

# Hybrid clubs: a feminist approach to peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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## Abstract

*Critical approaches to peacebuilding have successfully pleaded for a local turn in which alienated indigenous experiences are the cornerstone of emancipatory peacebuilding practices. However, in their quest to emancipate the ‘different’, they risk exercising discrimination and normalization not dissimilar to that of the liberal peace they seek to challenge. This article undertakes a feminist approach to critical peacebuilding and uses story-telling as a method in order to develop a conceptual grid that grasps the contradictions and complexities of the politics of difference. Second, the article proposes the concept of the “hybrid club” as a cluster of local and international actors that join forces to develop a series of peacebuilding initiatives. It does so via the case study of the feminist initiative Nothing Without the Women that seeks to have more women elected in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).*

## Introduction

We had been talking for about an hour sitting at the front porch of her father’s house. Clementine tells me that she lives in Goma, but she is in Kinshasa this week because the women’s organisation she founded is part of a campaign titled *Rien Sans les Femmes* [*Nothing without the women*] (RSLF). They have a whole program of advocacy activities for the next few days in the capital. The campaign, formed by international NGOs and national women organisations, seeks to have more women in electoral seats in DRC. She studied law, but she says she is no lawyer, and even though her friends say she is not like a “normal” Congolese woman, being a Congolese woman leader of a women’s organisation has attracted the attention of international donors, as well as of researchers such as myself. As I am about to leave, I ask her whether I can take a picture. She pauses to think for a minute. She wants to change clothes and get ready for the shooting. I

patiently wait at the porch. When she comes back, she is dressed with a piece of cloth that reads *Nothing without the Women*. To my question of *Why did you want to change clothes?* she answered: *Because out there, this is who I am, one of the leaders of the movement. Isn't this the reason why you interviewed me in the first place?*

Clementine feels the need to represent a certain collective and perform in front of the camera for an international audience.<sup>1</sup> She is conscious of the fact that the international community assigns her a role and a series of attributes that go with being a local woman of colour in charge of a women's organisation in DRC. This also means that she is part of a group of "locals" in important positions, equipped with the necessary skills to strategically make the most of this differentiation. She belongs to what Spivak named a "floating zone of elite subalternity" (Spivak in Landy and MacLean 1996). Actors in this zone of elite subalternity naturalise their identity and difference in what constitutes "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak 1985/1996: 214). "Strategic essentialism" supposes that members of groups, although being highly differentiated internally, engage in a process of homogenization of their public image, in order to portray a common identity as a means to achieve certain objectives. In order to illustrate this strategic essentialism, I propose the concept of the "hybrid club" as a cluster of local and international actors that join forces to develop a series of peacebuilding and development initiatives. The club can be considered as a diagnostic site for studying complex processes of differentiation and identification in post-conflict settings.

First, I argue that hybrid clubs constitute spaces where difference is crafted and performed through the sharing of knowledge and practices with and only with the members of the club. What makes a club "hybrid" is not the diversity of passports of its members, but rather the fact that the performance of difference is deployed strategically as belonging to the local, and therefore, "authentic sphere", while also being part of the international, as notions of democracy, human rights and civic identity are promoted and valued. *Strategic* then borders on the *pragmatic*, because it serves a definition of a certain political practice. Second, the club is also a space where actors build individual and collective identities from which to make political claims. In other words, these identities intersect with the ways in which the club articulates and represents peacebuilding, development and

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<sup>1</sup> The researcher is, in this case, part of the international audience collective before which the activist performs a certain identity.

security. Ultimately, the club restricts access to competing modes of thought about what is peacebuilding, development and who should be in charge of implementing it, as these modes of thought are heavily dependent on the collective identity developed.

