction that, so as lawyers, we thought we could start with proposing a law that sanctions rape and sexual violence.

In 1998, during the Second Congo War, the participant and her university colleagues began their advocacy journey to urge conflict actors to pay attention to women's rights. At the time, the DRC Family Code contained a law that discriminated against women and relegated them to a second-class status. The female peacebuilder argues that her advocacy had a positive impact in 2006 when the government approved the law condemning sexual violence. Returning to their motivation to become peacebuilders, the international peacekeepers add that it is usually difficult for women who have experienced sexual violence or rape to speak out. However, when they talk to a female officer, they are open to share their experiences. The female peacekeeper mentioned that women who are open to sharing their experiences end up becoming peacebuilders, joining others in the fight for peace and respect for women's rights.

Meanwhile, sexual violence is one of the many forms of GBV, but not the only one. Participants paid particular attention to the lack of respect for women's rights, which leads to further isolation and marginalization. For some women peacebuilders this was another reason to engage in this work. It is important to note that every woman interviewed said she had experienced first-degree gender-based discrimination, whether by a family member, a community member, or at work. Women have to overcome many challenges in order for their peacebuilding agency to be fully operational. In this regard, one participant mentioned:

As a peacemaker, I observe everything happening in our country. There is violence against women and against everyone, leading me to conclude that discrimination against women's rights is prevalent here. Women suffer and face unemployment. The insecurity in our country exacerbates their suffering. Many women live alone due to divorces, which further increases their hardship. There are few men who offer help, and when they do, they often demand a lot in return, such as expecting sexual favours in exchange for assistance or employment. Despite women's education and experience, these qualifications are often disregarded.

This passage highlights the challenges that women commonly experience and how these challenges often drive them to become peacebuilders. Women peacebuilders frequently express grievances about the discrimination and mistreatment they endure solely because of their gender. However, rather than remaining passive in the face of these adversities, they choose to take action, addressing the issues they perceive as most urgent and impactful within their communities.

Similar to these views, four other participants claimed to have experienced gender-based discrimination and exclusion in their workplaces or in the communities in which they sought to engage. Despite such false expectations, participants shared that such instances like that cultivate their resilience and increase their need to continue to advocate for gender equality. In fact, in conflict-affected areas, it is these acts of discrimination and exclusion that encourage local people to act, according to the participants interviewed.

5.2.1.2. When we talk about peace, women are more active.

The security situation in Eastern Congo is alarming in most times; civilians encounter violent conflicts during the day, police arrests are based on corruption needs and there are demands in rural areas to pay taxes to security forces and armed groups. All the participants interviewed understand what insecurity and violent conflict are. In fact,

participants mentioned that growing up in North and South Kivu and Ituri, one experiences violent attacks at least once. Of particular interest is the extent to which security constraints lead one to become a peacebuilder. When one participant mentioned that growing up in a war zone led her to become a peacebuilder in the first place, she explains:

Having grown up in a war zone, I knew I had to become a peacebuilder.... As a woman, it comes naturally for me to engage as a peacebuilder because women are naturally peaceful...

In particular, this participant uses the security challenges in Eastern Congo to encourage other women to join her as peacebuilders; she mentions that “when we talk about peace, women are more active.” In her view, it is a mistake not to include women in peace talks and agreements because women have the ability to understand the communities and bring solutions to the various conflicts in Eastern Congo. In addition, she believes that her maternal instincts make women excellent peacebuilders because they understand their families and are deeply involved in local communities. She adds that there is no better peacebuilder than the one who knows what is going on in her community.

5.2.1.3. Women are not just victims.

According to Ignatius et al. (2022, p. 1), the narratives that view women as passive victims are at the root of their exclusion as peace agents. The authors add that such a narrative contributes to the isolation of women’s voices “despite evidence of their leading role within their communities during humanitarian action” (p. 1). Similarly, the participants interviewed echoed these sentiments, arguing that the fact that women are

seen as mere victims during violent conflicts leads to some women to embrace the victim narrative. One of the participants stated:

Personally, I debuted my journey as a woman ambassador for peace because women should not only participate in the negotiations but also share their thoughts, as our voices should be taken into consideration in order to adopt agreements that put an end to conflict in our region.

For some women, being left out when the parties negotiate peace agreements felt insurmountable. Not only do women blame the norms that relegate them to a second-class status, but they also resent the lack of awareness about women's rights among their peers (other women). This contributes greatly to their position as passive victims, and sometimes they also resist the changes that other women bring about, making it more difficult to mobilize. The male peacebuilder argued that it is even more complex when educated women are unaware of their rights or never sensitize other women to speak up for themselves. In line with this idea, he referred to his encounter with a female journalist who was reluctant to talk about women's rights on her TV show.

5.2.1.4. Making a difference in the community

Although many participants began their peacebuilding journeys in response to the violent conflicts in Eastern Congo and the prevalence of SGBV, two young women peacebuilders were particularly motivated by the desire to make a difference in their communities. One participant, working with a youth organization focusing on peacebuilding since 2019, expressed her early need to engage in meaningful peace-led initiatives and contribute to fostering a culture of peace within her community. During a

telephone interview, she reflected: “I wanted to send messages of peace through culture, using poems and theatre, i.e., using art to rebuild society.” Over the past five years, she has actively participated in peace initiatives, addressing various challenges facing her community in Goma. In addition, some of her work involves hosting radio shows to promote peaceful coexistence, creating short films about ethnic conflicts and ways to solve them, and conducting improvisation classes at a community level. All of these activities emphasise the importance of harmonious living. She believes these initiatives contribute to rebuilding the community and fostering a sense of shared humanity.

Another young woman peacebuilder attributed her advocacy journey to her personal connection with her father, a person living with a disability. Witnessing the lack of support for persons with disabilities—many of whom acquired their conditions due to the conflict—propelled her to challenge discriminatory norms that excluded them from contributing to peace initiatives. This experience fueled her commitment to advocate for the active participation of women in peacebuilding. She described this moment as a turning point, stating that from then on, her commitment to peace advocacy became irreversible.

Another participant shared that her peacebuilding journey began with a desire to effect change. She recounted:

Personally, I had never encountered people directly affected by conflict situations. The first day I went to the East, to Bunia, where our headquarters is located, I listened to women who were victims of conflict. That night, I couldn't sleep. I told myself that I must get involved for peace, and that drives me. Even when I feel exhausted, I remind myself that there is still work to do so that those affected can find peace.

This powerful testimony highlights how her first-hand exposure to the suffering endured by women in conflict zones became the catalyst for her commitment to peacebuilding. Listening to the stories of women who had endured unimaginable hardships left a lasting impression, compelling her to take action to address the injustices they faced. Her dedication is rooted in a profound sense of responsibility and empathy, which continues to fuel her efforts despite the physical and emotional challenges she encounters. Her journey reflects a steadfast resolve to follow a path of peace, emphasising the transformative power of personal experiences in shaping one's dedication to creating a better world.

5.2.2. Personal and Community Impact

The results of this research show that being a peace agent as a woman has both positive and negative impact, especially on one's personal life and image in the community. In terms of positive impacts, women's organizations receive support from their families and at the community level. Their work is acknowledged, and through the trainings and dialogues they conduct, women can see the impact they are having. However, they also face challenges such as emotional and physical harm, as will be discussed below. The findings also suggest that participants who work with women's peacebuilding organizations often find themselves involved in more informal roles, mainly those of supporting affected communities.

5.2.2.1. Community and Family Support

When I expressed my interest in embracing a development and peacebuilding path, my family supported me because they believed my role would generate a positive impact.

In Eastern Congo, much of the population lives in communities. People support each other in difficult times, attend each other's weddings, and sometimes contribute to each other's funeral, and more. In such a context, the support of the community and family is tremendous for women's organizations in peacebuilding. The findings show that almost all women started after consulting their parents and spouses, which played an important role in overcoming social pressure and emotional harm as they felt supported at the household level.

Similar views are found in CARE's 2023 Rapid Gender Analysis conducted in Mudja, Munigi, and Kanyarucinya IDP camps. The document reveals that a married woman who wants to participate in community activities or travel outside of the community must seek permission from her husband (CARE, 2023 p. 11). Such information is essential as it provides the context within which women's agency operate. With the support of the family, most importantly a male figure, it becomes easier for women to engage as leaders in their communities.

While there is often resistance to women's involvement in peacebuilding and societal transformation, women peacebuilders emphasize that they have found ways to contribute their knowledge and expertise to peace-related efforts. The findings suggest that women exercise agency by collaborating with communities and strategically mobilizing community leaders. Their aim is to secure the support of these leaders, whose

influence can facilitate women's ability to work effectively within communities under their oversight. Once community leaders endorse their ideas, mobilization becomes more feasible, granting women the necessary space to carry out their activities.

The success of a woman peacebuilder often leads to broader community support, reflecting the value of their contributions. Of particular interest is the recognition one female peacebuilder received in Goma for her impactful work. She shared that "I received multiple awards in the past few years, including mentorship awards and excellence awards, which recognize my contributions and impact." Such recognition is significant as it affirms women's leadership roles, accentuates their ability to influence local perceptions, and enhances their credibility in conducting dialogues and training. Awards of this nature elevate their status, enabling them to engage with communities in a highly respected and impactful manner, further advancing their peacebuilding initiatives.

It also points to the support that some of the participants receive from the communities in which they work. This resonates with the female peacebuilder, who mentions the changing attitudes over the past decade, with more men supporting women's actions through the concept of positive masculinity⁶².

Consistent with these views is community support, also found in the seven SOFEPADI reports⁶³, which provide information on how the community is receptive to their activities in Beni and Ituri. One example is the ONE STOP CENTRE and the Medical Centre Karibuni wa Mama where victims of SGBV receive free treatment and follow-up

⁶² Positive masculinity refers to men's part in supporting women and upholding women's rights by challenging norms that lead them to mistreat women in the first place.

⁶³ The SOFEPADI annual reports highlights activities the organization does per year according to their objectives. Their second objective is about taking medical care of victims of SGBV – through this objective they take charges of supporting women affected by SGBV in violent outbreaks in Beni, Ituri and Kinshasa.

care, with all costs covered by the SOFEPADI. In Beni (North Kivu) and Ituri, the organization provides space for women's shelter and offer counselling and psychotherapy support to victims of violent conflict, among other services. In addition, in the areas where this organization works, community leaders cooperate and allow them to carry out their activities.

5.2.2.2. Building financial freedom

Two reviews have identified poverty as an obstacle to the society in Eastern Congo. It was found that the DRC faces extreme poverty line, with over 75% living below the poverty threshold, exacerbated by gender inequality in land ownership and lack of security for women (Selimovic, 2012, p. 13). Living in such conditions has led to what Maclin et al. (2015) identified as a risk for transactional sex due to limited income-generating opportunities in Bukavu (p. 123). These studies suggest that war and insecurity created situations in which women had to take care of the household, either because their husbands lost their jobs, joined the armed forces, or died. In all cases, women found themselves acting as heads of households.

The findings reveal that economic opportunities for women are severely limited, placing men in a more privileged position to secure employment. This disparity exacerbates financial hardships for women, particularly widows and single mothers, who face additional barriers to economic independence. A particularly compelling account comes from a female peacebuilder, who is both a widow and a single mother. She shared:

In my village, 80% of women live alone and struggle to support their households financially. As a single mother myself, I find life quite challenging. I want to work

like men do, going out into the field and engaging in various types of work. However, this possibility is hindered by insecurity, fear, intimidation, and the widespread torture inflicted on both women and men. This discrimination deeply affects our society and the way we live here.

Her testimony highlights the intersection of economic marginalization and the pervasive insecurity faced by women in her community. These challenges not only restrict their ability to pursue meaningful work but also force many women to engage in transactional sex as a means of feeding their families. This grim reality underlines the structural and societal barriers that limit the operationalization of women's agency, further entrenching their vulnerability and perpetuating cycles of inequality.

To address part of these issues, research participants mentioned that poverty is a major challenge to women's full participation. The findings show that women peacebuilders working in women's peacebuilding organizations and institutions in the Eastern DRC are working with associations and collective groups to build a micro-credit system in order to help women become financially free. Poverty is one of the main reasons why many women are forced into prostitution, especially in the mining areas. Mining is reported to have higher rates of sexual exploitation and rape.

This was observed by one of the female peacebuilders whose work focuses primarily on supporting women victims of sexual exploitation and rape. She believes that if women are given the means to be financially free, they can be even more engaged in peace work. She adds that her organization provides microcredit to women in order to help them become independent and avoid exploitation. Findings show that women in rural areas need help accessing loans to grow their businesses. Therefore, women's

peacebuilding organizations and institutions have chosen to support women with savings tools and the provision of microcredit. As highlighted by another female peacebuilder:

Currently, through AVEC⁶⁴, we are focusing on the economic advancement of women by implementing village savings and credit associations. We organize groups of 25 to 30 women who contribute monthly, and after nine months, the collective savings are distributed among them. This approach helps ensure that women are not confined to staying at home.

This system has enabled more women, particularly in rural areas, to access small grants to start and grow their businesses. Participants noted that financially independent rural women are more likely to join initiatives such as Ambassadors for Peace and advocate for women's rights. The rationale behind financially supporting women is rooted in the understanding that economic hardship often hinders their participation in peacebuilding activities. When a woman is struggling with poverty, her immediate priority becomes achieving economic stability. In the absence of the rule of law, such women are often compelled to engage in any activity that secures financial survival, leaving little room for peace-related endeavors. Thus, economic empowerment is seen as a critical prerequisite for meaningful engagement in peacebuilding efforts.

Related views are echoed in the ACNDC 2023 report, which outlines some of the activities undertaken to support indigenous women in the Mwenga area. These include efforts to combat discrimination in artisanal mining, providing indigenous women with financial support to continue their agricultural growth, environmental protection, and

⁶⁴ AVEC stands for Association Villageoises d'Épargne et de Crédit – a program created by Care International to support women in conflict affected societies – this association has been embraced by feminine organization in Eastern Congo. The support is primarily given to women victims of GBV to build their autonomy.

responses to covid-19 (ACNDC, 2023). These efforts continue to empower women to build their financial freedom.

5.2.2.3. Emotional and Physical Harm

The community was not entirely onboard, many discouraged me to continue, they believed I was not going to change the course of life. Especially if you are a feminist, people find that you are rebellious and try to discourage you.

This passage reflects a participant's concern regarding the challenges of engaging in community-based peacebuilding, particularly as a woman advocating for feminist principles. Consequently, societal rejections result in emotional and physical harm. Her experience highlights the broader struggle of women peacebuilders who navigate a dual challenge: advocating for peace and gender equality within communities that may not fully embrace their efforts. Feminist peacebuilding, in particular, often requires addressing deeply ingrained cultural norms, which can provoke backlash from those who perceive such advocacy as a threat to established social structures.

When asked about the impact of their work on both personal and community levels, most participants highlighted the significant challenges associated with exercising agency, describing experiences of “emotional and physical harm.” One of the most critical difficulties lies in taking the first step as a woman—advocating for women's rights, raising awareness, and engaging in peace-related work within their communities. Referring to these challenges, one female peacebuilder remarked, “As a woman, the community undermines your authority or labels you with derogatory names.” Participants also observed that women peacebuilders often face scrutiny, with individuals revisiting their

past actions in an effort to identify and highlight perceived immoral behaviours⁶⁵ or misconduct that could be used against them.

This observation resonates with a controversy surrounding the appointment of a female Minister of Youth in the DRC in May 2024. Following her appointment, nude photographs were circulated widely on social media and private messaging platforms, allegedly depicting her. Despite the lack of evidence confirming the authenticity of these images, the incident gained widespread attention, fueling public discourse. Such actions are emblematic of attempts to undermine women's credibility and agency, particularly in leadership and peacebuilding roles. At the community level, these efforts to delegitimize women exacerbate existing gender biases, making it even more difficult for women to be taken seriously or to gain the respect needed to effect meaningful change. This highlights the systemic barriers women face, where their efforts and contributions are not only questioned but actively sabotaged, impeding progress toward gender equity in peacebuilding and broader societal transformation.

The findings also suggest that women peacebuilders are blamed for poisoning the minds of girls and women with their thoughts. There are claims that their mission is to ensure that women stop responding to the family duties and obligations and will start being disrespectful to their husbands and elders. Such claims affect women's agency and their contribution to local communities; there is often resistance from both men and women. This is especially prevalent when the program being implemented sensitizes girls and women, both of whom need permission from a male figure in the family.

⁶⁵ Immoral behaviours, according to religion and customs, refer to an intimate relationship outside of marriage, disrespecting elders, and acting against customs.

While emotional harm is often employed as a tactic to discourage women from engaging in roles beyond familial duties, participants noted that such challenges were not surprising. They highlighted the availability of frameworks and tools that support their agency, such as the Maputo Protocol and recent amendments to the DRC Family Code, which have been instrumental in challenging harmful customs and social norms. Despite these resources, participants emphasized that the most daunting challenges they face are threats and physical harm. For some, these dangers have had direct and severe consequences. Two participants reported experiencing physical harm. One female peacebuilder recounted her ordeal of being arrested and beaten for speaking out against SGBV and for publicly criticizing government, police, and military officers involved in such abuses. She explained:

It reached a point where my advocacy led to imprisonment, and on more than two occasions, I was arrested and beaten. I faced severe emotional and physical harm to the extent that I wanted to give up. However, the importance of the cause compelled me to overcome my fear and continue with my mission.

