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Women's agency in traditional peace negotiation forums and the prospects for substantive democracy in Uvira, South Kivu

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ABSTRACT

Women's agency has been evident in local peace-building spaces for three decades in eastern DR Congo, following a succession of conflicts. Different sections of the population,

particularly women, have developed resilience in the face of violence and social injustices arising from a lack of respect for gender equality in the public sphere. This concept of capabilities, the commons and care effectively explain the extent of social inequalities and the degree to which women and other marginalised groups are included in local arenas.

This concept enables women to develop their capacity for action in order to circumvent obstacles and dismantle the constraints perpetuated by patriarchy.

The vision of a substantive democracy must indeed be built and sustained by the emergence of endogenous practices and women's capacity to act with complete autonomy and freedom. Women's access to local peace-building forums facilitates the development of their capabilities whilst drawing on the commons — namely peace and security — which society as a whole need to protect. Caring for all sections of the population means, precisely, supporting the social inclusion of marginalised groups. Women's political participation in the management of local peace-building structures enables them to take action and make decisions that have an impact not only on their own lives but on society as a whole. This study seeks to understand the trajectories of women's resilience in the mobilisation of the three Cs – the commons, capabilities and care – in order to advance towards substantive democracy. It advocates for social justice and analyses the level of women's inclusion in local peace negotiation forums. To collect empirical data on women's actions and interpret these actions in terms of female agency in Uvira, semi-structured interviews and life narratives were conducted with s of local peace committees. The selection of women leaders was carried out using the snowball sampling technique.

Keywords: Female agency, traditional arenas, substantive democracy, gender equality.

1. Homonymous democracy in traditional peace negotiation arenas in South Kivu

1.1. An ethnographic framework for female agency in the local peace arenas of Uvira

Gender identity remains a major issue in traditional peace negotiation forums at the local level. Gender relations are also raised to some extent to maintain a balance within these arenas. Women's agency is on the rise despite the many barriers within local peace committees (Ariane Djossou Segla, 2023). Consequently, the ethnographic aspect of women's agency must be highlighted, given the context in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in general and in Uvira in particular. Women's agency in traditional peace forums in Uvira is shaped and practised in light of the socio-cultural context of the norms and values embedded within society. This leads women to adjust their daily practices and adapt to established social realities. This theoretical model highlights the capabilities available to women, enabling them to participate, integrate and act collectively, and to overcome

difficulties at both the individual and collective levels. These are the capabilities that women develop in order to circumvent the structural and political barriers to gender equality within traditional peace-building forums.

In the local context, ethnographic evidence suggests that women's agency manifests itself in several dimensions in the pursuit of peace, particularly in the areas of security and local governance. Women use various means to circumvent these barriers, including economic empowerment, the feminisation of formal and informal employment, and the creation of women's associations which grant them the legitimacy to speak on behalf of other women and marginalised groups, whilst familiarising themselves with the terminology of peace processes and thereby developing their leadership within socio-political and family relationships.

Women's agency in this local context faces the challenges posed by the glass ceiling, which often takes hold in traditional peace-building arenas. In this way, they become active s in the peace process rather than merely passive victims – a role they have long been confined to in grassroots conflict resolution. By challenging the 'glass ceiling' theory in local peace-building arenas, they highlight their capabilities, which enable them to manage the commons and identify ways of accessing them, whilst shaping their narratives and consolidating their daily practices to empower women to act as citizens capable of positively influencing their social environment. This female agency enables women to develop the capabilities that allow them to take ownership of the commons in order to care for other women and marginalised groups within society.

Women's involvement in traditional peace forums in Uvira enables them to gain a solid understanding of the endogenous practices that give rise to grassroots conflicts, to the extent that they understand and master the workings of peace negotiations at the local level. Having a firm grasp of local issues and having long been viewed as passive victims of conflict, in this context, by developing their capabilities, they are empowered to take on the role of peace-builders and to prevent grassroots conflicts. With these capabilities, they anticipate the risks of violence and identify the root causes of grassroots conflicts at an early stage. Women's capabilities in peace-building arenas serve to strengthen relations between women and men in leadership roles and enhance their mutual trust.

Society values the recognition of skills. The capabilities that women demonstrate enable them to overcome barriers and effectively gain access to the commons (traditional forums, peace and security). Ostrom, E. (2010), "*defines the commons as resources that must be shared by all communities*". At a

local level, as women are excluded from contributing to peace and security within traditional forums, they have formed synergies or collectives to positively influence traditional peace forums through their capabilities. These women's forums are dynamic on the ground and carry out actions that promote peacebuilding. They organise mobilisations, engage in advocacy and expand their contacts with leaders in traditional forums in order to establish their presence in these spaces. It is in this way, through these forums, that women develop their female agency.