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

This article unpacks how to engage more generously with "difference" by using a feminist relational approach to critical peacebuilding (McLeod 2015; Read 2018). A relational approach takes dynamic and ever-changing relationship amongst agents as the appropriate unit of analysis, as opposed to structural accounts that focus on social stratification embedded in social structure (Joseph, 2018). Agents acquire meaning through and are constituted by their transactions, connections and relations with other actors developing a peacebuilding and development initiative. In turn, these transactions and connections are constituted not only by the formal rules and processes deployed in peacebuilding and development initiatives, but also by its informal and mundane practices. Second, I use storytelling in order to grasp not how the international understands alterity, but rather how alterity identifies itself with and embraces international interventions and how it differentiates from them (Daigle 2016). Some authors distinguish between a story and a narrative, the former denoting the 'tale' told by

the individuals and the latter uncovering the means of enquiry (Roberts, 2002: 177). I use both terms almost interchangeably in order to offer an entry point for hybrid peace scholarship to study peacebuilding and the “different” as a gendered, embodied and spatial experience. I argue that this can give us hints on how the politics of difference work. More specifically, I propose two theoretical and analytical points: first, feminist methodologies can provide more complex understandings beyond the essentialist dichotomy local vs international. Second, I argue that a feminist peacebuilding approach analyses power, dominance and resistance from a relational perspective by investigating the collective experiences of those at the margins, namely, at the intersections of gender, race and class hierarchies and exclusions.

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

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

a conceptual grid of three elements – embodiment, experience and space – through which the politics of difference can be grasped, accessed and understood. The second section explores the different stories about women and peacebuilding developed on and about the Democratic Republic of Congo. The third part illustrates the preceding set of theoretical arguments through an analysis of the case of the women’s movement *Nothing without the women* (RSLF). The article ends with some concluding reflections on the potential of a feminist relational perspective for unpacking the possibilities and limits of the politics of difference in peacebuilding.

### **Telling stories of experience, embodiment and spatiality**

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

Individual stories are key to a relational perspective to peacebuilding, as they are “a primary way by which we make sense of the world around us, produce meanings, articulate intentions, and legitimize actions” (Wibben 2010). Stories are therefore sites where power is exercised and where “the personal and the collective deviate” (Wibben 2010). Stories make sense of embodied experiences, and are therefore, subjective. Stories narrate personal experiences about war, peace and security from everyday perspectives (Read 2018; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016; Holland and Solomon 2014). Additionally, using storytelling as a method gives scholars the possibility to pay greater

attention to interpretive praxis (Wallis and Richmond 2017) and to step out of the binary division between personal and political (McLeod 2015; Enloe 2014).

Storytelling is therefore “a means of illuminating lived and embodied experiences” (Daigle 2016: 30) that constitute and are constituted by the politics of difference in peacebuilding. Although individually performed, stories are always inter-subjective and relational, as they are used to make sense of *experience* that goes beyond the individual *embodied* event in a particular *space*. To be sure, studying personal experiences and their (re)production through individual stories can be problematic because it relies on the “fragility of human memory” (Woodward and Jenkins 2012: 120). In addition, and as Joseph points out, there is a risk of privileging said experiences “over the context within which difference occurs” (this volume), and treating them “as though it were unmediated by wider relations, institutions and processes” (Basham 2013: 8). Therefore, stories here should be read as being part of “processes of identity production”, as testament of the “discursive nature of experience and on the politics of its construction” (Scott 1992: 37), and as facilitating the (re)presentation of the “unstructured, contingent and difficult” (Daigle 2016: 25).

### ***Embodiment***

Feminist scholars have challenged a disembodied approach to knowledge production (Haraway 1988; Enloe 2014; Young 1980; Gatens 1996; Moon 1997; Butler 1999; McLeod 2015; Dyvik 2016). In particular, these scholars criticize the body versus mind hierarchical dichotomy that puts the mind over the body as a site of knowledge production, but also that associates mind with rationality and body with passion, rationality with masculinity and passion with femininity, which effectively subordinates the feminine to the masculine (Grosz 1994; Prokhomik 1999). Bodies indeed produce and are productive of race, class and sexual configurations of power and knowledge and should therefore be “directly involved in the political field” (Foucault 1991: 25). However, although this turn to experience and embodiment has been prominent in the literature on war and IR (Sylvester 2013; Parashar 2013; Wilcox 2015), it has not been so in the literature of peacebuilding (Read 2018), a field still seen from essentially technical perspectives, as if matters of war and peace could be easily separated and put into two different boxes.