She explained that, despite being discouraged from continuing her role as an advocate against SGBV, the challenging realities of the conflict she experienced motivated her to persevere.

Another participant faced accusations of espionage due to her advocacy for the state to adopt a political strategy to negotiate with Congolese rebel groups, such as the M23. Her efforts led to her arrest and public labeling as a spy allegedly working for

Rwanda. Reflecting on her experience of participating in the Nairobi Process⁶⁶, she shared:

The biggest challenge was getting there because I was suspected of being sent by Kigali; I was also accused of working for the M23; I had to justify myself. I was accused of spying and had to justify myself to my employer and to the authorities as well.

These personal accounts align with findings from Dorothea Hilhorst and Marie Rose Bashwira's (2014) study of women CSOs in South Kivu. Their research highlights the array of emotional harms faced by female peacebuilders in leadership positions, including personal criticism, threats, and intimidation (Ibid, p. 33). Furthermore, these harms are often perpetuated and reinforced by religious and traditional institutions. For example, the Catholic Church exerts significant influence on NGOs and traditional practices in South Kivu, which not only obstructs efforts toward gender equality but also creates barriers for CSOs attempting to carry out their peacebuilding activities.

5.2.2.4. Supporting victims of violent conflicts

In Eastern Congo, the majority of the population has been affected by violent conflict, leading to a widespread sense of insecurity. As a result, they often flee to the nearest camps, which are usually located far from the areas of war or violence. This internal displacement has a significant impact on their lives, as they can only take a few essential items with them, leaving most of their belongings behind. One male peacekeeper

⁶⁶ The Nairobi process refers to a military track focused on supporting the DRC government in its efforts to attain sustainable peace and security.

noted that some IDPs do return to their homes, but this transition can be very disruptive. In regions with high levels of violent conflict and ethnic tension, people are forced to flee the country altogether. According to the UNHCR 2024 Fact Sheet, there are 7 million internally displaced Congolese and over 523,000 refugees in neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, in IDPs, women are suffering tremendously as they experience SGBV. As one female peacebuilder remarked:

We are the primary victims of the horrors of war. When you look at what is happening, it is the women who fill the displaced camps the most. These women are doubly affected—not only by the conflicts but also by outdated rituals and customs, as well as the poverty and vulnerability they endure.

Despite the challenges, women are actively engaged in addressing SGBV, as highlighted by many participants. This commitment is particularly evident in the work of SOFEPADI. Their seven reports detail the organization's extensive efforts to support women victims of SGBV and highlight the multiple hardships these women encounter. In general, SOFEPADI provides vital medical care to survivors and offers psychological support and commemorative activities for victims of violent conflict in Ituri and Beni. These actions emphasise the critical role that women and women-led organizations play in addressing the impacts of conflict and fostering resilience within their communities.

Drawing on the participant interviews, ten female peacebuilders emphasized that their primary responsibility is to support victims of SGBV in IDP camps. Their efforts include providing first aid supplies such as soap and sanitary pads, assisting women during childbirth with clothing and medical care, and providing food to IDPs. Many of these services are provided voluntarily by female peacebuilders. One of the peacebuilders shared her experience and motivation for volunteering in IDP camps. She explained that:

“A girl who has her period must go and stay at the lake for the entire time because she

does not have sanitary bandages.” For her, the lack of access to basic sanitary products not only impacts women’s dignity but also hinders their ability to engage proactively in community life. She emphasized that addressing these basic needs is a critical step toward empowering women in these challenging environments.

Additionally, the IDP camps host a significant number of orphans and children with disabilities, who require focused attention and care to navigate the difficult conditions they face. In support to these children, one female peacebuilder reported:

We have established childcare centers in the Bulengwe and Butayo camps, providing services for more than 1,000 children in the Nyiragongo territory. Every morning, we organize sessions where we dance with them and also provide them with porridge.

These initiatives emphasise the critical positive roles of women peacebuilders in addressing the multifaceted needs of IDP populations. These roles are often conducted in the informal sector in order to support women’s health and dignity to nurturing and uplifting children through care and nourishment, their work goes beyond immediate humanitarian assistance to foster resilience and hope within displaced communities.

Participants highlighted the alarming prevalence of sexual assault, rape, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases in IDP camps. In response, some women peacebuilders volunteered to support victims of such violence through advocacy and awareness-raising efforts focused on SGBV.

During a consultation with peacekeepers, one female peacekeeper observed that women often hesitated to speak out, especially in the presence of male officers. Few women were actively involved in discussions, and even fewer felt able to articulate their experiences. This challenge was echoed by another female peacebuilder, who noted that victims of sexual assault and rape in IDP camps were often reluctant to report their abuse.

To address this, she established an anonymous reporting systems, enabling survivors to report incidents without fear of exposure or reprisal.

The female peacekeeper further explained that women generally felt more comfortable confiding in female officers, a preference shaped by cultural norms and the pervasive fear of stigma. Engaging women in these discussions proved difficult, but those who did find the courage to speak out often transitioned into peacebuilding roles. These women, despite sharing their experiences and becoming advocates for change, still lacked adequate institutional and community support.

Additionally, participants emphasized that many women and girls feared reporting acts of violence against them due to the potential negative repercussions for their families. This fear of familial and societal backlash further silences victims, reinforcing the cycle of violence and impeding efforts to address and prevent SGBV in IDP camps effectively. To mitigate these challenges, female peacebuilders continued to conduct advocacy actions and raising awareness about ending GBV. As a participant commented, it is vital to the conduct targeted strategies to create safe spaces for survivors, increase the presence of female peacekeepers and peacebuilders, and provide robust support systems to empower women and girls in conflict-affected settings.

Additional approaches to support victims of violence include bringing the perpetrators to justice, advocating for accountability in addressing the consequences of violent conflict, and engaging in dialogue with the conflicting parties, such as the government and rebel groups. Some peacebuilders who adopted this path in the early

2000s organized a series of dialogues with the CNDP⁶⁷ and government officials urging them to negotiate a ceasefire. Others recommended that the government work toward an understanding with Congolese rebel groups to end the violence, emphasizing the widespread impact of the conflict on all members of society.

5.2.2.5. Advocacy for women's rights and participation in negotiations

Women peacebuilders have had a significant impact on their local communities by advocating for women's rights and participation in peace negotiations. Their advocacy includes issues such as ending SGBV, land ownership rights, business ownership rights, political participation, and freedom of expression without facing cultural and societal repercussions. They believe that respecting women's rights will increase the visibility of women's actions. These ideas are reflected in the views of one female peacebuilder, who shared:

As an advocate, I use my voice on radio shows to talk about women's rights, especially in rural areas, which means the right to own land. I advocate for women's participation at the negotiation table and meet women (especially in rural communities) to discuss and raise awareness about our rights.

This passage highlights the participant's belief that raising awareness about women's rights is a crucial starting point for ensuring that women recognize and claim their right to own a property. Her efforts aim to shift women from being perceived as passive victims to active agents of change in their communities. She further contends that economic

⁶⁷ CNDP stands for the Congres Nationale pour la Defence du Peuple, the CNDP was a rebel group fighting with the government and fighting the alienation of Tutsi Congolese by the Congolese government. The CNDP was later dissolved and became the M23.

independence is transformative, enabling women to break free from structural inequalities. Additionally, understanding and asserting women's rights reinforces the urgent need for their representation in decision-making spaces, ultimately contributing to sustainable peace and societal progress.

While representation is crucial, meaningful participation is even more critical. One participant emphasized that meaningful participation entails not only ensuring that women's voices are heard but also valuing their contributions in decision-making processes. This distinction is important, as highlighted in the research by Selimovic et al. (2012), which found that some women representatives involved in negotiations lacked an understanding of local issues. This disconnect arose, in part, because local women peacebuilders perceived these representatives as coming from privileged backgrounds, with little awareness of the realities faced by grassroots communities. As a result, the agendas advocated by such representatives often failed to fully address the pressing challenges and lived experiences of local women. This underscores the need for a more inclusive and grounded approach to representation, where those advocating for peace accurately reflect and prioritize the needs of the communities they aim to serve as mentioned by some women peacebuilders.

Similar views are reflected in the findings of Hilhorst and Bashwira (2014), who observed that women leaders in civil society organizations (CSOs) spearheaded initiatives to advance women's rights through campaigns such as *"Droits pour tous"* ("Rights for All"). These campaigns were conducted in public forums, including radio broadcasts in South Kivu, to reach a wide audience and raise awareness. Further, Selimovic et al. (2012, p. 6) highlighted the role of women's CSOs in advocating for revisions to the DRC Family

Code to eliminate discriminatory provisions against women. Their efforts aim to strengthen gender equality and empower women by addressing systemic legal inequalities.

5.2.2.6.Engaging women in peace activities

In addition to advocating for women's rights, participants highlighted that increasing women's participation in peacebuilding activities was their primary objective. The findings suggest that before engaging women in peace-related initiatives, it is essential to provide training and workshops on conflict mediation at the local level. These capacity-building efforts not only equip women with the necessary skills but also contribute to raising awareness of their rights and fostering their confidence in leadership roles. One female peacebuilder emphasized this approach, stating:

We involve women in all activities related to the identification of conflicts at the community level. After identification, all mediation activities follow, including reflections on the activities that communities can undertake to strengthen their connections.

A central aspect of their work is raising citizen consciousness. The underlying assumption is that when individuals are made aware of the conflicts within their communities and can discern which conflicts stem from systemic barriers or structural violence, they are better positioned to engage meaningfully in peacebuilding processes. By promoting such awareness and understanding, these initiatives lay the groundwork for more inclusive and effective participation, ultimately empowering communities to address conflicts collaboratively and sustainably.

In alignment with these perspectives, a male peacebuilder interviewed during the study, who trains women to become Women Ambassadors for Peace, shared details about two projects currently being developed in collaboration with MONUSCO and other partner organizations. These initiatives aim to actively engage women in peacebuilding activities and promote the protection of their rights. He explained:

Today, I am implementing two projects with the United Nations Mission for the Stabilization of Eastern Congo. We have ambassadors and mediators in the 19 groups of Masisi. We also extended this model to Rutshuru, Nyiragongo and Walikale, setting up mediators in 56 groups to relay information and monitor violations of women's rights. In areas of displacement, women become vulnerable, losing their economic autonomy, which directly impacts their ability to provide for their families. We also work on conflict awareness and peacebuilding. In these groups, we have set up mediators who relay information at the level of their groups to the territories to monitor women's rights and ensure their protection. We also work on conflict awareness and peacebuilding.

This passage highlights the approach used to empowering women in conflict-affected zones. By training women as mediators and ambassadors, the male peacebuilder recounts that the projects aim to enhance women's capacity to address local conflicts and monitor the violations of human rights violations. The initiatives also focus on raising awareness about conflicts and promoting peacebuilding within the communities. In displacement camps, where women are in difficult conditions and face financial burdens, these efforts as the peacebuilder mention play a critical role in restoring their autonomy and enabling them to support their families. As the passage suggests, in areas where the projects are implemented successfully, women not only become active agents of peace but also contribute to building more resilient and equitable communities.

In addition to the activities of peacebuilders, women themselves are undertaking important initiatives. A male peacekeeper shared his observations on women's

involvement in peace activities, particularly in IDP camps. He noted that in the Kanyarucinya camps, women, elders, and children endure severe hardships. Women in these camps often wake up early to travel to Kibumba to collect food, often carrying children on their backs because no one else can take care of them. Women suffer the most, yet they are crucial stakeholders, a point emphasized by all participants. When women initiate projects, their work is of great value to the communities. They actively engage with community members and have a deep understanding of local issues.

Some of the participants highlighted various women-led initiatives designed to empower women as ambassadors of peace within their communities. A notable example is the *Makoki ya Mwasi* project, which facilitates inter-communal dialogues and actively involves women in peacebuilding activities. One participant elaborated on the approach:

We bring together the community, including traditional chiefs, village chiefs, and group leaders, to address the existing cultural dynamics. In many of these communities, particularly those with purely traditional structures, women are not allowed to hold leadership positions, such as being the head of a village. However, through awareness-raising efforts and targeted projects, we work to challenge these norms. We strive to show men that women are equally capable and can contribute just as much as men. For example, in the Makoki ya Mwasi projects, we specifically engage with traditional leaders to emphasize the vital role women can play in the development of their villages. These efforts have started to yield results. In some cases, women are now being appointed to leadership positions, such as chiefs of neighborhoods and even customary roles, like chiefs of sub-villages. While there is still a long way to go for women to lead entire villages, this progress demonstrates the potential for change and the importance of continued advocacy.

This highlights the pivotal role of women peacebuilders in advancing gender equality while simultaneously fostering positive approaches to challenging patriarchal structures and entrenched customs. As participants noted, the initiatives they undertake are designed to position women at the forefront of peacebuilding efforts. However, they

are also keenly aware of the challenges they face, as not all communities or villages are receptive to their involvement. In certain areas, the implementation of women-led peace initiatives remains a particularly arduous task, underscoring the need for sustained efforts to overcome resistance and create spaces for women's active participation in peace processes.

Another important issue discussed in the interviews was women's involvement in mining areas and agriculture and the impact this has on their lives and their involvement in community-led peace initiatives. Participants working to promote peace in mining areas agreed that women in these regions are often poor and underprivileged, which sometimes lead to forced prostitution. One approach the peacebuilder used to address these issues is conducting small training sessions for women and encourage dialogue among community members to address local problems. Such interventions typically enable women to begin to participate at the community level.

Evidence from eleven reports⁶⁸ indicates that women's organizations are actively engaged in training women to become effective peacebuilding agents. The purpose of these trainings is to equip women with the skills and knowledge necessary for their roles in peacebuilding. These sessions focus on meaningful ways for women to contribute their voices to peacebuilding activities and to advocate for women's rights, including land rights. One notable example mentioned in the ACNDC 2023 report is a sensitization and training program on environmental and women's rights law. These training programs were

⁶⁸ SOFEPADI (2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022); ACNDC (2020, 2021 and 2023); Jamaa Grand Lacs (2023).

provided to ten groups of women workers in mineral sites, who reportedly face active discrimination.

5.2.3. Knowledge and application of the WPS policies

Of the 17 participants interviewed, 12 were familiar with the WPS policies, while the remaining five learned about these policies for the first time during the interviews. Four of the participants are women peacebuilders working primarily with youth groups and rural communities. Of the 12 participants who are aware of the WPS policies, 9 base their interventions on the four pillars: participation, representation, protection, and socio-economic recovery. Also, 2 participants draw on both the WPS policies and other frameworks, such as the Maputo Declaration. One participant is aware of these policies but does not incorporate them into her peacebuilding approach.

Discussions with the 12 participants who are familiar with these policies suggest that they are valuable in providing women with a framework based on international agreements, such as UNSC Resolution 1325. However, the effectiveness of these policies is limited by a general lack of awareness and resistance, which poses significant challenges to their implementation.

5.2.3.1. An opportunity for women

Most participants identified UNSCR 1325 and the adoption of the WPS policies as an important opportunity for women's groups in peacebuilding. They saw these policies as a crucial tool for addressing conflicts that affect women and their communities. These policies emphasize the need for women's participation in all aspects of peacebuilding.

First, participants use these policies to raise awareness and implement projects. One female peacebuilder mentioned that initially, awareness of the WPS policy was initially limited and that further efforts were needed to develop and implement the NAP at the national level and to apply it at the community level. In North Kivu, for example, a provincial plan was developed and successfully implemented, demonstrating the potential of the resolution when localized.

Second, these policies are instrumental in educating communities about active participation. One female peacebuilder emphasized that the resolution has empowered women to actively participate in peace processes. Projects such as "Mwanamuke na Amani na Usalama" in rural areas such as Rutchuru have strengthened women's decision-making power and participation in peace and security matters. However, this project has been relocated to Nyiragongo due to the occupation of Rutchuru by the M23 as one participant noted.

Third, the research findings indicate that participants believe that the WPS policies have contributed significantly to addressing social norms and legal barriers that deny women full participation. Efforts under Resolution 1325 have focused on challenging

social norms that hinder women's participation and advocating for an amendment of the law in order to fight discriminatory principles embodied in existing laws and customs. As one participant noted, "These initiatives aim to place women at the center of humanitarian responses and peacebuilding efforts, ensuring that they are recognized as key actors rather than passive agents."

Fourth, in the context of IDP camps, participants mentioned that Resolution 1325-informed projects have encouraged women to advocate for better conditions, reduce their vulnerability, and increase their capacity to act as peace agents. In the context of sexual violence, in particular, participants identified numerous projects by various organizations working to end sexual violence. These include projects supported by UN Women to encourage local authorities, police, and military personnel to address these issues. Such a comprehensive approach ensures that all actors involved in conflict and peace processes are committed to addressing sexual violence and broader humanitarian concerns.

