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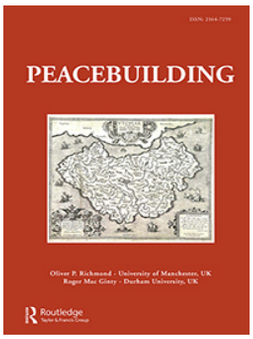

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The challenges and opportunities of researching masculinities during peace processes

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a special issue in *Peacebuilding* on researching masculinities during peace processes. It collates insights from feminist peace research, and research on gender and masculinities, to highlight how peace processes are necessarily also processes of gender re-negotiation and transformation. We argue that researching masculinities entails accounting for their plural circulation, complex and contradictory dynamics, and multiple effects. Researching masculinities additionally generates methodological dilemmas that require researchers' reflexive engagement. The articles in the special issue address critical themes and topics pertaining to masculinities and peace across a wide range of participant experience in diverse contexts (including Bosnia, Indonesia, Liberia, Timor-Leste, Uganda, and the UK). We summarise authors' critical and empirical contributions and chart their methodological innovations and strategies. We see plural masculine performances and identities not as obstacles to be overcome in/through research but as opportunities to generate discussion with research participants about the operability and impacts of gender.

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After armed conflict, societies undergo profound changes. The experience of often years-long armed violence reshapes societies, causing individual and collective trauma, distancing combatants from civilian life, and indelibly transforming economies and politics. As peace processes unfold, post-conflict societies work to navigate these changes, which frequently involve wholesale re-ordering of everyday, civic, and political life. Peace and conflict are additionally and inextricably linked with gender relations, ideals, and roles.[1] Hence, peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes are necessarily also processes of gender re-negotiation and transformation, where gender relations and meanings are

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[1]Cynthia Cockburn, 'The Gendered Dynamics of Armed Conflict and Political Violence', in *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, ed. Fiona C. Clark and Caroline O. N. Moser (London: Zed Books, 2001), 13–29; Cynthia H. Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); and Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

altered and re-shaped. Accordingly, researching masculinities – their plural circulation, their complex and contradictory dynamics, and their multiple effects in post-conflict settings – is an integral part of feminist peace and conflict studies.[2]

At the same time, researching masculinities in highly dynamic and complex post-conflict environments generates certain methodological dilemmas that would benefit from deeper engagement. This special issue explores these dilemmas in terms of both the challenges and opportunities they present to peacebuilding theory and practice. The issue brings together contributions that problematise the complexities of researching post-conflict masculinities, and that map, analyse, and empirically locate diverse research dilemmas and challenges. The contributions additionally identify diverse and innovative research strategies to grapple with dilemmas and challenges alongside research participants, i.e. in opposition to strategies that would presume to 'overcome' dilemmas and challenges. The special issue has two aims: first, to catalyse a constructive debate about engaging masculinities during peacebuilding processes in order to suggest concrete tools and methods for researching masculinities; and second, to problematise masculinities research within studies of peacebuilding so that this research can be ethical, inclusive, and peace-promoting.

In this introduction, we position and summarise the main arguments and significance of the special issue, introduce the individual contributions, and outline the inferences and conclusions that flow from its constituent articles. But first, we want to explore two concepts at its core: 'peace' and 'masculinities'.

What animates the 'peace' in 'peace processes', and is peacebuilding always peaceful? We understand peace as implicating questions about whose peace desires and objectives are prioritised and conceptualised through peace processes. Armed conflict and peace are not clearly demarcated phases in spaces correlating with state boundaries. Rather, they are spatial and temporal phenomena that co-exist and interrelate, '[f]or in the midst of violent conflict there are islands of peace, and in times of peace there are outbreaks of violent conflict'.[3] Troubling the timeframes and spaces of post-conflict transition reveals how dominant protection and security strategies generate violent continuities during peace processes. For example, feminist peace research has shown how discourses of reintegration, reconciliation, and rule of law can reinforce masculinist and patriarchal power that silences women and prevents them from accessing rights, justice, and redress from violence.[4] And, feminist peace research has demonstrated how the gender relations of war 'can carry on in new and old ways during militarized peacetimes'.[5] Enquiry into masculinities and gender