Through these women's forums, they have expanded their activities and thereby transformed gender relations within peace negotiation forums. These capabilities have succeeded in dispelling the male-dominated myth of male peacemakers and the inequalities observed, thereby facilitating inclusivity and equity. In this way, these forums promote social justice and solidarity through women's everyday practices. Dardot, P. and Laval, C. (2014) define *'the commons as a political principle of shared obligation for all those engaged in the same activity'*. Men and women are committed to consolidating peace and security for all. The participation of all social strata in the collective endeavour to act on the commons in order to preserve care and balance within society. To this end, this study aims to examine how female agency enables women to take ownership of the struggle for peace despite the barriers erected by cultural norms.

1.2. Women's agency in the women's forums of Uvira

In contrast to traditional arenas of peace negotiations, non-traditional spaces have their origins in civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations, both national and international. These organisations, the majority of which work to defend human rights and promote gender equality, do so by establishing local peace-building structures. They sometimes provide logistical support and capacity-building for members on the concepts of gender equality and respect for women's rights, whilst also addressing the resolution of local conflicts.

Indeed, there are forums comprising 100 per cent women, particularly those supported by women's associations. These organisations campaign for the implementation of Resolution 1325; yet, twenty-five years on, gender equality has not yet been achieved, although some progress has been observed at national level, whilst it remains a challenge in local peace negotiation forums. Consequently, there are three types of non-traditional forums where women exercise their agency. Firstly, there are women's forums where all members and all roles are held by women. Secondly, there are customary committees, predominantly composed of men, which deal

with local intra-tribal conflicts. This second category has its origins in the chieftaincy of each tribe. And thirdly, there are community Barza; this structure, for its part, brings together men and women from the mutual aid societies of the various tribes.

The primary role of women within these structures is to prevent, manage and resolve local conflicts. In this context, these structures advocate to the relevant local authorities against the violence women suffer during grassroots conflicts, whilst demanding their participation in customary peace negotiation forums. They seek not only to have their voices heard as women, but rather as citizens capable of enjoying all their rights. Women who participate in non-traditional peace negotiation forums receive support to build capacity, which helps them to coordinate their advocacy and human rights activities.

Women are active and engaged in grassroots conflict resolution activities, particularly when local committees receive funding and logistical support from donors. Conversely, women's engagement tends to wane once donor support ceases. However, in the absence of support from charitable organisations, a decline in activity is observed. Sometimes, meetings are not held regularly, and activities are carried out with little vigour. This explains the lack of engagement among members in non-traditional structures; they are, in a sense, dependent on the organisations that support them financially and logistically. Once funding ceases, some committees continue to exist precisely to prevent and manage local conflicts.

Women who are active in peace negotiation forums are regarded and perceived by other women as role models, whom they can turn to for information or clarification on issues affecting them. Members of local peace committees are better informed and trained in various areas of life, whether economic, entrepreneurial or cultural, which makes these women feel more secure. These women are also seen as role models when it comes to women's rights and even women's empowerment. They act as a community link between women who are not members of their organisations and organisations that defend women's rights. They are there to report abuses taking place within their communities. These women sometimes monitor cases of violence suffered by both women and men and seek ways to address them at their own level; if this is not possible, the situation is escalated. They also act as ambassadors for peace, serving as spokeswomen for their communities.

2. Theoretical and methodological framework

2.1. Feminist care theory

The approach to gender equality is cross-cutting and continues to fuel criticism and the development of theories. The fields of the arts, humanities and social sciences – notably sociology, anthropology, history and psychology – continually question the female–male dichotomy and gender differences. The academic debate centres primarily on the nature versus culture dichotomy and has been addressed by certain seminal authors (Simon de Beauvoir, 1949; Margaret Mead, 1996). The differentiation and hierarchisation of the sexes within society stem from socio-cultural infrastructures that are fundamentally rooted in cultural norms. The epistemological shift in gender studies within the social sciences lies in the fact that aggression and masculinity are attributed on the basis of sex.

In highlighting the study under consideration, we have drawn on the feminist theory of care developed by Carol Gilligan (2009, pp. 36–78). In this research, the author demonstrates that *‘caring for others is what makes women good, and those who care for others perform women’s work’*. In peace research and peacebuilding, care is presented here as a means of looking after women within the peace process. Beyond participation and inclusion lies the concept of women’s needs in traditional peace forums. As Carol G (2009) demonstrates, *‘women are devoted to others, sensitive to their needs, and attentive to their voices’*. It goes beyond their mere presence at the peace negotiation table, as they may be present without their gender-specific needs being taken into account. This is what is meant by listening to their voices and taking their needs into account as a feminist ethic (Sophie B, 2015).