Similar views are also found in the policy brief by Ignatiou et al. (2022) on women's organizations in North and South Kivu. The findings illustrate that the WPS policies challenge the narrative of considering women-led approaches as passive agency. They also show that these policies enable women's participation and leadership in addressing discriminatory gender norms and support women-led peace efforts (p.1). Specifically on the issue of building humanitarian protection strategies, the policy brief reveals that women's knowledge of local issues helps to prioritize successful strategies used in everyday life (p.3), which holds promise for building transformative protection strategies for future use. This includes the formation of women's leadership groups to

empower collective negotiation, the creation of community centres to provide psychosocial support, and much more besides.

In addition, the WPS policies provide opportunities for women organizations and institutions to train and conduct workshops and seminars to raise awareness of women's issues. This is evident in the 2023 report of the JAMAA Grand Lacs organization, which mentions the two-day seminar on UNSC Resolution 1325 held at the Université Citoyenne (2023, 27). This seminar was facilitated by two internal peacebuilding mediators in North Kivu, one of whom was a female leader and advocate of the WPS policies. In total, the results of the report show that 35 women actively participated in the seminar and acquired in-depth knowledge about Resolution 1325. In summary, the reports state that participants testified that they understood the essential role women play in conflict-affected societies and the ways in which they can bring about change (p. 27).

Another opportunity for women that comes with the adoption of WPS policies is for organizations to use these policies at the core of their foundation. Such findings are found in Kristen Van Houten's study of women's participation in local CSOs in South Kivu (2020). The author found that local CSOs using WPS policies emphasize the importance of gender equality in their work. In addition, the findings show that integrating women's participation in peacebuilding is beyond addressing SGBV, but also essential in creating safe space for women's voices and needs (2020, p. 248). Such views are critical to highlighting women's agency in peacebuilding activities, and to moving towards seeing women as capable agents rather than agency-free victims.

5.2.3.2.Challenges hindering effectiveness

Based on some of the literature reviewed (Van Houten, 2020; Selimovic et al., 2012; Hilhorst & Bashwira, 2014), the implementation of WPS policies at the local level faces multiple challenges and obstacles. These challenges include the limited representation of women's needs and voices in organizations, where women are often seen as victims. A major issue is the lack of female staff in leadership positions, which perpetuates the lack of representation of women's needs. Lack of funding shortages hinders the creation of new projects that engage women in peacebuilding (Van Houten, 2020, p. 255). Furthermore, there is a significant gap in alliances with men to facilitate the implementation of gender-responsive laws (Selimovic et al., 2012, p. 14). Although legislative acts have been adopted to strengthen women's legal rights, gaps and contradictions in existing legislation hinder women's political participation (Selimovic et al., 2012, p. 14). In addition, poor implementation and lack of awareness among the population hinder women's empowerment in the DRC (Hilhorst & Bashwira, 2014, p. 9).

These findings are consistent with the perspectives of the participants interviewed. They identified four challenges that hinder the effectiveness of WPS policies at the community level. These are (1) slow implementation as a result of the failure to implement the National Action Plan at the local level, (2) perception as primarily a women's issue, (3) limited awareness among community members, and (4) inadequate financial support to educate the local population about these policies. As articulated by a male peacebuilder:

At the level of North Kivu province, we are in the second generation of the action plan for the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. There are very few donors supporting this agenda, and projects are struggling to take off despite efforts to build capacity and set up mechanisms for women ambassadors and

mediators. Raising awareness takes time due to persistent social norms and the security situation. The advances of the last fifteen years have regressed because of wars. Women's participation in security mechanisms is limited by social norms and the predominantly male control of institutions and dialogues. In sensitive areas like North Kivu, sexual violence and women's protection problems are omnipresent, particularly in displaced persons camps.

While participants acknowledge significant progress in understanding the importance of the WPS policies, they also face challenges in implementing them. Often, they encounter resistance and unwillingness to listen when they try to sensitize local communities. Another major challenge is the lack of political support, as another female peacebuilder noted:

The implementation of Resolution 1325 has been slow. At the national level, we developed an initial national implementation plan with a comprehensive list of activities. However, due to ongoing conflict in the area, this plan did not materialize. Moreover, there has been a lack of political will to support its implementation.

In line with these perspectives, others highlighted the detrimental impact of poor governance on their efforts to implement projects based on WPS policies, resulting in reduced outcomes and a sense of working in isolation.

Participants also highlighted the critical role of gender in the implementation of WPS policies. These policies are often perceived as exclusively women's issues, placing the burden of understanding and applying them on women alone. However, men within the sector also play an important role in implementing these policies. One male participant stressed the importance of engaging men as advocates, noting that they are often implicated in causing harm to women. The research findings underscore that engaging men as allies is essential for the effective implementation and broader acceptance of WPS policies.

5.2.4. Cultural and Social Norms – Opportunities and Challenges

As confirmed by all participants and the studies reviewed, cultural and social norms in the DRC consistently hinder women's agency in various capacities. As one female peacebuilder put it:

Customs in the DRC dictates that women must stay in a specific [subordinate] space. However, we acknowledge that while there are good customs, this particular custom is detrimental. It prevents a large segment of the population—52% of whom are able to work—from participating in economic activities. This custom hinders women from working and participating in public life. As a result, women remain under the authority of their husbands and families. They are only expected to give birth and provide advice to their husbands secretly. We recognize that these customs impose significant limitations and prevent women from fully participating in society.

These barriers are deeply rooted in customs and beliefs and affect both men and women starting from the household to the community level. However, fewer participants and reviewed research highlight the meaningful ways women and girls overcome these barriers, often drawing on the same culture and traditions to find solutions.

5.2.4.1. Patriarchal Gender Norms, Stereotypes, and a Culture of Silence

The findings suggest that patriarchal gender norms and stereotypes are the primary factors affecting women's agency. As a result, participants expressed that these dominant toxic masculinities foster a culture of silence among women and girls. There is a strong emphasis on how women must conform to certain norms, with the situation being even more pronounced in rural areas. Female peacebuilders often encounter scenarios in which they are questioned about their involvement in peacebuilding or whether their families are

aware of their work. One young female peacebuilder recounted an instance where a community leader asked if she should find her a husband. In her own words, she stated:

When we go into rural areas, where we work a lot, we feel the cultural pressure. I remember once, in a village, someone said to me, ‘Wait, how old are you? We will find you a husband, so you stop getting involved with these issues.

As the participant continued narrating her story and experience, the moments where women’s agency is limited to marital status, conducting activities becomes an uphill task.

Other factors that reinforce such perceptions are the multiple tribes in the DRC, as well as the religious and social norms that define women’s roles in the household and the community at large. The extent to which this affects women’s participation in the community is significant, as their roles are often limited to reproduction, caring for the family, and supporting the community in times of need. Beliefs such as these are a barrier to women’s agency because of the existing limitations to what a woman can or cannot do.

Similar views are found in how participants describe their experiences with entrenched customs that put a barrier to their activities. For instance, a participant mentioned, there are tribes where women are not allowed to wear pants, and other tribes where women are not allowed to eat certain foods or participate in the dowry of their daughters. Failure to follow these customs has negative consequences for women. To name a few, women are regarded as rebels, will face exclusion and isolation, or are seen as witches. Participants expressed that it is often difficult to find women who are willing to go through such isolation and challenge these perceptions.

In addition to these challenges, a participant in Goma shared that it was only until recently that most women were allowed to attend their daughters’ civil weddings. The argument here is that if women could engage in all these activities, they will lose their

submissiveness, which is another factor found in religious beliefs.⁶⁹ A woman living in a community dominated by social and cultural norms must work twice as hard as men to be given space and to have her agency recognized. Often, women conducting peace-led activities remain invisible, and their roles become invisible because of their gender. Such views are found in a comment by a female peacebuilder below:

Our elders believe we are not capable enough to take on responsibilities. So, even for negotiation issues, we should rally behind them as we supposedly lack the experience to provide our point of view based on the realities we face.

The female peacebuilder's reflections showcase that not only women cannot fully share their experience because it lacks credibility in the eyes of the elders, but they must find ways to convince them. She added that it is even more difficult when they face resistance from other women. All participants mentioned that they also face the challenge of sensitizing women, because some women resist change and fully support retrogressive customs.

Moreover, other participants commented that women's resistance to change has negative repercussion as it reinforces a culture of silence among women and girls. For instance, if a young girl is raped or abused by a family member and reports the incident, the family's reaction is to ensure the information is kept a secret. This often results in the abused child remaining silent, which means the perpetrator will continue to abuse other children. This is particularly difficult for a young boy/teenager who faces the same type of abuse as it is considered shameful and emasculating.

⁶⁹ Religion in Eastern Congo (like in many states worldwide) is highly regarded; people rely on religion and spirituality to find alternative ways of handling difficult moments or as a way of life. However, most religions – especially monotheistic religions – encourages men and women on how they should approach their lives with holding different roles. Accordingly, they are supposed to follow these roles. Sometimes religious beliefs as is the case of this passage, they are harmful to women as these beliefs justify the harmful practices of putting a woman under a complex leaving condition.

In continuation, the policy brief by Ignatiou et al. (2022, p. 3) discusses the persistence of harmful gender norms combined with limited opportunities for women in decision-making roles. These harmful practices further accentuate a culture of silence around GBV. Meanwhile, these gender norms, as articulated above, are reinforced when women are abused. It was found that speaking out about these maltreatments lead to more social repercussions, resulting in prejudice against women, exclusion and further marginalization. As one female peacebuilder in Goma mentioned:

If all the women denounce, there will not be enough shelters, the dowry will decrease, and people will see it as a war. The resistance is much stronger on the side of the men. For women, it is more the fear of being frowned upon or facing repercussions, the fear of revealing what they are facing. Denouncing is really difficult. Men resist because of patriarchy. Education is contaminated by culture and tradition.

This passage highlights the concerns expressed by one of the female peacebuilders. Although her work involves encouraging women to speak out against abuse, she was worried about the potential consequences. This is partly due to the inadequate support provided to SGBV victims within the social and political landscape of the DRC, as well as the limited resources available to NGOs advocating for change. As a result, women who come forward about the harm they have endured risk facing an even more challenging life—a life where their experiences are publicly known, leaving them susceptible to mockery from both men and women or, even worse, a life marked by a lack of opportunities.

It is even more arduous for rural women who face twice the challenges of their urban counterparts. As one female peacebuilder working with rural women mentioned:

In the villages, the situation is even more complicated. Women are reluctant to speak up because they fear being identified as the source of information. The main issues stem from a narrow perspective on societal roles. Additionally, illiteracy

prevents many women from reading or writing. Many topics are considered taboo, and there are frequent accusations of men breaking into homes at night to rape women, often under the guise of being drunk or mentally unstable.

According to participants, the most difficult part is speaking out. Unless pregnancy is involved, families often choose to keep incidents of sexual violence a secret to protect their reputation and preserve the future marriage prospects of their daughters. A male peacebuilder highlighted that this is a pervasive problem in the community, where young men join armed groups with the initial intention of providing protection and security for their families but often end up becoming aggressors themselves. In addition, a female international peacekeeper noted that although, women break the culture of silence and expose their concerns to female officers, getting the support they need often requires interaction with men. This is particularly difficult for victims of sexual abuse. Women who speak out are sometimes viewed as traitors by other women or feel misjudged and that their concerns are not taken seriously.

5.2.4.2. Educating and Engaging the Community

Despite the challenges posed by a culture of silence, Allouche et al. (2023) argue that women in North and South Kivu used silence as a strategy to protect themselves from further violence, avoid shame, and cope with precarious situations. The authors suggest that although silence creates further insecurity for women, it is not solely destructive; a culture of silence has other advantages. Silence in the DRC is also used as an effective way to avoid retaliation from their communities (p. 216). This type of silence does not mean women will stop talking about the wrong done to them but will find a way to

denounce it in a private manner. Therefore, the problem can also be solved in the same way. The authors argue that this type of silence is influenced by cultural norms that emphasize the role of a dutiful wife who cannot expose her family. When a woman handles the matter privately, the victim and the perpetrator are not exposed, and the family finds a way of sanctioning the perpetrator. On the other hand, women's groups use these same silence traditions to advocate for protection needs (p. 219). Put simply, women's groups find meaningful ways to support their peers without putting them in precarious conditions and advocate for their protection by engaging community leaders and chiefs.

Specifically, the women's groups in Shasha and Bweremana challenged these norms by working with the local community, improving community interactions with authorities, and strengthening women's skills and confidence (Allouche et al., 2023, p. 220). In addition, women's groups in South Kivu, particularly in Cirunga, Kalulu, Bushwira, Miti, and Bugorhe, created forums and protection mechanisms for their communities. The findings suggest that these initiatives provided spaces for women to discuss issues affecting them and advocate for their protection needs (p. 225)

In addition to addressing the culture of silence, participants shared their experiences of addressing patriarchal gendered norms and stereotypes. This is done by educating and engaging communities in order to understand the importance of women's agency in peacebuilding and other social, economic and political spheres. As one participant mentioned:

Today, we have initiated networks of women peace ambassadors, and this is producing results. We have involved all the chiefs of different neighbourhoods and avenues so that we can work in partnership. We do not want men to be above or women to be below, or vice versa, but we want everyone—men and women—to make efforts to elevate and amplify the voice of the Congolese community, not just the voice of men or women.

Because each village has a community leader known as a chef or tribal king, participants recognized that the best way to engage women is to reach an understanding with the community leaders and implement activities with their support or approval. For instance, one participant shared that in Beni, peace efforts included working with community leaders to identify and address stereotypes and barriers that undermine women's rights. With the facilitation of these leaders, women are able to raise awareness and educate community members, leaders, and traditional chiefs about women's rights and protection needs. As one participant reports:

We worked with community leaders to identify traditional practices that promote child marriages. After raising awareness and explaining all the medical, biological, strategic, and economic aspects, they understood that it is a bad practice and signed an agreement stating that traditional leaders must begin to abolish the practice of child marriage.

In some societies, child marriages are permitted; there are different discourses as to why it is important, but part of it is preserving girls from committing adultery before marriage—partly because it is bad for her and the family's reputation. The second is for reproductive purposes, as some communities believe girls should have children at a younger age. When the female peacebuilder shared her experience educating about the negative effects of child marriages in rural areas, it was one of the most difficult tasks she conducted as most mothers had been married after their first period. Therefore, peacebuilders must first educate community leaders about these malpractices and how harmful they are and then attempt to do the same with parents. One of the participants shared that her intervention was successful and led to the beginning of abolishing child marriages in a village in Eastern Congo.

Another strategy used by women was to hold dialogues with communities to discuss mental health issues, reparations for victims of violent conflict, and denouncing hate speech and its consequences. Participants note that mental health is a neglected issue throughout the country, despite the fact that many people have experienced trauma. One of the main purposes of the dialogues is to ensure that communities are aware of the kind of support available to them, or whether there are meetings they can attend for psychological support and healing sessions. Of particular interest is the volunteer service provided informally and free of charge by three participants, who felt that the need was great and that the communities could greatly benefit from their efforts.

In addition, women's organizations in peacebuilding are involved in training youth in rural communities and universities in North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri to learn about healthy and meaningful ways to challenge regressive customs and traditions. One way to do this has been encouraging young girls to study and take on leadership roles at school, church or even in the community if available. Plus, women peacebuilders working with local communities actively mobilize actors such as community leaders, church leaders, influential people, authorities, elders and youth. The reason for this mobilization is to ensure change happens organically, starting with leaders accepting that women can actively engage in community-based projects. In training and mobilizing young girls to take on leadership roles, one of the female peacebuilders shared:

We find that even in universities and schools, there are girls who become heads of their classes, and this progress starts at the base. Within a few years, there will also be women who become leaders of neighbourhoods. In Beni, there are already some neighbourhoods led by women; even if they are deputies, they still participate in decision-making at the neighbourhood level. In the coming years, we will reach the commune level, and eventually, why not aim for the town hall and even the Presidency of the Republic through these efforts.

Equally, women peacebuilders use awareness-raising programs to empower young girls. One notable initiative involves educating young girls about their rights, encouraging them to report violence, and helping them find a purpose beyond marriage. Participants argued that in many rural areas, young adolescents are primarily focused on getting married because societal beliefs often dictate that marriage is the primary purpose for women to show their worth. In some traditions, marriage is considered sacred, and once a young girl in a rural area is married, she is considered an adult. However, these pressures contribute to early and child marriages. These beliefs prompted some participants to take action by educating young girls about alternative opportunities for growth beyond marriage.

Because most of these girls are minors or dependent, female peacebuilders must seek parental consent. One participant mentioned that while some parents respond positively to their efforts, there is often resistance. Their strategy includes inviting parents to participate in meetings to ensure they understand what their children are involved in. With the support of churches, schools, and youth groups, they have found that parents are more trusting than when they are approached individually.

5.2.4.3. Resilience and public campaigns against SGBV

Although most participants are active advocating for women's rights, fewer are involved in public campaigns against SGBV. In particular, three participants shared their experiences leading peaceful marches at different times to advocate for an end to SGBV.

One notable peaceful march in the early 2000s contributed to the amendment of the DRC Family Code in 2006. Other public campaigns against sexual violence and rape took place between 2013 and 2023 and were led by a female peacebuilder who participated in the interviews.