[2]Recent examples include: Heidi Riley, *Rethinking Masculinities: Ideology, Identity and Change in the People's War in Nepal and Its Aftermath* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022); R. Elizabeth Velásquez Estrada, 'Intersectional Justice Denied: Racist Warring Masculinity, Negative Peace, and Violence in Post-Peace Accords El Salvador', *American Anthropologist* 124, no. 1 (2022): 39–52; and Melissa Johnston, *Building Peace, Rebuilding Patriarchy: The Failure of Gender Interventions in Timor-Leste* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[3]Annika Björkdahl and Susanne Buckley-Zistel, 'Spatializing Peace and Conflict: An Introduction' in *Spatializing Peace and Conflict: Mapping the Production of Places, Sites, and Scales of Violence*, ed. Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 2.

[4]Johanna Nilsson and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, '"People Constantly Remind Me of My Past … and Make Me Look Like a Monster": Re-Visiting DDR through a Conversation with Black Diamond', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15, no. 1 (2013): 110–8; and Katherine Brickell, 'Gendered Violences and Rule of/by Law in Cambodia', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 6, no. 2 (2016): 182–5.

[5]Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 25.

pinpoints 'successive moments in the flux of peace and war'[6] and shows how violence extends 'from violence in the home, to the structural violence of poverty [...] to the violence of war and its aftermath'.[7]

Peace processes, accordingly, are also not clearly demarcated, continuous, or linear in their peace-producing effects. They do not always result in non-violence. Observably peaceful effects might lag a ceasefire or other declaration of cessation of hostilities. Peace processes are also complex and contingent, comprising various labour and practices of diverse actors positioned outside and inside the conflict. As objects of analysis, peace processes are also composed of diverse and hard-to-disaggregate levels of analysis – international, societal, institutional, communal, and individual. Masculinities thus always operate within a twilight zone between war and peace experiences. And, they impact on ideas about sequencing, prioritisation, observation, and evaluation of peacebuilding. For example, security-first and securitising discourses are reflective of hegemonic masculine assumptions about what matters first and what matters most when it comes to peace. Masculinised ordering of security helps to explain why more resources are dedicated to the reform of security institutions than to the education and employment of ex-combatants. Masculinist protection norms construct women and children as victims of conflict, and vulnerable and passive actors during peace, which results in their marginalisation and exclusion during peace negotiations and during major decision-making processes in the aftermath of conflict. In evaluative terms, peacebuilding is declared to be successful if war does not resume, even if that means the re-imposition of restrictive gender norms and the return of men and women to gendered divisions of labour that both equate peace with a return to the patriarchal status quo.[8]

The article contributions in this special issue expand understanding along these several lines of argument, emphasising that masculinities have diverse and multiple impacts on the nature, duration, and quality of peace. The contributions do so in opposition to the temptation to understand masculinity as unitary, static, and deterministic. In this, qualitative masculinities research contributes to pluralistic and contingent accounts of peace that acknowledge the contemporaneous nature of conflict and peace, and the continuities of violence that occur in and through peace practices. As a result, the diverse contributions to this special issue do not deploy the lens of masculinities to fix peace, an aspiration which is itself reflective of a masculinist will to power over peace (a presumption that knowability is achieved through parsimony or assigning explanatory power). They aspire to build knowledge about why and how masculinities matter to peacebuilding, rather than presuming to measure how much they matter. And, they aim to build an understanding of how masculinities and peace processes are co-constitutive, not to establish one or the other as a dependent variable.

Next, what are masculinities, and how can they be identified and elucidated? Whilst the individual contributions in this issue differ in perspectives about and approaches to

[6]Cynthia Cockburn, 'The Continuum of Violence: A Gender Perspective on War and Peace', in *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, ed. Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 24.
[7]Jacqui True, *The Political Economy of Violence against Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.
[8]Annika Björkdahl and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic, 'Gendering Agency in Transitional Justice', *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 2 (2015): 165–82; Megan MacKenzie and Alana Foster, 'Masculinity Nostalgia: How War and Occupation Inspire a Yearning for Gender Order', *Security Dialogue* 48, no. 3 (2017): 206–23; Nicole George, 'Policing "Conjugal Order": Gender, Hybridity and Vernacular Security in Fiji', in *The Difference that Gender Makes to International Peace and Security*, ed. Sara Davies, Nicole George, and Jacqui True (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 55–70; and Sara Meger and Julia Sachseder, 'Militarized Peace: Understanding Post-Conflict Violence in the Wake of the Peace Deal in Colombia', *Globalizations* 17, no. 6 (2020): 953–73.