Women seeking to become involved in peace processes do not aim to speak solely on behalf of women, but rather to address the needs of the community, even though their voices are not heard. And indeed, women can take their place at the negotiating table to discuss peace and security – issues that concern all sections of society and have nothing to do with women specifically. This leads us to examine the level of inclusion of women, which often appears to be low in peace negotiation forums at the micro-social level. In practical terms, men in power exploit the structures and workings of these forums to monopolise all the resources of power. It is men who bring women forward to ensure representativeness and to validate women’s participation, without the issues of inclusion and social justice being thoroughly debated, clarified and the barriers to gender equality broken down. The staging of women’s presence in peace forums must take into account the quality of their visibility in order to speak of social

inclusion. This is why; to borrow the words of Carol G, she demonstrates that:

‘The feminist ethics of care is a different voice because it is a voice that does not convey the norms and values of patriarchy; it is a voice that is not governed by gender dichotomies and hierarchies but articulates the norms and values of democracy’.

It is here that we refer to anti-epistemologies in an attempt to demonstrate what represents women in the peace process. This is far removed from the logic that women are the bearers of life, in line with the traditional discourse focusing on women’s status and emphasising their maternal role. This discourse is seen as a mechanism of exclusion when it comes to power. Drawing on this feminist theory of care, she confirms that women set themselves the aim not only of caring for others but also of making the voices of women—which have long been silenced—heard. In this study, the feminist ethics of care challenges the dichotomous male–female divide upheld by patriarchy. This theory shows that values associated with femininity do not merely represent weak qualities, let alone values inferior to those of masculinity. This means that women have undergone a process of socialisation that enables them to care for others and thereby maintain balance within society. This way of caring for others is not a weakness but rather a quality and value that women use to demonstrate their strength. For Sophie B, *‘rights must be understood as stemming from human needs, and the needs of each individual, not their autonomy’*. She seeks to demonstrate that listening to the concerns of others must be a prerequisite for any discussion of democracy. Inclusion and addressing the needs of others are the cornerstones of protecting the commons.

2.2. Methods of data collection

To provide tangible field data for this empirical research, we employed a qualitative approach (Grinschpoun, 2013; Muke Z, 2011). This approach differs from others in that it enabled us to delve deeply into the subject and obtain detailed information during our field investigations. It allowed us to explore the phenomenon under study. This qualitative research enabled us to understand the structural, functional and political dimensions of traditional peace negotiation forums in relation to women’s agency.

Through literature review, semi-structured interviews, life narratives, qualitative content analysis and snowball sampling, we were able to engage with women and local leaders. We were able to carry out fieldwork in the town of Uvira, in South Kivu, in the east of the Democratic Republic

of the Congo. This administrative entity is subdivided into three communes, which we visited. We collected data at two levels: firstly, we gathered factual data based on the actions of the actors, which enabled us to identify women leaders and local leaders by commune. Secondly, we collected hermeneutic data, which involves understanding the interpretations and explanations that the participants give to their actions – in other words, understanding the meanings behind their actions. The interview guide comprised six questions put to local leaders regarding the political and structural power of traditional forums and women's agency. The aim was to ascertain how men manage the committees, which are considered common goods, where all social groups can participate to contribute to peace-building. The semi-structured interviews enabled male and female members of the peace forums to express themselves, detailing the obstacles and strengths that women are developing in Uvira. Life story interviews enabled us to engage in dialogue with the selected women and discover their life trajectories and experiences, in order to understand their struggle for substantive democracy in Uvira. To achieve this, we organised meetings with the heads of the organisations, setting the dates and venues, and travelled to meet them. The study involved three participants: three women who are leaders of these organisations. The snowball sampling technique enabled us to select women leaders and local leaders who share similar characteristics and have points of similarity within the traditional arenas of peace negotiations in Uvira, a post-conflict society. This technique also allowed us to identify a further three leaders to interview. Of the six individuals, three are chairwomen of local peace committees; they shared their journeys and experiences with us, demonstrating how women's agency fosters substantive democracy. For reasons of confidentiality, we have used pseudonyms for these women leaders.