In addition to the public campaigns, the ACNDC published two public reports emphasizing its opposition to discriminatory customs and condemning the state's complicity in the surveillance of women in artisanal mines (ACNDC, 2020). The report highlights how pervasive toxic masculinities exacerbate gender discrimination in mining areas (p. 8). Similarly, Hilhorst and Bashwira's work (2014) showcases the proactive efforts of women in Walungu, South Kivu, to address critical issues such as violence against women and inheritance rights. They demonstrated resilience in overcoming challenges such as limited access to health care for women and girls affected by SGBV, as well as poverty, through initiatives such as the "Droit pour tous" campaign. The women of Walungu used public platforms such as radio programs to advocate for women's rights (p. 23).

Furthermore, according to Mulumeoderhwal's study (2022), women in South Kivu used campaigns for equal rights and equal opportunities in education and employment to challenge gendered norms that relegate women to a secondary status (p. 1204). The findings suggest that women's groups asserted their rights to occupy positions traditionally held by men and to participate in various economic opportunities despite their domestic responsibilities. The authors argue that resistance to traditional gender roles reflects a growing awareness among women in South Kivu despite encountering challenges rooted in deep-seated societal beliefs. These perspectives were also echoed by

the 14 female peacebuilders, who emphasized the importance of challenging customs, cultures, and social norms that impede gender equality.

5.2.4.4. Resilience and caregiving roles

While participants strongly condemn how traditions and customs keep women behind, underdeveloped and poor, they also mention how women's resilience and traditionally assigned roles make change possible. One female peacebuilder commented:

As an artisan of peace and women's liberation, I suggested that we could consider women as the mothers of society, truly recognizing them as workers who can excel.

Alluding to women as the mothers of society is based on the assumption that women are natural peaceful being and their ability to pro-create gives them a superior role of mother of a nation. This belief reminds me of a poem I learned in primary school – embedded in the African francophone education system– entitled “A ma Mère⁷⁰” in English to my mother by Camara Laye. The poem described the African woman as the mother of the nation, who carries heavy burdens without complaint and keeps moving forward for her children. While reflecting on this poem, there are many traits regarding how an African woman is perceived in the society, so the connotation that the female peacebuilder can be considered as the mother of society, echoes this poem. Thus, the peacebuilder's understanding is that women have the ability to nurture society peacefully.

Moving forward, women are increasingly aware of their rights and potential for growth. Even in conflict-affected areas, women strive to support their families and are

⁷⁰ <https://afrolegends.com/2016/11/14/a-ma-mere-to-my-mother-by-camara-laye/>

highly involved in the informal sector. In times of war and violent conflict in Eastern DRC, men often join the armed forces, leaving women at home to care for the family and as a result they develop their agency further. Some of the works they conduct includes farming, feeding the family, paying school fees, and ensuring that they provide for their families. Women take on a variety of roles, including non-traditional ones such as driving taxis. As articulated by the male peacekeepers:

The conditions from which women operate are critical; there is no safe space, and 90 % of productivity in rural areas comes from women, and hardly men will be productive. When children need to be treated, women are the ones responsible for that, and sometimes, women and children are forced into forced labour. In Goma in particular, the IDP's distance is 25 km to the rural area; women double the trajectory to do farming and come back because their children must be fed.

Three female peacebuilders added that women in IDP centres suffer from the burdens of customs and traditions that expect women to do domestic work. Sometimes, women in IDP centers continue to perform domestic chores for a larger number of people, which further affects their agency. Such views are supported in Mulumeoderhwa's (2022, p1211) study in South Kivu, where men felt that they should be the primary breadwinners and that women should focus on taking care of the household. However, women thought that this was unfair, and that there should be equal opportunities for both. Consistent with the findings of this study are the perspectives of all participants, who shared the view that equal opportunities are important to challenge dominant toxic masculinities and to see gender equality prevail.

5.2.5. Women's voices, politics and security

In this context, the findings indicate that women are using their voices to confront hate speech and ethnic discrimination. However, their agency is hindered by two main barriers: political obstacles and security challenges.

5.2.5.1. Addressing hate speeches and ethnic discrimination

During the interviews, three participants noted the escalation of hate speech and discrimination in Eastern DRC. Addressing hate speech has negative consequences for participants, as it often involves authorities, influential people, and occasionally high-ranking politicians as the primary perpetrators. Some interviewees reported experiencing harassment and intimidation for speaking out against hate speech and ethnic discrimination. In areas with armed groups, female peacebuilders must carefully consider their actions and speech, as one participant pointed out:

In the village, it is more dangerous because there are areas with armed groups based on ethnic hatred. This represents a danger of being raped or killed. As for dialogue within the village, if you are misunderstood, you suffer verbal and emotional violence.

This passage highlights the barriers faced by peacebuilders in openly addressing issues that affect them, many of which are tied to ethnic, GBV or political dynamics. As a result, maintaining political correctness can sometimes provide a form of security. For example, a political influencer noted that he is currently unable to travel to certain parts of the country due to his public denunciation of hate speech by politicians on social media. Similarly, a female peacebuilder lost her job and was even jailed at one point for

participating in marches advocating for an end to rape and for justice for women facing abuse.

Participants also expressed frustration with accountability, feeling that the government is not fulfilling its responsibility to resolve political conflicts. All participants advocated for a ceasefire, citing that outbreaks of violence or war hinder their work, and lead to internal displacement and increased incidents of sexual violence and rape in the aftermath. Some participants criticized the CSOs, noting a lack of coordination among those working toward common missions. The male independent peacebuilder highlighted concerns that some CSOs are increasingly becoming tribalistic, supporting only specific ethnic groups. He gave the example of the lack of support for Tutsi women due to ethnic animosity in Eastern Congo.

Two participants discussed ethnic tensions within their communities and how these tensions affect women peacebuilders. They specifically mentioned conflicts between Rwanda and Congo, which have exacerbated divisions between Kinyarwanda-speaking Congolese and other ethnic groups. One female peacebuilder in the Masisi area emphasized that despite ethnic divisions, it is crucial to recognize that all are affected by the conflict and stressed the need for collective action to address it. In her own words, she said:

Yes, there are Rwandan women, Tutsis, Hunde, and others. We must always live together because not everyone is involved in the war. Here in Masisi, we still live with all ethnic groups. We raise awareness among ourselves to contribute to peace and educate other women who are unaware of these efforts. We advocate with the authorities and collaborate with other women's groups. Today, we need women to promote peaceful coexistence and manage ethnic conflicts.

Although this participant's work is based in Masisi, violent conflict in the area led to her displacement to Goma where she then started engaging with communities in Eastern Congo as an ambassador for peace. Her assertion is crucial to this study because it demonstrates women's agency beyond issues of ethnicity and division. These views highlight the importance of collective action based on historical ties between affected communities.

5.2.5.2. Who benefits from war?

In recent years, Eastern Congo has witnessed several protests against MONUSCO, with the population calling for the mission's withdrawal due to its perceived inability to provide security and allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation. This situation presented both opportunities and challenges for CSOs.

An important point to note is the statement made by Ms. Sandrine Lusamba, the coordinator of SOFEPADI, during the UNSC meeting on December 11, 2023. Ms. Lusamba reminded the Security Council of Resolutions 1325 and 2594, which clearly stipulate the inclusion of women and youth in protection activities and engagement of the UN agencies. She pointed out the absence of implementing these principles were not upheld when national and international actors discussed the possibility of withdrawing MONUSCO. Ms. Lusamba underscored the importance of a "survivor-centred approach" to addressing gender-based violence (GBV), highlighting the current barriers women face in accessing support. She also expressed concern that if MONUSCO withdrew, some of the funding and humanitarian activities could be transferred to adequately trained CSOs.

In addition, she highlighted the risks posed to IDP centers if MONUSCO's security, monitoring, and evaluation functions were no longer guaranteed.

Meanwhile, three interviewees expressed skepticism about actors benefiting from the ongoing conflict. These participants included a male independent peacebuilder, and two female peacebuilders actively involved in women's rights advocacy in rural and mineral-rich areas. They all argued that one reason the conflict continues is that there are multiple actors benefiting from the insecurity in the region. While they did not specify the identities of these actors, they pointed to a general reluctance on the part of those involved, including the state, to bring an end to the conflict. There is a growing sense of mistrust among the people, as articulated by one female peacebuilder:

You see, there are people who do not want peace because they profit from their schemes in times of chaos. They prefer it that way. There is a certain atmosphere that is not good, far from lawful, and they prefer it to remain that way—in disorder, without peace. They like that, and it is really common.

All participants agreed that the security challenges in Eastern Congo are severely hampering their activities, particularly affecting women, whose role in peacebuilding is constantly threatened and challenged. Another issue of concern related to the heightened insecurity is the involvement of some women in perpetuating the conflict. One participant noted that because women are less likely to be suspected of carrying weapons, they often end up transporting goods and weapons to armed groups. He added:

They transport goods and accept child soldiers and combatant husbands. When men leave to fight, women pay the price for this absence by ensuring the survival of the family. Women are often taken hostage and become the wives of fighters. Women are used for survival missions, such as buying supplies for armed groups because they are less suspected.

These views are essential to understanding the experience of women-led peace efforts in Eastern DRC, as the increasing security concerns have had a tremendous impact on their agency. Despite all these challenges, the 14 female peacebuilders felt compelled to persevere and continue working for peace, seeing no other option but to step up.

5.2.5.3. We are always at war.

While women's organizations have been active in addressing the consequences of conflict in Eastern Congo in recent years, their efforts have faced significant obstacles. Reflecting on the challenges faced by women peacebuilders, one woman noted:

Our lives are difficult because we are always at war. We move around, entering different territories, chiefdoms, and groups. We are displaced people; we are still displaced people.

The findings highlight that the ongoing humanitarian crisis has had profound impact on women's organizations, some of which have been displaced or forced to relocate their activities due to security threats. Of particular note is the "Etat de siege" imposed in Goma in mid-2021, which severely limited women's active participation, as they faced restrictions on their actions and speech. One female peacebuilder described the initial challenges of working with soldiers, feeling marginalized and powerless.

The following chapter expands on the analysis of the findings.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

We always have hope. After the fog, there will always be sunshine. There is a decline in human rights and budget cuts for humanitarian actions and the promotion of rights. But we tell ourselves we are not going to be discouraged. It is important that we mobilize even more in the promotion of rights, especially in the fight against sexual violence and gender-based violence. We must take action, not just talk at conferences, but take action every day to put an end to sexual or sexist violence and discrimination against all people.

~ Julienne Lusenge, founder of SOFEPADI, Community Leader and Human Rights Defender

This quote sums up the resilience and commitment of Congolese women in overcoming obstacles and seizing opportunities to exercise their agency. This study examines women's experiences in peacebuilding in Eastern Congo, focusing on their peacebuilding activities, the opportunities seized, and challenges encountered. The findings reveal that while there are significant opportunities for Congolese women to exercise their agency, they also face significant challenges. Before summarizing the findings, this study addresses two central questions: In what ways are women-led peace efforts in Eastern DRC affected by the policies of SGBV? How do the challenges of victimization and cultural constraints experienced by Congolese women help shape their engagement in peace efforts at the community level?

In addition, the study addresses two interrelated sub-questions: (1) How do women's caregiving roles influence their approach to community-based peacebuilding? (2) How has the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda shifted/transformed women's agency in community-based peacebuilding?

In terms of objectives, and because this project explores women's active roles in promoting a culture of peace in local communities, the project aims to (1) explore the formality and informality of women's agency in promoting peaceful solutions in Goma and Eastern DRC more broadly; (2) explore the importance of culture in shaping how Congolese women engage in everyday peacebuilding activities within and between communities; and (3) understand the implications of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda on community-based peacebuilding.

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

The findings reveal how Congolese women in Eastern Congo contribute to peace-related activities despite the significant insecurity and gender-based discrimination they encounter. Women peacebuilders reported that their experiences with security concerns and gender-based violence have shaped their active participation in local peace efforts and catalyzed their advocacy for change at the national level.

The results suggest that women's agency in Eastern Congo is rooted in resilience, feminine instincts, and a strong ambition to contribute to peace-related work. Congolese women perceive their roles as arising from the need to act. In the face of insecurity and SGBV, becoming a peacebuilder seemed to be the natural path for many women. In addition, socio-cultural norms that define women as inherently peaceful beings have motivated some women to embark on their peacebuilding journey. Another important motivator is the desire to achieve personal goals and promote change through arts-based activities such as radio theaters and improvisation classes about dispute resolution. In this

regard, women peacebuilders have sought to communicate messages of peace through theatre and music.

The findings suggest that women's agency primarily focus on advocating for women's rights and full participation at the negotiation table. There is a common perception among women that if they do not advocate for themselves, no one else will. This sense of urgency stems from the belief that as long as women continue to face SGBV and gender-based discrimination, they will be seen primarily as victims in need of protection rather than as active agents capable of contributing to peace. While women's organizations advocate for protection and safety, they also argue for a broader recognition of women's active participation in peacebuilding.

In addition, women's peacebuilding organizations and institutions in Eastern Congo leverage opportunities provided by the WPS policies and the Maputo Declaration to highlight their potential beyond being seen as agency-free victims. In particular, WPS policies have served as tools to ensure that women's voices are heard and to remind the government of its commitment as a signatory of the UNSCR 1325. However, despite these opportunities, implementation remains challenging due to the limited understanding of these policies and the high costs associated with raising awareness and resources that women's CSOs often lack. Participants in the study emphasized that conducting trainings, dialogues, and workshops on peaceful coexistence and women's rights is one of the most effective ways to engage local communities, both urban and rural. The findings highlight that women organizations are actively involved in various capacities, including training, educating about women's rights, and mobilizing fellow women in peace-related activities throughout Eastern Congo.

An important aspect of the findings is the influence of socio-cultural norms, which often hinder women's agency due to customs and beliefs that place women in a subordinate position. Dominant toxic masculinities exacerbate gender-based discrimination, affecting both men and women. However, the study also shows that certain cultural norms are not entirely harmful and can empower women within their communities. For example, the role of women as "mothers of the nation" is one such cultural norm that positions women as active agents responsible for caring for community members, including victims of sexual violence and rape, orphans, people living with disabilities, and the elderly.

6.2. Understanding the formality and informality of women-led peace efforts in Eastern Congo

While studying the experiences of Congolese women in peacebuilding, the findings reveal a clear distinction between their formal and informal roles. These women's formal roles derive from the authority and structure of the organizations they work for, while their informal roles are shaped by their involvement in various associations and women's groups. These roles, as articulated by the women peacebuilders, are integral to their daily engagement in peace-related activities. Table 3 below shows the differences between formal and informal roles and illustrates which actions fall under each. These distinctions are based on how Congolese women conceptualize their initiatives and contributions to peacebuilding efforts.

Table 3 presents the distinction between the formal and informal roles in Eastern Congo

Formal roles	Informal roles
Advocacy and campaigns for women's rights fight against SGBV, gender equality and women's participation and representation.	Advocacy for inclusion of women in community-led activities and positions (such as community leader)
Training and mobilization programs in schools, universities and community levels about WPS policies and women's involvement in peace-related work	Supporting women victims of violence and taking care of children in IDP camps
Community Dialogue	Mobilizing community leaders and individual families to attend gender-based projects and dialogues

Table 3 Formal and Informal roles of women's agency in Eastern Congo

Beyond analyzing women's agency through the lens of formal and informal actions, this study seeks to delved deeper into the lived experiences of women peacebuilders in Eastern Congo, examining how they navigate challenges in their personal and professional lives. Figure 2, below, illustrates the positionality of these women by highlighting six key elements that shape their experiences: opportunities, values, skills, knowledge, threats, and challenges. These elements have been synthesized from the

extensive accounts of women engaged in peacebuilding, which will be further explored in the following discussions.