### ***Experience***

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

### *Spatiality*

Through the concept of spatiality, the paper stresses the contingency, precariousness and instability of identities. This is done by paying special attention to the different sites in which actors in post-conflict contexts are constituted by a multiplicity of positions that do not respond to the binary local-international (McLeod 2015). This understanding resonates with the ideas of Henri Lefebvre’s on space as socially and meaningfully produced in stories and implicated in embodied social practices in sites where structures of the national and the international are both reproduced and challenged (2011:33). Therefore, while being grounded in materiality, spaces are social constructs produced through and by embodied experiences and practices. Although it is true that the local turn has moved from state-centric analysis to study local dynamics, it does not look at how local spaces become meaningful as produced by identities and memories.

In sum, there is no difference before its performance. Difference and commonness come into existence through the relational process of identity (re)production. But identities are not “out there” and therefore, differences are not inherent to one person or group. Instead, these (individual and collective) identities are born out of embodied experiences. Once born, these identities are deployed and open up new spaces in which new relations between groups conforming collective identities are formed. These new relations, in turn, produce new embodied experience. By focusing on embodied experience and post-war spatialities, I try to challenge hegemonic narratives and capture the intricate ways in

which difference is regulated in the stories told in and about peacebuilding. In doing so, the article focuses on the ways in which storytelling talks about other bodies as well as to how it collectivizes bodily experience in particular spaces, recognizing that peacebuilding and development projects are relational encounters in which the different is produced, retained or discarded.

### **Differentiating gender narratives, resisting peacebuilding initiatives**

International narratives about women in DRC have put forward a bad reputation when it comes to gender equality and justice (Baaz and Stern, 2013; Holmes 2013, 2015). For example, in a speech by the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in conflict at the time, Margot Wallstrom, the eastern part of DRC was labelled as “the rape capital of the world” (Wallstrom 2010), where sexual violence is perpetrated in a war driven by “conflict minerals”. What is more, these narratives have been stabilised by popular culture, as documentary films such as “The Greatest Silence: Rape in Congo (2007) and “The Man Who Mends Women” (2015) are portraying women in Congo as victims of sexual violence and other atrocities in the East. Female eastern Congolese bodies are stripped of any political agency and associated in this narrative with the experience of sexual violence during conflict. This goes very well with the main narrative of UN Security Council that understands the gendered body as female, and as being a passive body that needs protection from violence (McLeod 2015: 12). For example, the 2006 Security, Stabilisation and Development Pact put in motion by the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region understood gender as a transversal issue, but gender disappeared completely in the 2013 Framework for Peace, Security and Cooperation for the Democratic Republic of Congo and Region, where gender as a power relation is substituted by a meagre mention of “women’s empowerment”. What is more, different declarations by Heads of State in the region related to the issue - Goma Declaration on the eradication of sexual violence and the eradication of impunity in the Great Lakes region and the Kampala Declaration on gender and sexual based violence in 2011 - have focused on sexual violence. The Stabilisation and Reconstruction Plan in Eastern DRC (2011) is also concentrating on sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), as is the 2010 National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR1325). The resolution urged the UN and its member states to

ensure women's participation and involvement in decision-making in peace and security matters, and to mainstream gender in all areas of peacebuilding. The resolution has been very much criticized for having put the accent on protection of women from SGBV in conflict and for equating gender with women (Martin de Almagro, 2017). This is important because although these plans and frameworks are national and regional mechanisms, they are supported and funded by the United Nations and its Stabilisation Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) under the framework of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