3. Presentation of results

3.1. The social profile and motivation of women activists

The process of rebuilding a post-conflict society cannot be studied at a specific point in time without taking into account the perspectives of individuals and their life stories, both prior to and during their struggle within society. However, in line with the intersectional approach, it is clear that there are differences linked to their individual circumstances, depending on social class, ethnic background, age, religious beliefs and so on. The women interviewed are engaged in their struggle whilst navigating diverse family, personal and professional lives. Notwithstanding the diversity and similarities in their life stories, they find common ground in their efforts to promote gender equality within traditional peace negotiation forums. Indeed, a number of women

activists were approached. There are examples of certain women who are championing the long-awaited change within these traditional peace forums. They agreed to share their journeys and motivations with us. However, the actions they have undertaken are directly linked not only to their individual professional careers but also to the common denominator of gender equality and the consideration of women's gender-specific needs at the peace negotiation table. Some of them have requested anonymity and will be identified by the first letter of their names.

The first participant is a woman from the Uvira territory, born in 1972. She is married and the mother of five children – three daughters and two sons. She was born into a polygynous family where her father had two wives. She is the eldest daughter of her mother, who was her father's second wife. She completed her secondary education in general pedagogy and went on to study rural development at the Higher Institute of Rural Development in Bukavu, known by its acronym 'ISDR'. She holds a bachelor's degree in rural administration. The second participant *is a peace activist in the territories of Uvira, Fizi and Mwenga, working in the high and mid-altitude plateaus of these areas. Her commitment stems from the suffering of our communities. Prior to this, she took part, like so many other members, in training courses and workshops, and whenever recommendations were made, she was asked to report back on them.* She was so enthusiastic that she would even leave her home to share the resolutions across the various chiefdoms that make up the Uvira territory. She funded all these activities herself. The aim of her travels was to bring together women from different tribes with a single message: to show them that they are capable of working towards the noble cause of consolidating peace in their communities. She grew up amidst intra- and inter-community conflicts, gender-based violence and sexual violence, which were a constant occurrence. She lived in a context where women and children were the primary victims; this is why she embarked on mobilising women after participating in and gaining experience through various training courses.

3.2. Care as the essence of women's actions for peace

Care 'is defined by a fundamental concern for the well-being of others and centres moral development on attention to responsibilities and the nature of human relationships'. For the first participant, *the actions undertaken by women to achieve peace mean breaking the silence and overcoming the distance that separates people. These commitments by women create a space for mutual listening that seeks to bring the parties closer together in order to foster a better understanding of the problem and attempt to resolve it according to their own approaches.* For a second participant, *care is seen as that*

female solidarity which strengthens their legitimacy even at the most grassroots level. These women form a united front to combat the social ills observed in their society. These women have developed their agency by forming a coalition and setting aside their tribal, professional and social-class differences. Women's commitment to peacebuilding has become a shared vision championed by other women, with the aim not only of being represented by women but also of feeling involved and carrying the hope of rebuilding a post-conflict society. These women see themselves as unifiers. This solidarity amongst women has become a source of strength, enabling them to speak out and persuade men by demonstrating how social inclusion is a means of reducing social inequalities. This, in turn, would lead to a more balanced society.

Women's actions in peacebuilding at the local level mean that they stabilise the peace process; this stabilisation, in turn, leads them to realise that women are capable of stabilising conflicts. Women's commitment means that when everyone is working towards the same goal, enormous results can be expected within their communities. In this context, women prioritise prevention over reaction or violence. Women are there to anticipate violence. They build bridges between the different parties in conflict. Women's peace-building actions maintain dialogue as a way out of any conflict. For them, it cannot be said that peace can be achieved without frank dialogue. And women advocate dialogue as a way out of any dispute. Women link peace to everyday realities; that is to say, they reflect on the local context, which enables them to understand how to carry out their actions in order to achieve the desired results within their women's group.

According to a third female participant, a journalist, *'the actions women take to promote peace at a local level signify an awareness of the problems plaguing their communities. These actions signify the power to act and to make a difference. It is about taking charge of the community's needs; for women, therefore, it is a contribution towards improving their society'*. Women's actions demonstrate an ongoing struggle and a commitment to the cause of society.

3.3. Peace, security and traditional forums for peace negotiations are shared concerns

The issue of the commons lies at the heart of the challenges relating to research, power and struggles surrounding the production, exploitation and governance of resources (Jackiewicz, Agata; Nougaret, Lara, 2024; Cressier, P.; Osuna Vargas, M.M., 2025; Achille Mbembe; Rémy Rioux, 2022). The efforts made by most women towards the security and peace remain unrecognised, despite their significant contribution to society (Pélissier, M., Magkou, M., 2024). The