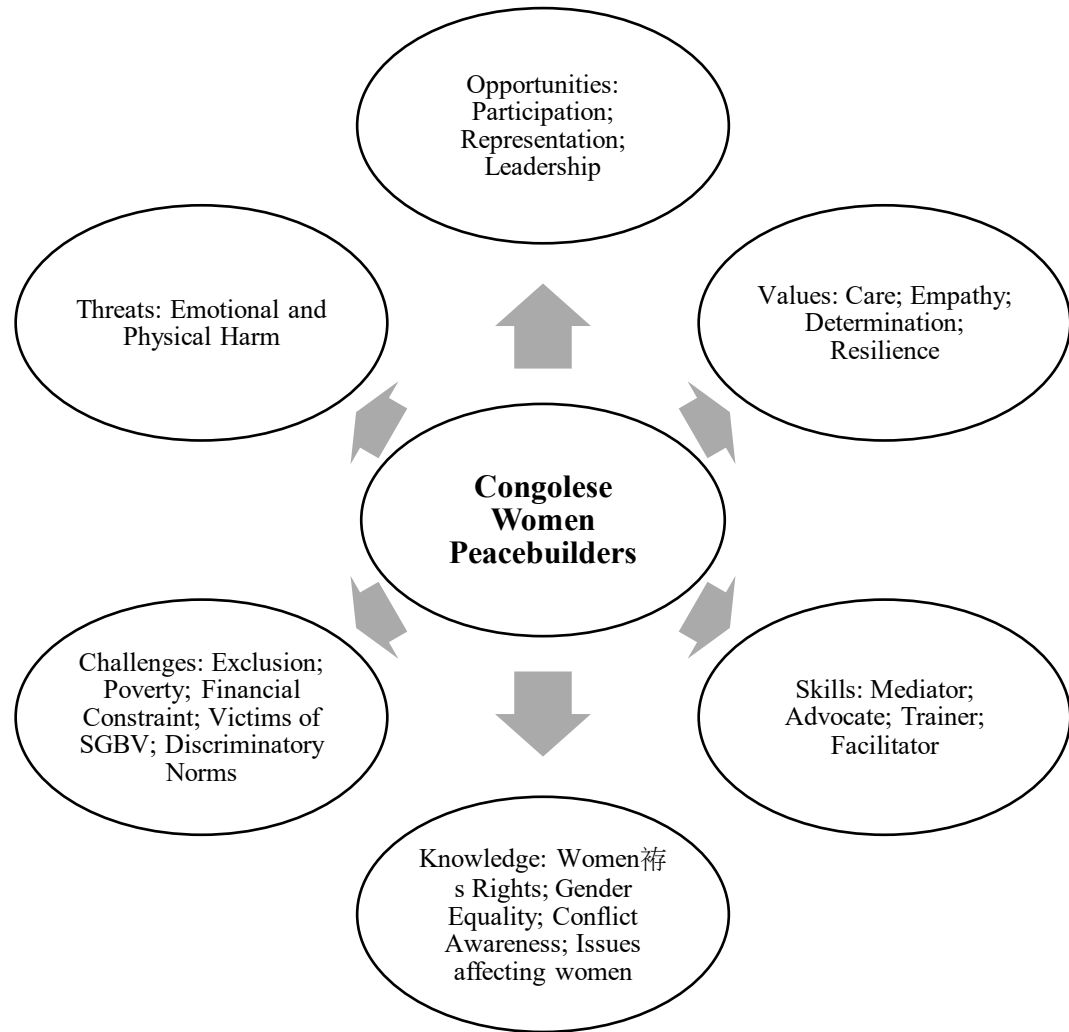


Figure 2 Overall experience of women's agency

6.3. Women's Experiences in Peacebuilding

In examining women's everyday experiences in peace-related activities, it is clear that their roles are perceived as central to the success of peacebuilding initiatives. The findings highlight that women are active in advocating for women's rights, participating

in decision-making processes, and providing humanitarian support to victims of conflict. These roles are played through formal mandates of the organizations they represent and informal community engagement initiatives. Integrating formal and informal processes allow women to leverage organizational resources while maintaining a strong connection with the communities they serve. This dual approach increases the effectiveness of their peacebuilding efforts and fosters trust and collaboration at the grassroots level.

According to Ball (2019, p. 9), grassroots women describe peacebuilding as more than simply ending hostilities in a particular conflict; but also involves addressing domestic violence and gender-based discrimination. This conceptualization is based on the view that violence against women is not just a consequence of war and violent conflict but an ongoing crisis. Therefore, when women engage in peace-related work, they aim to eradicate GBV in their communities. This perception is consistent with the broader understanding of peacebuilding among Congolese women, who see it as encompassing actions and activities to promote social harmony, support victims of violent conflict, and eliminate gender-based hostilities. For these women, peacebuilding processes include community-led initiatives. For instance, Congolese women are involved in supporting victims of violence in the Kanyarucinya and other IDP camps. A similar support system is found in Chitando's (2019, p. 116) study of young women in Mashonaland, where they mobilized men and women to build community cohesion and support healing from violent conflict.

Participants also noted that their peacebuilding experiences were borne out of necessity, as they felt a moral responsibility toward their communities. Similar views are found in a study conducted in Kenya, where women understood their peacebuilding roles

as a moral obligation because no one else would (Mueller-Hirth, 2018, p. 174). Congolese also felt a moral obligation to address GBV, as the primary victims are women and girls. This is also supported by another study on women peacebuilders in the DRC (Selimovic et al., 2012). The authors argue that the involvement of women's NGOs in peace work has created scenarios of abdication of responsibility by the state. Women's NGOs are left to provide the necessary support to victims of violent conflict (Selimovic et al., 2012). This abdication of responsibility affects women's NGOs as they don't have enough funding and adequate resources to support everyone affected by conflict.

In trying to understand women's motivation to become peacebuilders, some participants indicated that feminine and maternal instincts catalyzed their involvement. Although several studies have argued against maternal and feminine instincts as motivators for becoming peacebuilders (Enloe, 1990; Cohn, 2013), it appears that women living in communities with customs that view women as a naturally peaceful being share this understanding. Some of the interview participants cited these feminine instincts as a reason for their involvement. Similarly, Mueller-Hirth (2018) notes that during the 2007/8 post-election violence in Kenya, local women felt that their feminine instincts were a primary motivation for engaging in community-led peace activities. These views are commonly found in culturally embedded societies where women do not completely reject certain biological attributes, believing them to be part of the natural order. In order to understand the local turn debates on change, it is important to take into account the beliefs of conflict-affected populations to gradually challenge harmful practices. Congolese women involved in peace work argue against SGBV but also emphasize the importance of having their spouses or fathers approve their work.

The debates against maternal instincts as the primary motivation for women's engagement in peacebuilding are based on the premise that viewing a woman's role from this perspective may exclude the fact that their participation is also shaped by historical, cultural, and political contexts (Cohn, 2013). This also excludes female combatants and their needs in post-conflict reconstruction. From this perspective, it is understandable that women's agency is not the result of maternal and feminine instincts. However, when viewed from a locally led perspective, it significantly shapes women's active engagement. Thus, this study does not argue for or against maternal and feminine instincts but seeks to give a voice to women's experiences and understanding their role in peacebuilding.

Moreover, Congolese women's experiences in peacebuilding extend beyond war and violence to include areas such as the arts and the desire to make a difference. Similar ideas are found in Jordan's (2003) study of young women peacebuilders in Zimbabwe. Her study shows that arts such as music, drawing, theatre, self-help, storytelling, and spirituality help build reconciliation and peace among divided communities. In Chitando's research in Zimbabwe, young women peacebuilders use art and performance to bridge gaps between communities. This is echoed by young women peacebuilders in Congo who use art and passion to engage in everyday peacebuilding. One example is how these peacebuilders hosted short plays on the radio in Goma to spread their message of peace. These creative activities have the potential to reduce tensions and unite divided communities.

6.4. Advocacy for Peace and Women's Rights

An examination of the everyday experiences of Congolese women in peacebuilding reveals that advocacy campaigns are an important tool for bringing about change. These campaigns target several critical areas, including SGBV, women's rights (such as land ownership), participation and representation, and policy reform. The findings suggest that women view advocacy as a powerful tool to positively influence their communities. According to Anderlini (2007), women's advocacy is crucial, particularly on issues that are often overlooked in male-dominated negotiations. She argues that women in conflict-affected communities mobilize at the grassroots level, bridging ethnic, religious, and political divides to foster communalism and resilience. Such approaches provide a broad base of support for peace initiatives and ensure that peace agreements are inclusive and representative.

The study highlights the pivotal role played by Congolese women in the 2006 referendum on the penal code of the constitution. Historically, the penal code lacked provisions against sexual assault, violence, and rape. Advocacy campaigns led by female peacebuilders were instrumental in securing these important changes. Similarly, the DRC's Family Code was amended in 2006, influenced by women's groups during the Sun City negotiations and the implementation of the first NAP on WPS. Despite these legislative advances, Sadie (2015) notes that the implementation of such laws remain a challenge. Issues such as the perpetration of sexual violence by law enforcement officers within the Congolese army complicate compliance with these norms.

Congolese women's advocacy for gender equality extends to economic empowerment. In patriarchal systems, women are often perceived as passive victims, constrained by societal norms from performing certain tasks. Employment opportunities are predominantly male-dominated, relegating women to low-paying jobs, which sometimes forced them into transactional sex or prostitution (Maclin et al., 2015; Byemba, 2020). This division of labour and discriminatory norms are more pronounced in rural and mining areas (Byemba, 2020; ACNDC, 2023). The study shows that women peacebuilders also face these challenges. Widows, in particular, struggle without male support systems, yet they persist in their advocacy efforts and continue to reinforce gender equality.

The study indicates that women engage in both formal and informal advocacy to secure community participation. Formal advocacy includes actions taken within the framework of NGOs or specific project goals. For example, organizations such as SOFEPADI and CAFED advocate for WPS policies and the Maputo Declaration. SOFEPADI's annual reports detail face-to-face activities promoting gender equality and WPS policies. Informal advocacy includes one-on-one interactions on social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and Instagram. Many local women's organizations, such as collectif MUMAMA, lack websites and financial resources for large-scale campaigns and instead rely on personal social media accounts to share their activities.

Advocacy for land ownership rights is another critical area where Congolese women peacebuilders are active. They use radio and community meetings to advocate for women's rights to inherit and own land, particularly in rural areas. One participant shared

her struggle after her husband's death when her family in law tried to claim his land, leaving her vulnerable. Her experience motivated her to be involved in peace work and advocate for women's right to own land. Furthermore, Hilhorst and Bashwira (2014) argue that land ownership in the DRC is characterized by significant inequalities, with men legally considered the primary owners of household resources. These inequalities are more pronounced in rural areas, where male-dominated decisions prevail. However, in urban areas, there has been a gradual increase in the number of women who own land and earn their own income (ibid, p. 32). Despite discriminatory norms, women peacebuilders have the potential to challenge and change these practices.

6.5. Training and workshop

To address issues of SGBV and overcome cultural and political constraints, women's organizations in Eastern Congo use training and workshops as key tools to challenge discriminatory norms. The findings suggest that women's organizations must conduct training sessions and workshops to address these issues and encourage active female participation in peacebuilding. To increase women's participation in peacebuilding, women's organizations are mobilizing and training women to become effective peacebuilders. This is exemplified by initiatives such as the Ambassadors for Peace and Makoki ya Mwasi projects.

The Ambassadors for Peace project involve recruiting women and training them on policies such as the WPS agenda to empower them and amplify their voices. These ambassadors advocate for peaceful coexistence, educate communities about women's

leadership roles, and ensure that women's voices are heard. The project operates in several regions of Eastern Congo, including Masisi, Rutshuru, Nyiragongo, and Walikale. It equips the Ambassadors for Peace with the knowledge and skills to mediate local conflicts, promote gender equality, and challenge customary, social, and political norms that marginalize women.

Similarly, the Makoki ya Mwasi project aims to equip women and girls with knowledge about their rights, including reproductive rights, education, and employment (SOFEPADI, 2021, p. 35). Participants have noted that a lack of awareness regarding women's rights prevents women from fully contributing to peacebuilding efforts, as they remain constrained by discriminatory norms. This project seeks to increase women's understanding of their agency before they can participate effectively as peacebuilders.

The effectiveness of these training and workshop strategies is supported by various studies on women's roles in peacebuilding (Tkach, 2017; Paffenholz et al., 2016; Cohn, 2013; Anderlini, 2007; Manchanda, 2005; Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002; Mazurana & McKay, 1999). Research suggests that women's participation in the delivery of training and workshops can have a transformative effect, particularly in promoting sustainable peace (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). For instance, when women in Eastern Congo mobilize and train others to join the Ambassadors for Peace, they foster a sense of agency. Although progress may seem incremental, especially in volatile regions like Eastern Congo, these trainings have lasting effects. Women, who might otherwise suffer in silence, are empowered to speak out and educate others about respecting women's rights. As Enloe (2004) argues, addressing women's issues in post-conflict reconstruction is crucial to achieving real

peace. In local contexts, communities must determine the nature of the peace they want. Thus, training and workshops on women's rights and peaceful coexistence have a great potential for promoting sustainable peace.

6.6. Community Support and Engagement

Most community support and engagement activities are carried out voluntarily. The findings indicate that Congolese women play an important role in volunteering in IDP camps. These roles include providing first aid supplies to victims of violent conflict, serving as midwives assistants, and organizing activities for children. For instance, women's organizations have set up childcare centers in Bulengwe and Butayo camps, providing services to over 1,000 internally displaced children. These initiatives are crucial as they foster hope in otherwise dire circumstances. Numerous studies have linked the role of women's agency to care and empathy that underpins their peacebuilding efforts (Tronto, 1993; Mazurana & McKay, 1999; Anderlini, 2007; Chopra, 2009). It is evident that women's agency incorporates care-centered values into their activities, which is a central characteristic not only of Congolese women, but also of women across continents. For example, during the Nepalese conflict, women's groups supported victims of violent conflict (especially women who had lost their parents) with para-legal services to obtain citizenship (Justino et al., 2018, p. 916).

Another important aspect of community support and engagement is the facilitation of inter-community dialogues by women organizations. These dialogues address customs that promote child marriage or deny women the right to inherit or own land. Women's organizations collaborate with community leaders to find meaningful solutions to these

issues, which are often entrenched at the village level. These dialogues provide an alternative perspective on the role of women. This can be analyzed in two ways. First, women organizations adapt to local traditions in order to work effectively within these communities. By understanding and using the language and customs approved by community leaders, women can challenge regressive norms from within the established framework. Second, they can challenge these customs using what Porter (2016, p. 214) calls a feminist gender-relational approach, in which both men and women adhere to feminist principles and practices of gender equality and justice. While the latter approach aims to create lasting peace, it is seen as somewhat utopian in Eastern Congo, where communities still struggle to understand and accept these levels of equality. This does not mean that women's organizations are not committed to these views, but rather that they see it as a gradual process. In the meantime, they need to use strategies that work best for them and the communities they serve.

6.7. An Analysis of the WPS Policies: Opportunities and Challenges

The findings suggest that continental and international policies, such as the WPS agenda, are crucial tools for women's organization in Eastern Congo. However, the debate on their effectiveness is twofold. On the one hand, these policies provide opportunities for women's active participation, gender equality, and protection from harm. On the other hand, implementation remains a major challenge, as not all women are aligned with these policies, and various barriers hinder their applicability.

The WPS policies, in particular, provide a framework for women to engage and redefine their roles, moving from passive victims to active participants. The data shows that women who use these policies find them instrumental in promoting women's emancipation and challenging gender-based discrimination. These policies have created a platform for women to find their voice and serve as a reference and support mechanism. For instance, in areas such as Rutchuru and Nyiragongo, women's organizations have initiated projects such as "Mwanamuke na Amani na Usalama," which translates as "Women, Peace, and Security," to make these policies accessible by translating them into local languages. This effort underscores the important work that women peacebuilders are doing to mobilize and educate women and girls about their roles. Translating the policies into local languages has facilitated better understanding among local populations and shifted perceptions of women from secondary status to active contributors.

However, there is an ongoing debate about the role of organizations in driving these policies. Basu, Kirby, and Shepherd (2020, p. 9) state:

Civil society groups have been involved in the drafting, monitoring, and advocacy for the implementation of the resolutions. Conversely, the resolutions recognize and seek to support the role that women's organizations and civil society, more broadly, play in facilitating the implementation of provisions laid down in the WPS resolutions. This institutionalization, however, has come at a cost. In order to make sense to the decision-makers, groups that seek to engage are bound by the formal policy language and mechanisms that inevitably restrict the scope of the agenda. There are tensions between those who speak this language and others who remain distant (by choice or otherwise) from the corridors of power (Basu et al., 2020, p. 9).

This highlights the local-international differences, where local organizations may not adhere to the formal language used in these policies, but because it is used by international experts and donors. This is a significant challenge that is increasingly recognized as an

obstacle in implementing the WPS policies. In particular, implementation is challenging because it does not fully reflect local realities.

While women peacebuilders generally view these policies positively, they do not always reflect the realities faced by most women. Firstly, as external tools, WPS policies are limited to their ability to challenge regressive practices. Van Houten (2020, p. 244) argues that WPS policies have been inadequate in the DRC, noting that women's participation in formal peace processes has largely been limited to discussions of SGBV, thereby reinforcing existing power structures rather than facilitating women's full engagement (Van Houten, 2020, p. 243). In addition, WPS policies are primarily used by women's organizations funded by external donors, and are often not fully aligned with local understandings, leading to resistance and implementation challenges at the community level. These policies are more familiar to women in high-level positions than those in rural areas, making it difficult to see their impact at the grassroots level. Selimovic et al. (2012) argue that in Eastern Congo, these policies are often referred to a "woman's issue" highlighting the importance of involving men in their full realization.

Although the DRC is entering the second generation of its NAP the implementation of gender equality and women's participation seems more theoretical than practical. The DRC's NAP under the WPS agenda reflects the challenges of top-down policy frameworks in addressing grassroots realities. For example, the exclusion of informal actors like women's groups and associations limits the scope of these policies, despite their significant contributions to local peace efforts. Other critiques are that the focus is merely on SGBV issues. Genuine participation in peace processes should extend

beyond discussions on SGBV to address all issues affecting local populations. Autesserre (2012) highlights that the focus in the DRC has been predominantly on SGBV, diverting attention from other human suffering. This focus is prevalent in academic and policy debates as well as among women's organizations, which often concentrate on SGBV due to the significant funding allocated to organizations working on this issue. One participant noted that organizations that do not focus on SGBV are less likely to attract funding.