It is with the idea to counter this narrative in mind that the *Rien Sans les Femmes* (RSLF) [Nothing without the women] campaign was developed under the hybrid initiative of the international NGOs International Alert and Kvinna till Kvinna and several women's organisations in Eastern Congo.<sup>2</sup> The two international NGOs invited 30 leaders of Congolese civil society organisations to a workshop in March 2015 in order to reflect on how to promote the political participation and representation of Congolese women in the country, "as the National Action Plan on UNSCR1325 focuses too much on SGBV".<sup>3</sup> The result of the workshop was the launch of the campaign *Rien sans les femmes*, and constituted one of the rare occasions where women activists from North and South Kivu and women activists from Kishasa had joined forces. It had two aims in mind: The first one was to advocate for the enactment of the Parity Law that would recognise the importance of women's participation in governmental structures and in all aspects of public life, and the second was to request a revision of the Electoral Law that would make compulsory to include women in all electoral lists. The campaign managed to collect more than 200000 signatures from individuals around the country, and in May 2015 it submitted a petition together with the signatures to the President of the National Assembly. The petition asked for the revision of Article 13.4 of the electoral law, so that future electoral lists needed to respect the principle of parity between men and women. Marches were organised at the same time in Bukavu, Uvira and Goma in order to gather popular support for the campaign. Only in Bukavu, more than 6000 people joined the march. Marches were an essential mechanism for setting up the counter-narrative of women as passive victims, since they constituted a visual performance of female bodies actively protesting and occupying the public space. Although the Parity Law was passed

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<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork notes, Kinshasa, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with a staff member of an international NGO, Kinshasa, 26th May, 2017

in August 2015, the movement kept on growing and it now includes more than 160 women rights organisations.

During the last week of May 2017, representatives of the movement from Goma and Bukavu flew to Kinshasa to join forces with the capital's representatives in order to carry out a week of advocacy activities and to present their detailed report on the successes and shortcomings of the recently passed Parity Law.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the advocacy activities, rather than focusing on women's fundamental rights or on women's as victims through a rights-based approach, the master narrative was that parity in decision-making institutions is good for sustainable development and peace. It is worth highlighting here that the master narrative is framed in opposition to the earlier dominant narrative, but it still plays with some of the key words that would appeal to donors. The idea was that making political institutions accessible to women was a condition *sine qua non* for a successful bottom-up approach to peace. The advocates of the initiative aimed to create a new space for women to voice their experiences and enable women to become political subjects instead of merely beneficiaries of peacebuilding processes. The organizers explained that peacebuilding projects that included gender were normally directed at protecting women, but did not challenge the structures of the state that disempowered them and made them vulnerable to violence in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

This framing marks the first determinant of difference, by which the international approach to implement Women, Peace and Security based on women's rights and embraced as the standard is countered by a coalition of international and Congolese women organisations that engage in resistance to the agenda of the United Nations and the DRC government. The women I interviewed, all of whom belong to activist organizations, indicated that they became active in resistance because there was no other way out.<sup>6</sup> These women were fed up with the international narrative that seemed to simply have forgotten that women in DRC had mobilised for peace during the inter-Congolese dialogue in 2001 that put an end to the Second Congo War: *"We were a group of African women leaders that were taken to a training in Sweden. The first thing they do is to show us a film on Liberian women as peacemakers and a second one on Congolese women*

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing (September 2017), the legal status of the petition to modify the electoral law and the procedures to follow are unclear.

<sup>5</sup> Fieldwork notes, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Kinshasa, DRC.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with leader of women's organisation, 24 May 2017; Interview with leader of women's organisation, 25 May 2017; Interview with leader of women's organisation, 26 May 2017.

*raped as a result of war. But we were also in Sun City, we also participated to the inter-Congolese dialogue, we are also here, fighting.”*<sup>7</sup>

The violence experienced by their female bodies did not depoliticize them, but provided a collective story for mobilisation. The life stories of these activists not only ensure them a subject position, but also provide counter-narratives to the dominant international narrative from which to present alternative forms of peace: *“We have not documented to the world the story of the fight of the Congolese woman. There is a story of the women victims, but not of women peacebuilders. And I can say today that we have fought a lot”*.<sup>8</sup> Telling their story as a sustainable peace narrative provides a way to establish “a political identity from which to make claims” (Stern 2005: 116). Moreover, it also offers a counter-narrative to the international idea that there is “not a women’s movement in DRC with a clear leader and joint efforts”.<sup>9</sup> The RSLF movement represents one of the most important hybrid alternatives to the official line of implementation of UNSCR1325 in DRC and its national action plan. The next section shows how the construction of a hybrid club constitutes a political strategy to sell a story in the peacebuilding market.