analysing masculinities, they share a basic understanding that accords with Connell's ground-breaking work on the subject. She conceptualises masculinity as 'simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture'.[9] In any given time and space, diverse masculinities co-exist, although these exist culturally and contextually as hierarchically ordered, with hegemonic masculinities in a relationship of power vis-à-vis other identities and performances based on their correspondence or difference with the hegemonic and ideal type.[10] Various contributions to this special issue, therefore, do not and cannot over-generalise masculinities, because antecedent contributions affirm that masculinities are stubbornly contextual.[11]

Within peace processes, violence-producing and violence-resistant masculinities are variously on display, and these are also contingent on the diverse roles and identities that men and women assume during post-conflict transition: soldiers, ex-combatants, and veterans; peacekeepers and aid and development workers; civilians, victims, and protesters; and, politicians, diplomats, mediators, journalists, and researchers. These roles and identities deploy masculine and feminine frames in ways that simultaneously build and undermine peaceful relations, including gender relations. The contributions in this special issue move beyond acknowledging that a multitude of masculine and feminine roles exist. Jointly, the deliberations complicate existing understandings of those roles and their impact on and interactions with peace processes. Issues like parenthood and familial relations, political beliefs and decisions about whether to join or support one party or another during conflict, engaging in certain income generating activities and articulating how those activities are relevant to peacebuilding, experiencing trauma and stigmatisation, and experts' use of technology are not neatly linked to *either* masculine *or* feminine roles and identities. Instead, the elaboration of these cross-cutting issues and themes in the contributions underscore the unfinished, multiple, and contradictory forms that masculinities take, including in their proximity to or distance from femininities. Tellingly, these issues also all show how research participants take pains to script their performances as relevant to peace processes, and why they experience the need to do so in opposition to narratives and discourses that script their performances, fixing and simplifying them in ways that distance them from peace. The contributions additionally emphasise how cross-cutting identity markers such as gender, race, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, class, socio-economic background, age, and (dis)ability, exist in intersectional relationship with each other and further complicate and enrich research understandings of the role that masculinities play in post-conflict contexts and peace processes.[12] The articles collated in this special issue all make generative reference to these complex intersections, and to how the relationality between masculinities and these various markers produces observable impacts on peacebuilding.

[9]R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*. 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 71.
[10]Connell, Masculinities, 80–1.
[11]Ibid., 185–203.
[12]Kathrine Bjerg Bennikea and Pauline Stoltz, 'Peacekeeping Masculinities, Intersectionality, and Gender Equality: Negotiations of Military Life and Civilian Life by Danish Soldier/Veteran-Parents', *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 17, no. 1 (2022), 5–20; and Henri Myrttinen, Lana Khattab and Jana Naujoks, 'Re-Thinking Hegemonic Masculinities in Conflict-Affected Contexts', *Critical Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017), 103–19.

Positioning the special issue and principal argument

Existing studies on masculinities, peace, and peacebuilding have yielded important insights about how hegemonic masculinity and violent conflict are co-constitutive, and how conflict-to-peace transitions posit the transformation of masculinities as both necessity and opportunity.[13] That peace depends on transformation of masculinities is reflected in important gender-focused discussions about different peacebuilding instruments like security sector reform (SSR),[14]disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR),[15] and transitional justice,[16] as well as in gender transformative interventions in development contexts.[17] While peacekeeping is considered a means to influence post-conflict masculinities, the peacekeepers' masculinity itself has become a central interest of researchers, pointing both at militarist and masculinist cultures that can explain sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)[18] and the formation of a peacebuilder masculinity which converges and diverges with violent military masculinity.[19] At the same time, all interventions seeking to influence gender constructions are at risk of reproducing patriarchal power structures or gendered essentialisms.[20] Researchers analysing masculinities are confronted with similar pitfalls, in particular when focusing exclusively on violent masculinities, which risks marginalising other, less violent forms of masculinity also present in post-conflict contexts.[21]

We argue that studying post-conflict masculinities is particularly challenging as it is positioned at the intersection of two research fields that are in themselves already methodologically demanding: 1) conflict transformation and peace processes and 2) masculinities.