Furthermore, Basu, Kirby, and Shepherd (2020, p. 9) note that

Individuals and organizations that are well-networked and professionalized are better positioned to access resources set aside by donors for civil society engagement compared to those who may have a deeper understanding of the specific contexts.

Put simply, the WPS policies set the stage and the ongoing process for women's organizations in peacebuilding. However, they are not sufficient, as they are not straightforward and do not necessarily represent the views of local and rural women.

6.8.Challenges and Solutions for Women's Agency

Women's experiences in Eastern Congo are characterized by significant barriers and challenges that impede their agency. The security situation in the DRC is difficult for anyone to navigate, but women face even greater obstacles to their activities. Firstly, regardless of their ethnic background, women are constrained by societal norms that devalue their voices. The findings show that these customs and norms, which are designed

to marginalize women, make their participation in peacebuilding efforts particularly difficult. However, it is noteworthy that feminist NGOs are aware of these obstacles.

According to the study's findings, women affiliated with such organizations play a crucial role in contesting and challenging these restrictive norms. Second, poverty and funding are particularly challenging, especially for women involved in peacebuilding. Engaging impoverished people in voluntary peace work—rather than paid employment—is extremely difficult. For women living in extreme poverty and having families to support, their primary concern remains providing basic necessities and ensuring the safety of their children, often overshadowing their ability to engage in peacebuilding activities. In addition, women's organizations suffer from a lack of funding for their projects, especially when these are community-based approaches, most of which create social harmony but are seen as less impactful at the national and international levels. Thus, this section highlights the challenges and obstacles women's agency encounter.

6.8.1. Emotional and Physical Harm

While not all women peacebuilders face physical harm, as the participant illustrated, most are emotionally harmed, often as a result of symbolic and structural violence. Women who advocate for justice for victims of SGBV, for political solutions to end armed conflict, and against hate speech often experience negative repercussions. In particular, when reporting misconduct by law enforcement officers such as police or military personnel, these women face physical harm, and the women they represent are similarly affected. Selimovic et al. (2012, p. 10) corroborate these concerns, stating:

Quite often, women's rights activists and women politicians are slandered, and women sometimes withdraw from their activism and political positions because their morals are questioned. This intimidating tactic also compels many women to work behind the scenes to maintain anonymity (Selimovic et al., 2012, p. 10).

One peacebuilder mentioned being tortured and imprisoned because of her campaigning against gender-based violence, while others had received death threats through text messages and social media. Another participant was spied on, accused of working for the M23 rebel group because of her campaigns for a cease-fire and a political solution. These intimidation tactics are used to silence women. There are socio-cultural repercussions for women who speak out publicly about the harm done to them, whether at home or in public space.

The lack of state and institutional support for women peacebuilders, combined with widespread impunity for violence against women and other victims of conflict, has led individuals to take justice into their own hands, contributing to increased insecurity in the region. The failure of the state to assert its authority has led to the widespread arming of civilians, many of whom go on to join armed groups. In rural areas, as discussed in previous chapters, bandits target women and girls in their homes. Recent allegations of sexual violence, exploitation, and rape involving peacekeepers, including MONUSCO and South African contingents⁷¹, further exacerbate the physical and emotional abuse faced by women peacebuilders. The complicity of law enforcement officers in violence against women has led to widespread impunity. Consequently, the state's inability to provide security forces women peacebuilders to endure emotional and physical harm

⁷¹ Rolley and Mahamba, 2023 – Eight UN peacekeepers detained in Congo over sexual abuse claims - <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-suspends-some-peacekeepers-congo-denounces-sexual-abuse-2023-10-12/>

when they speak out. Selimovic et al. (2012) highlight these systemic weaknesses have forced local women NGOs to support victims of violence despite financial constraints and limited capacity. However, these NGOs remain marginalized in national, regional, and international peace negotiations.

6.8.2. The fear to speak

In conflict-affected zones, silence serves as a refuge for many, particularly for women, who are already placed in subordinate roles by prevailing social norms. Women's organizations in Eastern Congo face significant challenges in engaging their peers in peacebuilding efforts, particularly because many have been victims of SGBV. The findings indicate that some women peacebuilders aim to support SGBV survivors but face two primary challenges: first, supporting those women who choose silence as a coping mechanism, and second, ensuring their protection when they do choose to speak out. Whether the violence is perpetrated by a family member or an outsider, the decision to speak out is fraught with difficulty, and even more so when the violence is perpetrated against men. These issues are deeply rooted in cultural traditions that place men in positions of power and mandate emotional restraint (Bjorkhaug & Boas, 2014). While women are positioned as primary caregivers, rendering their sexuality is a taboo topic. Men who experience such violence may be perceived as emasculated, while women who are abused lose their social value within the community (Bjorkhaug & Boas, 2014; Mulumeoderhwa, 2022). As a result, silence often emerges as the most viable means of coping with these traumatic experiences for both men and women.

Silence, however, is not merely a product of fear; it is also a strategic choice made by women to protect themselves from further violence, to avoid shame, and to navigate precarious conditions (Allouche et al., 2023). Silence is also influenced by tribal affiliation; in some cultures, there is a strong norm against denouncing one's community, and issues are expected to be resolved within the family. Breaking this silence can have negative consequences for women's organizations. Despite these challenges, women's organizations in Eastern Congo have developed strategies to overcome these barriers. Numerous women-led NGOs in the region are dedicated to advocating for justice for SGBV survivors. Allouche et al. (2023) repeatedly highlight that:

The creation of women's groups in North and South Kivu created channels for women to develop leadership skills, and the establishment of other support forums enabled women to publicly contribute to community protection plans and advocate for their protection needs with various local authorities and state actors. Women became effective by learning to use legal frameworks and informal networks to access leaders and by creating male allies. These practices have created the possibility for slowly changing gender norms (around women's access and presence in decision making, and ideas around women's protection needs and rights) and to challenge the culture of silence around violence (Allouche et al., 2023, p. 228).

While these developments represent a positive step towards justice for victims, there remain significant concerns about the effectiveness of the judicial system, which is often criticized for corruption. As long as these systemic problems persist, it will be a challenge for women's organizations to establish a robust disciplinary system that effectively condemns SGBV. In addition, it results in SGBV issues becoming the focus of women's active engagement, isolating some of the other key roles they can play in addressing violent conflicts and contributing to building a more just and peaceful society.

6.8.3. Community Resistance

The findings highlight instances of community resistance when Congolese women engage in peacebuilding and development activities. These women are often blamed for encouraging disobedience among young girls and are perceived as a threat to traditional gender roles, particularly the notion of women's subordination. As in many patriarchal societies, the DRC Family Code designates the man as the head of the household. As per the discussions with participants, this designation itself is not problematic; rather, the problem arises when men exploit this authority to undermine women. This is precisely what many women's organizations are trying to eradicate. Despite amendments to the Family Code aimed at promoting inclusivity, the clause affirming men as heads of households reinforces the perception of male superiority, a concept also prevalent in the monotheistic religions to which the majority of the Congolese population adheres. The criticism here is not of religious beliefs per se but of the abuse of the authority by men who use it to oppress women. Participants indicated that while they accept the idea of men as the head of the family, they object to the mistreatment of women under the guise of cultural and religious norms.

Meanwhile, Congolese women's advocacy for gender equality has a different meaning depending on the context. At the national level, gender equality is understood as the equal treatment of all individuals, equal access to opportunities, and the impartial application of the law. At the household level, however, women often interpret gender equality as the equitable sharing of gendered responsibilities. This latter interpretation has been criticized by liberal feminists, who argue that men and women should be treated

equally in all aspects, including equal pay and rights (Butler, 1990; Fraser, 1997; Nusbaum, 2011). On the other hand, standpoint feminists emphasize the importance of understanding the world from women's perspectives (Smith, 1987; Harding, 1996). To understand why Congolese women, see gender equality at the household level in terms of gendered responsibilities, it is crucial to consider that many of these women, despite being peacebuilders, are deeply influenced by cultural and religious beliefs. For them, it is more practical for them to share tasks within the household than to strive for complete equality in domestic roles.

Community resistance to women's peacebuilding efforts is reinforced by symbolic and structural violence rooted in cultural and religious norms. This resistance exposes women peacebuilders to personal criticism and threats aimed at discouraging their activities. The belief that women should be subordinate to men undermines the authority of women as leaders, who are often accused of having inappropriate behaviour, labelled as troublemakers, or seen as home wreckers, casting suspicion on their intentions. However, alternative approaches to challenging these norms have been suggested in the literature, emphasizing the importance of women's experiences. McKay and Mazurana (2001) argue that women's religious and spiritual beliefs in conflict-affected communities have shaped their peacebuilding strategies, particularly through a focus on reconciliation. While this study did not fully explore the impact of religious beliefs on women's agency, it did highlight the importance of ethnic solidarity among women. Despite their different group affiliations or political positions, women share common experiences of domestic and gender-based violence, which motivated them to set aside their differences during the Sun City Agreement to develop policies and recommendations to address these issues.

6.8.4. Financial challenges and building autonomy

The results point to two types of financial constraints that hinder the effectiveness of women-led peace work. First, there is a significant lack of funding for women-led NGOs, particularly those working in rural areas. This lack of funding severely hampers the ability of these organizations to carry out peace-related activities within their communities. Indeed, rural women who often lead these organizations face additional challenges due to limited educational opportunities. Yolanda Sadie's (2010) research also highlights the financial constraints faced by local NGOs in rural areas, such as Masisi and Rutshuro. Unfortunately, despite the passage of 14 years since Sadie's study, little progress has been made in supporting women-led NGOs in Eastern Congo.

Other scholars studying women's agency in peacebuilding in this region confirm that the lack of funding for women's projects remains a pervasive problem (Selimovic et al., 2012; Hilhorst & Bashwira, 2014). This lack of funding limits the scope of women's interventions, forcing them to focus on issues that are more likely to receive funding, such as SGBV. Even in these cases, there are complaints that women affected by SGBV are not adequately supported due to the lack of adequate social services (D'Errico et al., 2013). These challenges are exacerbated by the high levels of poverty in the country despite the DRC's wealth in natural resources.

In line with these concerns, Justino, Mitchell, and Müller (2018) note that similar challenges have been observed in other conflict-affected countries, where:

Women's rights organizations in communities in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, and Sierra Leone (and independently of NGO presence) reported limited access to appropriate levels of funding, resources, and support for peacebuilding work — which generally requires intensive community engagement over long periods of time (Justino et al., 2018, p. 920).

This underscores the wider issue that women's issues are often neglected, leading to misconceptions that undermine their agency.

The second financial challenge women peacebuilders encounter is at the individual level, where they face financial discrimination. When trying to engage communities, they are often asked for money, making it difficult for them to carry out awareness-raising, training, or workshops. This problem is particularly acute in rural areas, where women's organizations struggle to mobilize other women, many of whom are forced into prostitution due to economic hardship (Maclin et al., 2015). High levels of illiteracy further exacerbate these financial constraints. Women's organizations highlight the profound impact of financial constraints have on women's small businesses and their access to loans, which are hampered by poverty and a lack of education.

Despite these financial limitations, many women's organizations and associations have supported their peers by providing loans and savings tools, such as Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA or AVEC). Through AVECs, rural women can access loans and microcredits to support their small businesses. According to women peacebuilders, those who achieve financial independence are more likely to embrace the values of women's rights and gender equality that are crucial to their peacebuilding efforts. Put simply, women peacebuilders believe that when women achieve a certain level of financial autonomy, they are better able to contribute to solving problems in their

communities, thereby promoting an understanding of gender equality. This perspective aligns with feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe (2004), who argues that financial independence significantly enhances women's roles and effectiveness in peacebuilding

6.9. Factors shaping women's agency in peacebuilding

According to the findings of this research, the key motivations and values that drive Congolese women to become peacebuilders revolve around care, empathy, determination, and resilience. One of the central research questions focuses on how Congolese women's caregiving roles influence their community-based peacebuilding efforts. The findings suggest that women's involvement in peacebuilding is shaped by several factors, including a sense of victimhood, self-awareness, a determination to effect change and prove women's worth, empathy for victims of violent conflict, and a deep care for their communities. These motivations were evident in participants' discussions of their reasons for becoming peacebuilders.

These factors play a crucial role in understanding how women navigate the opportunities and challenges they encounter in their peacebuilding work. Furthermore, this section explores how these motivations relate to the theoretical framework of this dissertation, bridging between the empirical findings with the broader academic discussion on women's roles in peacebuilding.

6.9.1. Integrating Women-led Peace Efforts with African Feminism, Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care

The integration of women-led peace efforts with African Feminism, Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care is primarily drawn from virtual field research on the experiences of Congolese women in Goma.

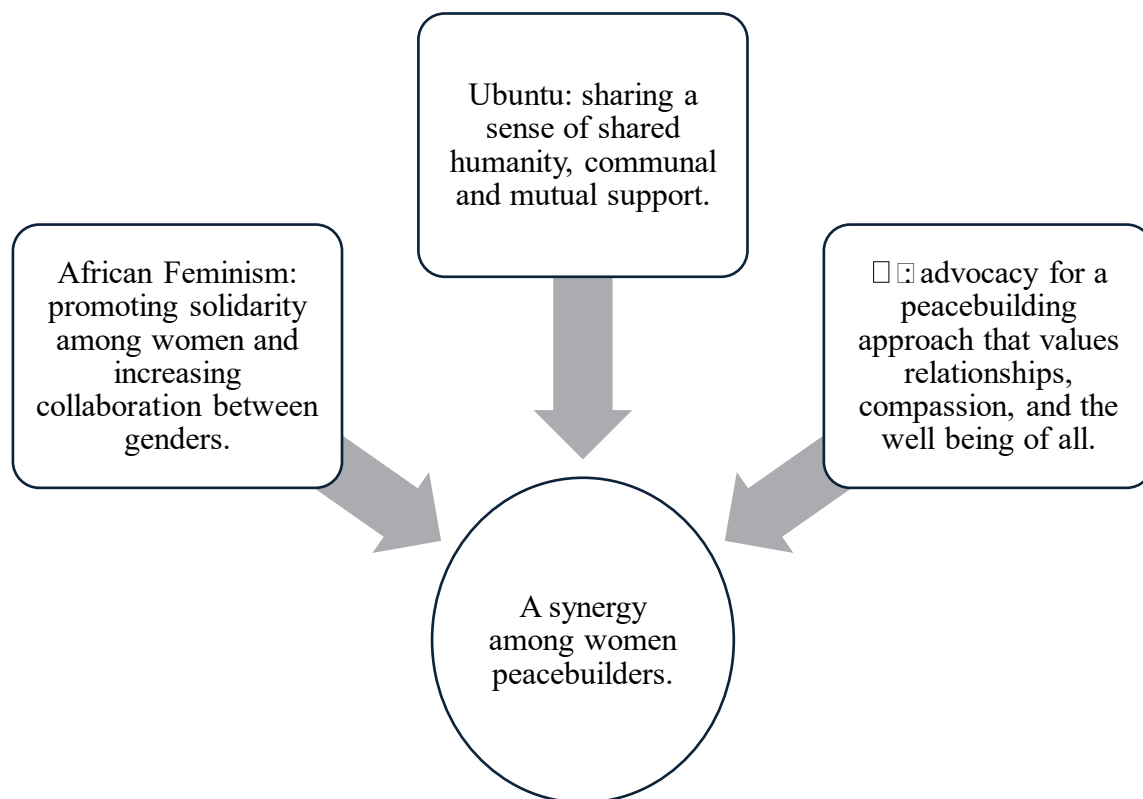


Figure 3 Synergy among women peacebuilders

Figure 3 illustrates the synergy between women peacebuilders in Eastern Congo and highlights their collective approach to peacebuilding that transcends ethnic divides. As observed in discussions with Congolese women, there is a strong belief in creating a unified system for women involved in peacebuilding, regardless of their background. This synergy also extends to involving men in these efforts in order to promote collective action to build peace and ensure respect for women's rights. This collective approach is

consistent with the three theoretical frameworks that underpin this study: African Feminism, Ubuntu, and the Ethics of Care.

African Feminism, as defined by Wane (2010), is a theory of decolonization that emphasizes solidarity among women and encourages collaboration with men as allies. Congolese women embody this principle by working together as a community. My observations during the research revealed that women peacebuilders often referred to their experiences and activities in terms of “we.” For instance, in Saké, one female peacebuilder, who was a law student at the time, recounted how she and her colleagues had proposed a law to sanction rape and sexual violence. This collective approach was a source of strength, as these women consistently sought each other’s support. Such qualities are fundamental to African Feminism, which believes that significant impact can only be achieved through collective action. Participants frequently mentioned the need for greater synergy among women peacebuilders, emphasizing that these collective efforts not only amplify their voices but also provide crucial support in navigating the challenges faced by women.