### **Clubbing in DRC: it is not always the Other who is the Different**

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

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<sup>7</sup> Intervention by a woman lawyer member of the RSLF movement, presentation of RSLF movement, Swedish Embassy, 24 May 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with the leader of a national women’s organisation in Kinshasa, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Intervention by a MONUSCO high-ranked member of staff, presentation of RSLF movement, Swedish Embassy, 24 May 2017.

From the perspective of several women's groups in DRC, it is not only that some of the local actors are more connected to international ones for different reasons such as funding, language and geographical situation, but also that clusters of local actors and organisations are more connected to particular international actors and institutions, forming what I call "hybrid clubs".<sup>10</sup> Several interviewees attributed the difficulties in having a strong and united women's movement because of club divisions: *"if you work with one women's organisation, you need to work with members of that organisation's club. And you have to be very conscious of which organisations are part of this club and which are not."*<sup>11</sup>

### ***Performing embodied sameness and difference***

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

However, this identification is not fixed, but variable, and some differences are created depending on the spaces of performance. For example, where "locals" and "internationals" had dressed using the same RSLF clothes in an effort to show the

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<sup>10</sup> The word "club" was used by several of the interviewees to explain the intricacies and divisions of the women's movement in the country.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with member of staff of an international NGO, Kinshasa, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

international community present at the Swedish ambassador residence that a hybrid initiative telling a story of women as peacebuilders was worth funding, internationals and locals dressed differently in the presentation of the movement to national Members of the Parliament the following day. Indeed, the visual element that had been used to identify “sameness” was used to identify “difference” the day after. This time it was only the “local” women – and the newly appointed Minister of Gender - who were wearing the RSLF clothes and speaking about sustainable peace. As requested by the Congolese members of the campaign, members of international NGOs sat at the back of the room, did not speak at any time during the event and wore different clothes in an attempt to prove to Parliamentarians that this was not a hybrid initiative, but a truly Congolese one. The way in which listening and seeing difference is called into being lies in everyday, seemingly trivial details, which makes bodies intelligible with reference to a club. However trivial these may seem, and contrary to what we could think, these are rather performed in a very much conscious attempt – remember Clementine’s insistence on wearing the RSLF clothes for the picture – to shape the politics of difference.

When the sensorial strategies are not needed anymore to perform club membership, alterity is felt in another way. For example, the distribution of space and distance amongst individuals part of the same movement is striking: before the event at the residence of Swedish Ambassador starts, clusters of staff from international NGOs asked one another how their children are doing or when they are going on holidays, and Congolese women also seem to meet in groups of 3 or 4 for an informal chat. The ordering of “different” bodies in space was also very telling during an informal preparatory meeting conducted the previous day at the headquarters of one of the international NGOs. The oval table distributed bodies in two opposite sitting spaces: at the left side of the oval table, two representatives of the international NGOs, while on the right side of the table - the one farther away from the door - six Congolese women member of RSLF prepared their week of activities ahead. This distribution of the physical space is vital because it also demarcates the distribution of tasks in the movement: the direction and coordination, and even cheering, comes from the international, but the final decisions are taken by the opposite side of the table. Nevertheless, there are also differences amongst the “locals”. The two women coming from Eastern Congo are sitting together, bodies touching one another, even if one comes from Goma and the other one from Bukavu. They were the ones who flew away from home and whose bodies directly experienced conflict. They

came to the meeting dressed in traditional clothing, portraying a clear visual difference from Kinshasa-based activists in Western clothing.