With respect to the first field, research on conflict transformation and peace processes must find ways of engaging with diverse methodological and ethical questions. Previous work has highlighted the power imbalances and the possibility for exploitative dynamics between outsiders and vulnerable populations, as well as within research partnerships

[13]Victor Seidler, *Transforming Masculinities: Men, Cultures, Bodies, Power, Sex and Love* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005); Naomi Cahn, Fionnuala D. Ní Aoláin, and Dina Francesca Haynes, 'Gender, Masculinities, and Transition in Conflicted Societies', *New England Law Review* 44 (2009): 101–22; Kimberly Theidon, 'Reconstructing Masculinities: The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia', *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2009): 1–34.

[14]Rahel Kunz 'Gender and Security Sector Reform: Gendering Differently?' *International Peacekeeping* 21, no. 5 (2014): 604–22.

[15]Isabella Flisi, 'The Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia: Addressing Violent Masculinities in a Fragile Context', *Gender & Development* 24, no. 3 (2016): 391–407.

[16]Brandon Hamber, 'There Is a Crack in Everything: Problematising Masculinities, Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice', *Human Rights Review* 17, no. 1 (2016): 9–34.

[17]Antonia Porter, '"What Is Constructed Can Be Transformed": Masculinities in Post-Conflict Societies in Africa', *International Peacekeeping* 20, no. 4 (2013): 486–506.

[18]Marsha Henry, 'Parades, Parties and Pests: Contradictions of Everyday Life in Peacekeeping Economies', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 9, no. 3: 372–90; Paul Higate, 'Peacekeepers, Masculinities, and Sexual Exploitation', *Men and Masculinities* 10, no. 1 (2007): 99–119; and Kathleen M. Jennings, 'Unintended Consequences of Intimacy: Political Economies of Peacekeeping and Sex Tourism', *International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 2: 229–43. See also, in this special issue, Jasmine Westendorf, 'Troubling Masculinities: A Feminist, Relational Approach to Reseaerching Sexual Exploitation', *Peacebuilding* 12, (2024).

[19]Claire Duncanson, 'Forces for Good? Narratives of Military Masculinity in Peacekeeping Operations', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 11, no. 1 (2009): 63–80.

[20]David Duriesmith and Georgina Holmes, 'The Masculine Logic of DDR and SSR in the Rwanda Defence Force', *Security Dialogue* 50, no. 4 (2019): 361–79; Sabrina Karim, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace, and Security in Post-Conflict States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); and Nina Wilén and Lindy Heinecken, 'Regendering the South African Army: Inclusion, Reversal and Displacement', *Gender, Work & Organization* 25, no. 6 (2018): 670–86.

[21]Myrttinen, Khattab, and Naujoks, 'Re-Thinking'.

between foreign, well-funded researchers and local NGOs or research institutions.[22] Literature in this field has also warned that research-ethical questions are highly politicised and research projects are easily interpreted as political projects in post-conflict contexts (i.e. research projects are not neutral, nor are they perceived by participants as politically neutral).[23] Furthermore, in post-conflict environments, research participants might mistrust researchers, and experience research fatigue.[24] Yacob-Haliso emphasises the intersectional dynamics impacting upon how researchers and research participants relate and connect to each other in post-conflict contexts.[25] Schulz provides insights into the constantly shifting positionalities of researcher and research participants, demonstrating that research participants exercise power and agency in creative, and creatively disruptive, ways.[26]

Regarding the second research field, the question of how to research masculinities in context is a critical one that presents distinct challenges. Disciplines neighbouring International Relations and peace and conflict studies – including sociology, geography, criminology, and anthropology – have emphasised the specific challenges of researching masculinities, particularly related to men's resistance to discussing gender.[27] The absence of far-reaching methodological reflections on masculinities within disciplines that remain primarily concerned with the experiences, actions, and perspectives of men is vexing. Feminist methodological reflections and methodology in gender research at large are corrective, producing a significant body of literature.[28] Researchers interested in masculinities should incorporate and learn from this literature.