In Eastern Congo, as in many parts of Africa, community relationships are highly valued. Collaboration and mutual support are essential for Congolese women’s organizations to engage and mobilize communities as allies in peace-related work, particularly in advocating for women’s rights and gender equality. Congolese women recognize that their efforts will be more effective if they have the support of their communities. Of particular interest is how these women navigate community resistance and influence community perspectives and opinions. One strategy involves leveraging community knowledge to mobilize support. For example, Congolese women

peacebuilders often hold informal awareness-raising sessions with families to demonstrate the importance of their activities and encourage them to allow their daughters to participate. This approach reflects an understanding of the impact of cultural and social norms and a determination to overcome these barriers in raising awareness about women's issues.

The results show that these actions are deeply rooted in the principles of mutual support found in all three theoretical frameworks and in the concepts of care and empathy central to Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care. Why focus on care and empathy? Women peacebuilders in Congo expressed that when they witness inequalities and gender-based violence, they often think, "This could be my child." One participant said, "Do you imagine not being present at your daughter's dowry?" For her, peacebuilding is not only about addressing conflict but also about empowering young girls to choose their own paths. It is care and empathy that leads one to reflect on gender-based violence and consider its impact on their daughters.

In addition, some findings suggest that women's feminine instincts are critical motivators in their decision to become peacebuilders. Studies on feminine instincts often highlight women's inherent peacefulness and capacity for care. While not all women possess these qualities, and more and more men share these values, the feminist Ethics of Care, as discussed by Gouws and Vanzyl (2015), emphasizes the importance of valuing these attributes rather than dismissing them.

The resilience demonstrated by Congolese women in peacebuilding aligns with Ubuntu's emphasis on communal interdependence. For instance, participants' caregiving roles, such as providing shelter to displaced families, embody the Ethics of Care and

underscore the informal dimensions of their agency. This challenges traditional frameworks that focus primarily on formal peace processes. Working in IDP camps, Congolese women see their efforts as a moral responsibility to support communities affected by violent conflict. Despite limited funding, they visit displaced people, provide midwifery services, engage with children, and more to create an atmosphere of hope, in line with the Ethics of Care. According to Held (2005), the Ethics of Care suggests that the state should take on care-centered roles. In Canada, for example, there are services to support low-income families, social groups for new mothers, and free toys for children. These services stem from the care-centered approach that Canada has adopted as a state. The fact that Congolese women are adopting similar approaches with limited resources shows that the Ethics of Care is central to their actions.

In Addition, table 4 show how women-led activities fit within the frameworks of African Feminism, Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care,

Women-led peace efforts	African Feminism	Ubuntu	Ethics of Care
Engaging women in peace work	☒ collective work emphasizing peacebuilding	☐	☒ focuses on nurturing and relational aspects of peacebuilding
Supporting victims of violent conflicts	☒ addressing specific needs and	☒ interconnectedness	☒ emphasis on empathy,

	rights of women affected by violent conflicts	and collective responsibilities	compassion, and support for those in need
Advocacy for women's rights and gender equality	☒ African Feminism's core principles	☐	☐
Advocacy for women's political participation	☒ African Feminism's goals of increasing women's participation and representation in political spheres	☐	☐
Community building training and mediation of conflicts	☐	☒ communal well-being and solidarity to support and rehabilitate victims of violent conflicts	☒ fostering relationships and caring for the community as a whole
Advocacy for justice for women	☐	☐	☒ addressing injustice and ensuring

			support for women's needs and rights
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Table 4 shows how women-led activities fit within the frameworks of African Feminism, Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care

Table 4: Many of these activities overlap with all three theoretical perspectives of this research to varying degrees, but each is selected based on how it aligns closely with a specific theory.

On another level, there are notable differences when considering Ubuntu as a philosophy that embodies the principle of “I am because you are.” At its core, Ubuntu emphasizes that communalism is only possible when it is truly shared by everyone concerned, typically manifested through truth and reconciliation. This study, however, reveals a different reality. The challenges that exist in Eastern Congo, such as deep-seated mistrust between and amongst communities, significantly hinder the application of Ubuntu in its fullest sense. While people may share physical spaces, they are often divided by tribal affiliations and political affiliations that create barriers to genuine community interaction.

Moreover, the unjust imprisonment of individuals on the basis of their political positions or ethnic background has created a pervasive sense of fear within communities, affecting even women peacebuilders. The findings of this study suggest that much work remains to be done before Ubuntu-based reconciliation approaches can be effectively implemented. While empathy and care are evident among women peacebuilders, the broader communal and reconciliatory aspects of Ubuntu are less prominent in their

approaches. This suggests that, despite Ubuntu-inspired elements, the full realization of its principles is constrained by the current socio-political environment.

6.9.2. Understanding Women's Determination and Resilience

Women's roles in peacebuilding are frequently characterized by their determination to effect change and their resilience in the face of gender-based discrimination and the conflicts that ravage their communities (Mazurana et al., 2005). Evidence from interviews and documentary shows highlights how Congolese women demonstrate this determination and resilience through their peacebuilding activities. Numerous scholars have examined women's resilience in conflict situations (Manchanda, 2001; McKay, 2005; Mazurana et al., 2005; Gbowee, 2011; Mutisi, 2012; Paffenholz, 2010; Dharmapuri, 2011; Berry, 2018). While these studies examine various contexts in which women's organizations operate, they consistently conclude that women's resilience is defined by their ability to cope with challenging circumstances, adapt to them, and remain determined to rebuild their lives despite the obstacles they face. This resilience, in turn, underpins their determination to take action and persevere to achieve their objectives.

In terms of determination, these women show a strong commitment to working for peace, women's rights, gender equality, and justice despite the many risks. For instance, they persist in organizing campaigns against sexual violence and rape, fully aware of the potential for emotional and physical harm, driven by the conviction that if they do not act, no one else will. In addition, they are involved in various peacebuilding initiatives, such as the Makoki ya Mwasi projects and the Women Ambassadors for Peace program, which exemplify their persistence in pursuing meaningful change.

In terms of resilience, three key aspects were drawn from women's experiences and roles in peacebuilding. These are adaptability, rebuilding and recovery, and emotional and psychological strength. As Paffenholz notes,

The resilience of women in peacebuilding is closely tied to the support networks they cultivate. These networks not only bolster their determination but also provide the necessary resources and solidarity to sustain their efforts in the long term (Paffenholz (2010, p. 153).

Similarly, Congolese women demonstrate resilience by adapting to changing circumstances and challenges while fulfilling their community roles and responsibilities. They extend their efforts into unsafe spaces to support and uplift their communities.

In the face of increasing violent conflict, Congolese women are engaged in activities to rebuild and improve their communities. They use various platforms, including radio, face-to-face workshops at universities, and inter-community dialogues, to encourage communities to envision a future beyond violence and focus on opportunities for reconstruction. Through their networks and support groups, they also actively address trauma and stress by providing support to victims of SGBV. In particular, the work of SOFEPADI is an example of a robust support system for victims of gender-based violence, providing medical care, healing, and psychological support to communities affected by conflict in Ituri and North Kivu.

6.10. Study limitation and further research

This study provides valuable insights into the role of women's agency in peacebuilding in Eastern Congo, yet several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the findings.

First, as noted in the methodology, the research scope of the research was limited by logistical and security challenges in Goma. This led to a virtual fieldwork using online platforms, where discussions were rich and primarily involved women in leadership positions – which may raise questions about issues of power and narrative uptake/reception by other women in the region who are not in similar positions, but who are equally engaged in similar activities. This is because the women interviewed were educated and had a good understanding of security constraints and the status of women in Eastern Congo. While this approach provided a clear perspective on the status of women, capturing the insights of rural women involved in community-based peacebuilding efforts would have also been beneficial.

Second, while the study provides in-depth and context-rich information, its reliance on qualitative data introduces potential biases. Most participants drew from personal experiences and perceptions that may not fully represent broader perspectives. A key observation from the interviews is the gender bias in the understanding of women as active agents in peacebuilding. Although male participants acknowledged the importance of women as actors, they often portrayed them as passive victims who needed help to exercise their agency. Men's criticisms of women's work reflected a lack of in-depth

understanding of women's issues, although their efforts to recognize and challenge toxic masculinities were also evident.

Third, the evolving social and political landscape in Eastern Congo may influence current perspectives on women's agency, potentially limiting the applicability of research conducted in 2023. However, a review of studies since 2000 suggests that these changes may be minimal and therefore have a limited impact on the findings.

Fourth, there is a significant gap between the work of women's NGOs and that of state authorities. Engagement with state authorities in Goma was challenging due to the "Etat de siège" and the appointment of a military governor, leading to an increasingly suspicious environment where officials were reluctant to speak with researchers. Although this did not have a significant impact on the study, a comparison of the perspectives of state authorities and women's NGOs would have enriched the analysis, particularly in understanding the funding gaps that women frequently mentioned.

Fifth, the documentary review revealed a lack of literature focusing on the role of women in peacebuilding in Eastern Congo. The documents that are available often emphasize donor-driven analyses of women's roles, which is also reflected in the reports of women's NGOs which prioritize securing funding over conducting in-depth analyses of their activities. This funding-driven focus may contribute to a bias in research towards issues such as sexual violence, rape, and gender-based violence, areas in which these NGOs receive the most funding. In contrast, this study sought to focus more on women's experiences as peacebuilders, capturing their everyday encounters and providing a more nuanced understanding of their roles at the local level.

Acknowledging these limitations is crucial to understanding the scope and implications of the study's findings. Future research that addresses these gaps has the potential to significantly enhance our understanding of the complexities associated with women's peacebuilding roles, particularly their grassroots agency

CONCLUSION

This dissertation examined the formal and informal roles of women in peacebuilding in Eastern Congo. Since the 1990s, this region has been plagued by violent conflict, resulting in significant human and material losses. Women in the region not only bear the brunt of these conflicts, but also face sexual violence, rape and gender-based discrimination, often rooted in local beliefs and cultures. To address these challenges, this study aimed to understand the specific roles women play in peacebuilding and the agency they exercise in these efforts.

To complete this dissertation successfully, four key elements were pivotal. First and foremost is the dual methodology of the study. One aspect of this methodology involved amplifying the voices of women peacebuilders, allowing them to articulate their own experiences of carrying out peacebuilding activities. This includes how they perceive these activities, the moral and physical consequences they face, and what motivates them to continue their efforts. These women are as deeply affected by the violent conflicts as any other residents of Eastern Congo, but they also face gender-based discrimination. As Pankhurst (2003) notes, women's experiences of violent conflict and post-conflict periods are profoundly shaped by such discrimination. Thus, interviewing women peacebuilders provided a nuanced understanding of their complex daily realities.

The second aspect of the methodology is the review of secondary data, which extends the scope of the study to encompass a wider geographical area within Eastern Congo. Academic, policy, and media discussions frequently focus on the violent conflicts in North Kivu, often neglecting other regions in Eastern Congo, such as Ituri and South

Kivu, which face similar challenges. Although there is limited research on women's agency in peacebuilding across Eastern Congo, the available data offered valuable insights into the day-to-day activities of women peacebuilders, thereby enhancing the overall clarity and depth of the study.

Conducting fieldwork in Goma was interesting because most women peacebuilders have offices in Goma but work throughout Eastern Congo. Grasping their contributions in rural and urban areas increased the understanding of the differences between the two and the mindset of the locals, which, in turn, can explain the reasons for the failure of the negotiations and peace agreements. Local urban communities have a better understanding of gender equality (although they sometimes show some resistance) and are more used to seeing women as leaders in their communities. In rural areas, local people are strongly influenced by their understanding of gender relations, and it is a challenge for women peacebuilders to sensitize local populations about peacebuilding programs.

Second, the use of a theoretical link between African Feminism, Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care offered a novel perspective on women's active involvement in peacebuilding. When I first proposed this theoretical framework, my argument was that this nexus could help uncover some of the informal roles of women peacebuilders. In particular, community work, empathy-based and care-oriented approaches, the use of motherhood and feminine instincts, and reconciliation methods. After conducting virtual field research, different ways of viewing how this theoretical nexus influences the understanding of women peacebuilders were further clarified.

In the context of African Feminism, women peacebuilders in Eastern Congo see their activities and commitments as deeply rooted in a sense of community. They have fostered a synergy among themselves that enables cooperation and collaboration between different peacebuilding initiatives. This collective approach is reinforced by their shared commitment to the principles of gender equality, which underscores their ability and capacity to exercise agency. This commitment is particularly evident in their advocacy for women's rights and their efforts to address SGBV. Indeed, their understanding of agency is inherently communal, with women peacebuilders consistently describing their work as part of a collective effort rather than an individual or self-driven endeavor. They emphasize that their achievements are the result of group dynamics and collaboration with their peers, underscoring the importance of solidarity and mutual support in their peacebuilding work.

African Feminism seems to resonate strongly with the lived realities of Congolese women. As Njoki Wane (2011) asserts, African Feminism advocates that women support each other and engage in activities that promote women's rights—a principle that is clearly reflected in the experiences of Congolese women. These women not only endorse such ideals but also actively participate in initiatives that highlight women's contributions to advocating for their rights and training them as peacebuilders. This perspective represents a significant shift from viewing women merely as agency-free victims to recognizing them as active agents of change, which I argue is a crucial lens through which to understand women peacebuilders.

In this study, acknowledging women's abilities change public perceptions, leading to greater acceptance and confidence in their agency among local populations. African

Feminism thus provides a valuable framework for understanding the perspectives of African women, particularly in how they navigate and respect cultural and traditional norms while addressing retrogressive practices in ways that are understandable and acceptable to their societies.

Meanwhile, this study sought to understand how women perceive their relationships and communal work beyond African Feminism, exploring the principles of Ubuntu Philosophy and the Ethics of Care. Ubuntu Philosophy (a South African moral theory) posits that true reconciliation is grounded in human relationships and communalism, which aim to promote the well-being of all (Metz, 2007). While women's organizations in Eastern Congo may not focus solely on reconciliation, their advocacy for community dialogue and their efforts to enhance the well-being of others reflect the essence of Ubuntu. This is evident in their interventions in IDP camps and their use of the arts to promote peacebuilding and reconciliation. In addition, the empathy and care-based activities of Congolese women, which are central to their motivation as peacebuilders, resonate deeply with the values of Ubuntu. For Ubuntu to be practiced effectively, a care-centered approach must be integral to every action, a perspective that is particularly shared by young women peacebuilders and those working in rural communities, as the findings of this study show.

The Ethics of Care, which emphasizes care-centered roles and the promotion of women's rights, has also had a significant influence on this study. Traditionally, care-centered roles have been marginalized in moral philosophy and politics (Tronto, 1993). However, Congolese women understand their roles as deeply rooted in their feminine instincts and their ability to provide care to those in need. This perspective is consistent

with the Ethics of Care, which values domestic roles as crucial for building a community that prioritizes collective well-being. In this study, while care is not the sole motivator for women to become peacebuilders, it is a key factor in strengthening their agency. Care-centered approaches drive women to take action despite the challenges posed by violent conflict and regressive customs that often place them in a subordinate position.

Moreover, care-centered work, which includes supporting communities, acting as midwives, and educating children, takes place primarily in informal spaces. Tronto (2013) argues that integrating the Ethics of Care into both social and political spheres has the potential to create a more equitable society. Although her work does not explicitly address women's rights, an equitable society inherently involves gender equality and equity, as well as the consideration of special needs. This study underscores the significance of care-centered roles in shaping women's agency, highlighting how these roles contribute to broader societal transformations toward equity and justice.

This theoretical framework reveals a link between Congolese women's agency in peacebuilding and aspects of communalism, care, empathy, human relations, gender equality and justice for women affected by SGBV. All of these peacebuilding aspects are linked in one way or another to some features of African Feminism, Ubuntu and the Ethics of Care. By bringing together Ubuntu, the Ethics of Care, and African Feminism, this study contributes to a modest understanding of the culture of communalism embedded in African traditions and how it relates to women's agency in Eastern Congo. Such a mix provided means to probe informal peace efforts of ordinary women in their everyday life experiences.

Thirdly, the literature review of this study provides an in-depth analysis of women's agency in both formal and informal ways. The link between the literature review, the findings and the discussion of this study is based on aspects such as the WPS policies and resilient work. The WPS policies have served as a foundation for women's organizations. Some of the women interviewed were involved in campaigns to change discriminatory laws in Congo, and their actions had a positive impact when these laws changed for the first time in 2006. The interviewees were strong advocates for increasing women's participation and representation at the negotiation table. Indeed, women peacebuilders have used these policies to influence public opinion on women's rights and gender equality. Interestingly, in Ituri, these policies have been translated into Swahili to ensure that the local population understands and support women's representation, and the protection of women from sexual violence, rape and other forms of gender-based violence. Although most debates on these policies focus on women's participation and representation at the peace table and in holding political positions, there are clauses in these policies that touch on bottom-up approaches. These approaches encourage peacebuilding talks to consider locally led action by women as key to peace negotiations.

The failure to uphold key clauses and policies, coupled with the persistence of strong patriarchal attitudes, has fueled resilient action by women in Eastern Congo. Despite the physical and emotional harm associated with their peacebuilding efforts, these women show remarkable courage, determination, and resilience in pursuing their objectives. The literature on women's movements highlights similar patterns of resilience, with women stepping out of traditional domestic roles to engage in activism, struggle and speaking out, as exemplified by the women involved in the Maoist movement in Nepal

(Manchanda, 2005). Such resilience often emerges in response to the violence and oppression that women endure.