The making of “difference” happens through the complex performances of individual and collective bodies. Wearing a piece of clothing, occupying a certain space and performing a speech or staying silent are part of this production of commonness and difference that goes beyond geographical spaces and skin colour. It simultaneously makes individuals become part of the same club. As the women in the movement actively and consciously rescript their identity, they present certain markers - wearing or not wearing traditional dresses - as primordial. Yet, at the same time, “they also assign certain social/political meaning to them within the particular historical context” (Stern 2005: 103) in which they are situated. Differentiation therefore constitutes a strategic approach at reaching political aims, namely getting funding from the international community or convincing Members of Parliament of the need to reform the Electoral Law.

### *The international is (also) a personal experience*

The differentiated narratives and embodied experiences regulate the politics of difference in the hybrid clubs. These clubs seemed to be therefore very much coordinated and orchestrated by local elites who work with a diversity of donors and international partners in the implementation of hybrid peacebuilding initiatives. What is striking then is that, without exception, all the donors interviewed pointed to the fact that women organisations in DRC are scattered and that previous attempts at working with them have not carried out good results. In this section I argue that attempts at working with a coherent movement have failed precisely because practising a “politics of difference” has served women’s organisations to differentiate from others and stand out in the overcrowded peacebuilding market. These women organisations are therefore very much wary of sharing their space, narratives and international partners with the others. The selling point and main narrative of “differentiation” of RSLF plays precisely on leaving differences among members aside in order to create a “coherent, non-partisan and intergenerational movement”<sup>12</sup> and on transforming the story of the everyday realities of women in Eastern Congo as victims. As the peacebuilding market in DRC started experiencing donors’

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<sup>12</sup> Fiedwork notes, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

fatigue due to the lack of results from the engagement with women's organisations, presenting a complete different narrative based on unification seemed particularly witty.

The personal stories narrated by my interviewees reveal a clash between Clubs, that is, between those organisations supported by UNWOMEN - mainly from Kinshasa - and those who are supported by the international partners of RSLF. When conducting interviews, it was very clear that women in different Clubs experienced the international in very diverse ways:

*"We don't understand why UNWOMEN has not joined efforts. Maybe they had other priorities".*<sup>13</sup>

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

It appears from these two quotes that the Clubs are led by the international partners, who at the same time have different approaches to what local ownership constitutes and to the kind of activities that would be carried out. I therefore decided to talk to the representative of the national dialogue framework in order to explore these differences into more detail. In paper, this national framework funded by UNWOMEN was also part of the RSLF movement. However, in reality, they never attended any of the activities RSLF had carried out. The representative was upset that women from the East had come to Kinshasa in what she considered an attempt to capture funding and partners: *"why do they have to fly women from the other side of the country to do advocacy? They can do advocacy directed towards local politicians there and we will do our part here."*<sup>15</sup>

For their part, international donors had never heard of RSLF, with the exception of those who attended the presentation at the Swedish residence. Instead, they were very much aware of Café Genre, the new highlight project of UNWOMEN. Every two months, a conference is organised where Ambassadors share best practices with the international

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with the leader of a national women's association from Kinshasa, Kinshasa, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with the leader of a women's organisation from Sud-Kivu, Kinshasa, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with president of the main women's organisation national dialogue framework, Kinshasa, 23<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

community and the Ministry of Gender, as well as with civil society organisations. The aim is to raise awareness and to build a network of women in Kinshasa that would then distribute information to provincial branches, where knowledge shared during Café Genre would be “communicated to those women who cannot read and write”.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the latest Café Genre was on SGBV is very telling as it reinforces the narrative of women as victims. Several of my interviewees from the international community and from local women organisations indicated that this is an event whereby UNWOMEN looks for visibility, but that “there is no real work behind”. When asked whether UNWOMEN was aware of the RSLF movement and whether there have been any synergies, the local staff of UNWOMEN in charge of women’s participation shook her head as a way of saying no. This is all the more surprising since minutes before, she spoke about her previous personal experience where she was the lead researcher for Eastern Congo for a project on Women’s participation in the Great Lakes region. She had been hired precisely because of her knowledge on the subject.