actions undertaken by women are commitments whose motivation is not based on material goods. Women who undertake peace-building work develop a steely resolve because their daily actions and gestures convey a message of peace. Women's sensitivity to peace-building efforts ensures that society does not suffer the harmful effects of conflict. Women anticipate events and propose dialogue as a means of restoring peace. As the first participant said, *'When we carry out a peace initiative, we are carrying out an act of life.'* The actions undertaken by women in support of peace are not for personal gain but rather for the benefit of all members of society. Women's participation in the peace process at the micro-social level is not motivated by funding but rather is a choice, an option for maintaining balance within society. All the actions undertaken by women as individuals are also driven by a desire to bring people together and to contribute to the stability of society. These actions embody unity and social justice because serving one person means touching the lives of many others close to them. To this end, society benefits both directly and indirectly through the sharing of information with local leaders. Women share their experiences to build and maintain social balance. Women have become role models and sources of inspiration for peace-building; as Maxime Forest and Alii (2023) state, the common good must be something in which all social groups participate. Women are involved in setting up women's community organisations with the aim of empowering other women and emancipating girls. Women leaders mobilise other women not merely to meet digital needs, but rather to make their voices heard. Women's commitment to mobilising other women is aimed at strengthening their capacities so that they are able to serve their society in the interests of peace and the economy, and to contribute in every way they can, both in the private and public spheres. This enthusiasm for working for the good of society is leading women to become involved even in political parties, with ambitions to stand for public office. Women's commitment to community safety has received the approval and support of local leaders and other women.

For the second participant, *the peace initiatives launched by women help to ease tensions, that is to say, to prevent harmful effects within society. Local dialogue enables greater participation by women and young people.* This leads to a better flow of security-related 'early warning' at the local level. Strengthening social cohesion. This enthusiasm for women's initiatives inspires members to get involved in local governance. The sharing of early warnings by women's forums is a means of disseminating information on women's involvement in security and peace at the local level. It is a strategy they use to ensure that society is informed about the actions undertaken by women, thereby validating their status as agents of peace. In this way, society benefits from advance

information designed to prevent the negative effects of conflict and build a society where inclusivity and social justice are to the benefit of all. Society also benefits from women's vigilance regarding security at the community level, which serves to demonstrate their capabilities.

3.4. Women's capabilities as levers of female agency in Uvira, South Kivu

The concept of capabilities is closely linked to commitment and agency (Geneviève Perrin, 2019). Before women became involved in feminist activism, they were motivated to follow this path for the sake of the collective good. Since the onset of cyclical armed conflicts in conflict zones, there has been a keen interest in gender equality within traditional peace negotiation forums, reflecting not only a concern for women's representation at the peace negotiation table but also an effort that must be endorsed by certain male peace actors.

At a time when the inclusion of women at the negotiating table is not yet supported, let alone accepted, women's empowerment and/or agency constitute a mechanism and a pathway to be encouraged in order to enable their participation and ensure that gender-specific needs are taken into account. Several studies in recent years have focused on the victimisation of women during local conflicts. However, in my field of research, there is a scarcity of sociological studies examining women's trajectories in peacebuilding. This is why, in this study, we have examined the trajectories of their struggle for gender equality within traditional peace-building arenas in order to identify the factors in their life stories that may explain their intense commitment to this peace-building process.

Women's participation in seminars and training courses on human rights, women's financial autonomy and the development of women's leadership in peace-building arenas constitutes a set of capabilities that encourages women to become involved in the peace- process. Women invest in themselves to facilitate inclusion and social justice within local structures. The local peace committees in Uvira are becoming a space where women can recharge their batteries, develop their capacity for action and stay the course towards autonomy. Women sit on these committees to receive training.

4. Conclusion

Traditional forums for peace negotiations are venues for peace discussions. Women's forums derive their existence and foundation from mutual aid societies and are also referred to as 'extra-customary' bodies (inter-community Barza, local peace committee). These forums originate from civil society

organisations and non-governmental organisations. These traditional forums draw their authority from local authorities, religious leaders and, above all, from the choice to join these structures either through voting or on the basis of merit. These forums exert significant influence in grassroots conflict resolution, given the traditional methods they employ. They also advocate for the preservation of peace by rejecting any form of judgement that could harm social relations. It must be noted that women do not enjoy the same advantages as men within traditional peace forums.

Women in Uvira are building their capacity for action through the meetings they hold in local peace committees. To overcome these barriers, women have developed their interpersonal skills and economic empowerment; increased women's participation in both the formal and informal labour markets; and established women's community organisations that grant them the legitimacy to speak on behalf of other women and marginalised groups. By familiarising themselves with the terminology of peace processes, they are developing their leadership skills within socio-political and family relationships. Civil society organisations act as channels that facilitate women's empowerment in the peace-building process at local and regional levels. It is in this way that the actions undertaken by these women build female agency and grant them the legitimacy to act not only to ensure women's representation but, more importantly, in the interests of the community.

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