In the context of Eastern Congo, the findings suggest that many women were motivated to become peacebuilders because of the violence they witnessed during and after the conflicts. Their motivations are deeply rooted in a desire to counteract these atrocities, demonstrating how resilience underpins their agency. This resilience not only drives their peacebuilding activities but also enriches our understanding of women's everyday experiences. Moreover, these actions inform us about some of the factors that positively influence their agency in conflict zones. Put simply, the findings of this study contribute to a broader body of knowledge about women's resilience in the face of systemic violence and their critical role in peacebuilding efforts.

Fourth, the discussion chapter draws extensively on the historical context of the conflicts in the DRC. It traces the evolution of conflicts in the DRC, from the end of colonization and the beginning of the country's independence, with particular emphasis on the period following the First and Second Congo Wars up to the present day. These conflicts provide a crucial context for understanding the work of women's agency and the emergence of numerous women-led associations and organizations.

Indeed, it could be argued that women's organizations have limited influence, as their concerns are often overlooked in peace negotiations and agreements, and their impact appears minimal in the face of ongoing instability. These challenges undoubtedly affect the effectiveness of their organizations. However, a historical perspective reveals that women's issues were much less discussed in the 1990s. The fact that the DRC is now in

the third phase of implementing the NAPs on WPS suggests that, despite the perceived limitations, women's actions have indeed managed to influence government policy.

However, the intensification of the violent conflict and the failure of the state to ensure stability have led local populations to increasingly rely on peace-led organizations and associations, including those led by women. Women affected by SGBV often find greater comfort and trust in talking to other women, particularly within women-led groups. Women's organizations have gained respect in rural areas through programs such as AVEK, which provides micro-credit. Despite their crucial role, these organizations often lack visibility and recognition, and women's issues are rarely prioritized by the state unless there is external pressure. This disconnect is also reflected in the numerous policy documents on gender equality and women's rights, which remain largely unimplemented.

The documents reviewed also highlight a disparity between the number of women in political positions in state authorities and the impact they have in addressing the issues faced by local women in Eastern Congo. This gap is partly due to the significant differences in lived experiences between those in Kinshasa and those in the eastern regions of the country. This makes it difficult for state authorities to intervene effectively in areas they rarely visit. A critical challenge in Eastern Congo is the persistent failure to address the root causes of conflict. Without addressing these root causes, building peace in the region will remain elusive.

Despite the persistence of regressive cultural practices, there is a growing recognition of the challenges, which is an important step towards addressing these issues. The findings suggest that women are increasingly optimistic about finding ways to challenge patriarchal gender norms. This is usually done through dialogues and informal

discussions with community leaders. Women peacebuilders are gradually building trust within local communities, which increases the effectiveness of their sensitization efforts.

However, many factors continue to hamper the work of women organizations in Eastern Congo. For instance, it is difficult to advocate for social justice in a region where the justice system is dysfunctional. Addressing social justice issues requires overcoming several systemic obstacles. Congolese women are acutely aware of these challenges and continue to focus on ensuring that women's rights are respected. Other factors, such as poverty, ethnic discrimination, and the presence of multiple armed groups, also present significant barriers to women's agency often affecting them on a personal level.

In conclusion, the core arguments of this thesis are as follows:

1. Although women are often victims of SGBV in Eastern Congo, local women's organizations in peacebuilding provide a critical perspective on their active participation at both formal and informal levels.
2. These perspectives show that, with adequate support, women can make significant contributions to peacebuilding in both the political and social spheres, thereby shaping policies that address the needs of women affected by SGBV and providing support systems for victims of violent conflict.
3. Local women's organizations have developed strategies to overcome regressive cultural practices by using language and approaches that resonate with local communities and offer opportunities for social transformation.
4. Despite the importance of the WPS policies, much remains to be done to ensure that these policies are reflected in local practice. There remains a significant gap

between the understanding of these policies by women in high-level positions and their implementation by women in rural areas.

5. There is considerable potential in exploring the informality of women-led peace efforts in Eastern Congo, and greater recognition of these efforts is needed in peacebuilding debates.

Future Research

Research on the formality and informality of women-led peace efforts in Eastern Congo has revealed a complex set of interrelated issues that resemble a puzzle of women's agency in peacebuilding, of which this thesis has unravelled only one aspect. This study examines the peace initiatives led by local women in Eastern Congo and highlights their crucial role in the peacebuilding process. However, it is important to recognize that achieving sustainable peace requires the involvement of all primary actors. While women's contributions are significant, they alone are not enough to achieve lasting peace, especially given the local and national biases and discrimination that hinder their full participation.

To build sustainable peace, it is necessary to examine how state actors, including politicians and law enforcement officers, women's groups, ethnic minorities, and rebel groups, work together. An analysis of the chronology of peace agreements in the region shows that they have yet to be fully implemented. Scholars attribute this to several factors, including the lack of localized peace negotiations, failure to address the root causes of conflict (see Severine Autesserre and Bojana Coulibaly), and the lack of attention to

women's issues in the negotiations. In addition, the failure of state officials to honour peace agreements exacerbates these challenges, creating a sense of urgency for further research on the impact of excluding primary actors from peacebuilding processes in the DRC.

Studying women's organizations in peacebuilding in Eastern Congo raises further questions about their representativeness across ethnic groups. Eastern Congo is home to different ethnic communities, often divided along tribal lines, which limits day-to-day interactions between these groups. This raises important questions about how women's organizations mediate local conflicts, particularly in the context of inter-ethnic clashes. How do women from particular ethnic groups navigate such conflicts? Do they remain neutral, or do they take sides? These questions point to further research that addresses the broader puzzle of women's agency in peacebuilding in Eastern Congo.

Another critical issue is the notion of meaningful participation. It is crucial to examine whether women's roles in peacebuilding are truly considered meaningful participation. Future research could focus on defining meaningful participation and understanding how women's agency contributes in a meaningful way. This includes asking whether the policies adopted are gender-sensitive and whether women at the negotiation table are actively discussing women's issues. Meaningful participation goes beyond peace negotiations and agreements to include women's influence on policy implementation at the local level.

It is also important to explore the role of local cultures in Eastern Congo and examine how different cultural contexts shape women's roles. Most research emphasizes patriarchal cultures because of the dominant narratives that shape social norms and

politics. However, studying matriarchal cultures can provide valuable insights into how women operate within these cultural frameworks and how they are perceived by local communities when they engage in peace work. This approach also opens avenues for exploring indigenous knowledge and dispute resolution practices, which are essential for understanding the local dynamics of peacebuilding.

This study contributes to academic debates by emphasizing the critical yet underexplored roles of informal, women-led initiatives in peacebuilding. By integrating African Feminism, Ubuntu, and the Ethics of Care, it offers a nuanced framework for understanding the interplay between cultural contexts and gendered agency. Future research could explore the potential of environmental peacebuilding and digital advocacy as emerging areas where Congolese women could further their contributions to sustainable peace.

In conclusion, this thesis argues that women in conflict zones are not only victims but are also key actors who contribute to change, whether on a large or small scale. It emphasizes the importance of valuing women's actions, as these actions shape positive relationships between and among local communities and promote peaceful coexistence. Although conflict can sometimes undermine these efforts, local populations often find ways to live together. Furthermore, women's informal actions play a significant role in these processes. Therefore, the potential areas of future research areas outlined here are essential to complete the puzzle of women's agency in peacebuilding in Eastern Congo.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1: Research Ethics Board



UNIVERSITÉ
SAINT-PAUL
UNIVERSITY

13-03-2023
dd-mm-yyyy

Bureau de la recherche et de la déontologie (BRD)
Office of Research and Ethics (ORE)

COMITÉ D'ÉTHIQUE DE LA RECHERCHE (CER) | RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD (REB)

REB File Number	1360.40/22		
Last name	Name	Affiliation	Role
Mukazi Ndekezi Onguny	Peace Philip	Faculty of Human Science Faculty of Human Science	PhD Candidate-PI Thesis Director
Type of project	Doctoral Thesis		
Title	Exploring women-led peace efforts among local communities: a case study of Goma, Eastern Congo.		
	Approval date	Expiry Date	Decision
			2 (Revisions required)*

REB COMMITTEE COMMENTS

(*) Revisions required:

The project requires some clarifications/revisions. The REB provides the researcher with written feedback outlining its concerns. Ethics approval will be granted and an ethics certificate will be issued once the feedback has been satisfactorily addressed. Please use **track changes** and/or **highlight text** to clearly document where the change has occurred:

The Code of Conduct Form:

- **B.6:** The researcher is asked to specify how he will guarantee the security of her assistant;
She also needs to provide the interview guide for the focus groups;
- **D.6:** The researcher needs to be more specific;
- **E.2:** The researcher is asked to explain the nature of the research permit;
- **G.1e:** The researcher cannot guarantee full anonymity and confidentiality due to the focus groups.

The Consent Form:

The risk: the researcher must clearly mention that the risk is more than minimal and specify what are the concrete measures he will put in place in order to mitigate the risk.

Anonymity and confidentiality: both cannot be fully guaranteed because of the focus groups.

Louis Perron, Ph.D.
Chair
Research Ethics Board (REB)

Annex 2: Interview Guides

Guide 1: Interview Guide for Women Peacebuilders

1. Can you share the story of when and how you began working as a peacebuilder?

What inspired or motivated you to take on this role?

- Were there any specific events, experiences, or individuals that influenced your decision to become a peacebuilder?

2. How has your work as a peacebuilder shaped your personal life, relationships, and social standing in the community?

- Have you experienced any significant changes in how you view yourself or your role in the community as a result of this work?

3. Can you describe specific actions or initiatives you have led or participated in as part of your peacebuilding work?

- What were the most significant outcomes of these actions?
- How have community members, including men, women, and youth, responded to your efforts? Can you share any examples of positive or negative reactions?

4. Are you aware of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) policies or related frameworks? If so, how did you come to learn about them?

- In your experience, how do these policies influence your work or the work of other women peacebuilders at the community level?

5. How do cultural beliefs, traditions, and social norms in your community influence your actions as a peacebuilder?

- Have you faced any resistance or support rooted in cultural or social norms? Could you provide examples?
6. What challenges have you encountered in your peacebuilding work, whether related to resources, social attitudes, or personal limitations?
- How do these challenges affect your ability to achieve your goals? What strategies or support systems have helped you overcome them?

Guide 2: Interview Guide for Decision Makers and Experts

1. How familiar are you with the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) policies and related international or national frameworks?
 - How do you think these policies influence or align with grassroots peacebuilding efforts, particularly those led by women?
2. In what ways do these policies promote or hinder women's active participation in peacebuilding?
 - Are there any specific examples of policy-driven initiatives that have had a noticeable impact at the community level?
3. Can you describe any programs or initiatives that your organization or institution has in place to support women-led peacebuilding efforts?
 - How are these programs designed to meet the unique needs of women peacebuilders?
4. How have women in the communities responded to the programs or initiatives supporting their peacebuilding efforts?

- What are the most common challenges women face when implementing peace initiatives, and how have these challenges been addressed by your organization or through other means?
5. From your perspective, what specific measures or interventions would help women overcome the challenges they face in peacebuilding?
- Are there any gaps in current policies or programs that you think need to be addressed?
6. Do you believe women should have a more active role in formal peace negotiations? Why or why not?
- How do you perceive the informal approaches women use to build peace in their communities? Are these methods effective, and how can they be better integrated into broader peacebuilding frameworks?

Annex 3: Consent Form

**Formulaire de consentement**

Titre de l'étude : Explorer les efforts de paix menés par les femmes au sein des communautés locales : une étude de cas à Goma, dans l'est du Congo

Chercheuse : Peace Mukazi Ndekezi
Département : Études de conflits
Faculté : Sciences Humaines
Établissement : Université Saint Paul

Superviseur : Professeur Philip Onguny
Département : Études de conflits
Faculté : Sciences Humaines
Établissement : Université Saint Paul.

Cette recherche a été approuvée par le comité d'éthique de la recherche de l'Université Saint-Paul

Invitation à participer : Je suis invitée à participer à l'étude explorant les efforts de paix menés par les femmes à Goma, menée par Peace Mukazi Ndekezi.

Objectif de l'étude : Cette étude explore le caractère formel et informel des agences féminines pour faire avancer des solutions pacifiques à Goma et dans l'est de la RDC. L'étude explore l'importance de la culture dans la façon dont les femmes congolaises s'engagent dans les activités quotidiennes de consolidation de la paix au sein et entre les communautés. En outre, l'étude vise à comprendre les implications du programme Femmes, paix et sécurité (FPS) sur la consolidation de la paix à base communautaire. Le projet est rédigé en anglais, mais les entretiens sont en français ou en swahili.

Participation : Ma participation consistera à avoir une conversation en tête-à-tête avec la chercheuse par téléphone ou par vidéoconférence. La séance durera une heure, durant laquelle je répondrai aux questions de la chercheuse. Les entretiens ont été planifiés en ligne selon un calendrier convenu.

Participation des participants à la discussion de groupe (si applicable) : Ma participation à la discussion de groupe consiste à se réunir en groupe de six pendant deux heures via une réunion en ligne. Je participerai à la discussion du groupe de discussion à une heure et une date convenue.

Enregistrement : Je suis conscient(e) que la chercheuse enregistrera notre rencontre via un système d'enregistrement zoom ou un enregistreur vocal numérique.

Risques : Ma participation à cette recherche implique que je me porte volontaire pour partager des informations sur mon rôle et mon expérience, et cela peut me mettre mal à l'aise émotionnellement, et il pourrait y avoir des risques minimes tels que des risques sociaux et politiques possibles et des répercussions sociales et juridiques sur l'information que je partage. J'ai reçu l'assurance du chercheur que tous les efforts seront prises pour minimiser ces risques. Les questions qui pourraient être nuisibles ou générer certaines formes de risques politiques et sociaux, et les répercussions sociales et juridiques seront évitées lors de l'entretien ou de la discussion de groupe. Les informations partagées seront stockées sur l'ordinateur personnel de la chercheuse et dans le cloud, protégées par un mot de passe. Je suis conscient(e) que la chercheuse respectera mon anonymat, ma sûreté et ma sécurité. La chercheuse veillera au respect des avis et me permettra de mettre fin à ma participation au moment de mon choix.

Avantages : Ma participation à cette étude mettra en avant les choix et les actions des femmes dans la consolidation de la paix et les défis rencontrés au cours du processus. Les résultats de cette recherche ont le potentiel de bénéficier aux acteurs et actrices locaux, nationaux et internationaux impliqués dans la consolidation de la paix en trouvant des solutions à long terme pour la paix, la sécurité et la stabilité dans l'est du Congo.

Confidentialité et anonymat : J'ai reçu l'assurance de la chercheuse que les informations partagées resteront strictement confidentielles. Je comprends que le contenu sera utilisé uniquement pour ce projet et les articles tirés du projet et que ma confidentialité sera protégée car je resterai anonyme. Les données seront stockées dans un endroit sûr auquel seule la chercheuse peut accéder.

Confidentialité et anonymat pour la discussion de groupe (si applicable) : J'ai reçu l'assurance de la chercheuse que les informations partagées resteront confidentielles. Je comprends que le contenu ne sera utilisé que pour ce projet et les articles tirés du projet et que ma confidentialité sera protégée par la Chercheuse. Cependant, je comprends que l'anonymat ne peut être pleinement observé car je participerai à une discussion de groupe avec mes pairs. Bien que nous utilisions des noms codés pendant toute la durée de la discussion, nous ne pouvons pas nous attendre à ce que tous les participant(e)s respectent la confidentialité. Les données seront stockées dans un endroit sûr auquel seul le chercheur peut accéder.

Anonymat : J'ai reçu l'assurance que la chercheuse ne révélera pas mon identité dans les publications tirées de cette étude.

Conservation des données : Les données collectées seront stockées dans le cloud personnel de la chercheuse, protégées par un mot de passe et un disque externe auquel seule la chercheuse pourra accéder. Après cinq ans, les données détenues seront détruites du stockage en nuage et du disque externe.

Rémunération : Je ne m'attends à recevoir aucune compensation pour ma participation.

Participation volontaire : Je n'ai aucune obligation de participer. Si je choisis de participer, je peux me retirer de l'étude à tout moment ou refuser de répondre aux questions. Si je décide de me retirer, toutes les données recueillies jusqu'au moment du retrait seront détruites.

Acceptation : Moi, -----, accepte de participer à l'étude de recherche ci-dessus menée par Peace Mukazi Ndekezi du Département d'études sur les conflits, Faculté des sciences humaines de l'Université Saint-Paul, dont les recherches sont sous la direction du professeur Philip Onguny.

Si j'ai des questions sur l'étude, je peux contacter la chercheuse ou son superviseur.

Si j'ai des questions concernant la conduite éthique de cette étude, je peux communiquer avec le Bureau de la recherche et de l'éthique, Université Saint-Paul, 223, rue Main, Ottawa, ON K1S 1C4.

Tél. : (613) 236-1393

Il y a deux copies du formulaire de consentement, dont l'une m'appartient.

Signature du participant : (Signature) Date : (Date)

Signature du chercheur : (Signature) Date : (Date)