The international women part of the RLSF campaign were clear in showing how they are “different” from the abstract idea of the international and its institutions operating in DRC, as they are “tired and frustrated” to see that “incompetent people” or “people that simply do not care” end up taking the “Gender” portfolio in international and national institutions.<sup>17</sup> One of the interviewees deplored that RSLF has got in touch on several occasions with UNWOMEN, with no response from their part.<sup>18</sup> They do not appreciate the fact that “*international organisations fund once, twice and three times the same national federation of women’s organisations, but they have no idea of what they are funding*”.<sup>19</sup> The personal experiences of failure to engage with difference might therefore be due to the politics of hybrid club, where funders within the club stick to working with their members, even though collaboration between clubs had been sought. In this case, the collaboration between UNWOMEN and RSLF could not see the light. Certainly, the differentiation strategies between these clubs lie in their disparate understanding of local women experiences and their opposing narratives: women as victims on the one hand and

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with a member of staff of UNWOMEN, Kinshasa, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2017.

<sup>17</sup> This also points to another issue on the gendered dynamics of power in hybrid peace, where “soft” issues such as women’s issues and the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda are resisted or ignored by international and national organisations as they are considered the “unimportant” matters in post-conflict contexts (for a developed argument, see Ryan and Basini 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with staff member of an international NGO, Kinshasa, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2017

<sup>19</sup> Informal conversation with two members of staff of international NGOs, Kinshasa, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2017

women as policy makers and political figures on the other and these narratives seem to be irreconcilable.

Using the conceptual toolbox of experience, body and space in order to analyse the politics of difference makes it clear that first, “difference” is not to be understood as being between the local and the international, but between “hybrid clubs” that portray a certain narrative on gender and peacebuilding. Second, these clubs are conformed by individuals with complex identities, who decide to perform sameness or difference according to their particular goal in the spatio-temporal circumstances they are in. Looking at “difference” from a relational perspective enables us to see that it is not always the international that seeks compliance and local actors who resist, ignore or adapt peace interventions, and/or offer alternative forms of peace-making.

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

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

I have argued that the value of using a feminist approach to understand the politics of difference is twofold. First, feminist methodologies based on storytelling can provide more complex understandings of the essentialist dichotomy local vs international in order to make visible blind spots, such as “hybrid clubs”. Listening to the stories of the embodied experiences of the local elite shows how they walk in a fine line of identity-difference that is subtle and shifting, depending on the configuration of power relations in a particular geographical and temporal space. The analysis has brought forth women activists in DRC as resourceful and agential subjects that know how to play the politics of difference that hybrid peace brings about. Second, a feminist approach analyses power, dominance and resistance from a relational perspective and enables to demonstrate how the local(s) and the international(s) are multiple, and dynamics of power and privilege have important implications for who is considered different and in which context. Ultimately, paying attention to individual and collective experiences of hybrid peacebuilding reveals the organising politics of difference that arrange not only who is incorporated in peacebuilding interventions, but also how this incorporation is negotiated, resisted or validated through everyday micro-politics.

This micro approach may be considered banal for being of relevance to better understand the politics of difference in hybrid peace. In answer to such criticisms, I claim that there are two points to be made. First, I argue that attending to micropolitics and its manifestations through a relational approach is a crucial undertaking if we are to better understand how identity-difference is created during peacebuilding interventions without essentialising one or the other. The ordinary instances of differentiation depicted in this paper were employed by individuals and groups in order to have better access to resources, perform better at work or denounce having been left behind. At the same time, they all constitute embodied experiences that transform identities and differences in a peacebuilding and development initiative and in doing so, these experiences defy problematic assumptions on difference. Second, a micro approach enables us to precisely use a kind of radical reconsideration of the costs of war and peace – which are “everywhere”, in civilian employment, marital bedrooms and high schools” - when “serious attention” is directed at individual’s lives (Enloe, 2010). Future research could use a feminist relational approach to hybridity in order to examine in more detailed the politics of difference within particular cases or across particular issues. This may help to unpack the nuances of which actors are considered the good “different” and are allowed

to take part in hybrid peace initiatives and also how different narratives emerge on how to implement those initiatives, while other “different” actors and initiatives are pushed to the margins.

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