In parallel with this learning, distinct methodological challenges persist. Doing research in peacebuilding contexts and devising research strategies that analyse masculinities are overlapping, intersecting, and mutually reinforcing processes. All contributors to this special issue encountered such methodological challenges in one way or another as they carried out the research underlying their articles. For example, mistranslations occur in the movement from 'international gender discourse' to localised expressions of masculinity as they are narrated and performed in the everyday lives of research

[22]Kate Cronin-Furman and Milli Lake, 'Ethics Abroad: Fieldwork in Fragile and Violent Contexts', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51, no. 3 (2018): 607–14.

[23]John Heathershaw and Parviz Mullojonv, 'The Politics and Ethics of Fieldwork in Post-Conflict Environments: The Dilemmas of a Vocational Approach', in *Doing Fieldwork in Areas of International Intervention: A Guide to Research in Violent and Closed Contexts*, ed. Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Morten Bøås (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), 93–112.

[24]Kate Roll and Geoffrey Swenson, 'Fieldwork after Conflict: Contextualising the Challenges of Access and Data Quality', *Disasters* 43, no. 2 (2019): 240–60.

[25]Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso, 'Intersectionalities and Access in Fieldwork in Postconflict Liberia: Motherland, Motherhood, and Minefields', *African Affairs* 118, no. 470 (2019): 168–81.

[26]Philipp Schulz, 'Recognizing Research Participants' Fluid Positionalities in (Post-)Conflict Zones', *Qualitative Research* 21, no. 4 (2021): 550–67.

[27]James W. Messerschmidt, *Nine Lives: Adolescent Masculinities, the Body, and Violence* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); Liviu Popviciu, Chris Haywood, and Mairtin Mac An Ghaill, 'The Promise of Post-Structuralist Methodology: Ethnographic Representation of Education and Masculinity', *Ethnography and Education* 1, no. 3 (2006): 393–412; and Martin Robb, 'Exploring Fatherhood: Masculinity and Intersubjectivity in the Research Process', *Journal of Social Work Practice* 18, no. 3 (2004): 395–406.

[28]See, for example, Joan Acker, Kate Barry, and Joke Esseveld, 'Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research', *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, no. 4 (1983): 423–35; Kim V. L. England, 'Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research', *The Professional Geographer* 46, no. 1 (1994): 80–9; Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True, 'Reflexivity in Practice: Power and Ethics in Feminist Research on International Relations', *International Studies Review* 10, no. 4 (2008): 693–707; and Annette Alfina LaRocco, Jamie E. Shinn, and Kentse Madise, 'Reflections on Positionalities in Social Science Fieldwork in Northern Botswana: A Call for Decolonizing Research', *Politics & Gender* 16, no. 3 (2020): 845–73.

participants.[29] Equally, methodological challenges can occur when we, as researchers, attempt to use international ideas and norms about gender relations – be they based on academic work or international development discourse – to assess post-conflict realities.[30] Furthermore, research participants' might distrust researchers and question their ulterior motives, which can be amplified by the gendered, socio-economic, or educational differences between researchers and research participants.[31] Finally, masculinities might be invisible or illegible, or seen as a generic default category space, and are therefore hard to capture.[32] The authors contributing to this special issue not only richly describe these various methodological challenges but also have identified innovative and generative ways of constructively engaging with them. Among those are combining postcolonial humanist and posthumanist ontological perspectives in ethnographic research,[33] understanding interviews as processes of multiple translations through which to increase mutual understanding and analytic clarity,[34] and deploying relational approaches that can shift qualitative interviews into instances of collaborative meaning-making.[35] The issue contributors narrate how they grappled with research participants' positionality within prevailing gendered peacetime orders, including how some men and women do not experience the peacetime order as peaceful. A key insight that unites the contributions is how masculinities operate during peace processes to celebrate idealised and hegemonic masculine norms – and even work to reinscribe and reproduce those norms through peacebuilding practices and discourses – and alternatingly marginalise, distance and exclude some men from the possibility of achieving those ideals. Thus, each contribution enhances understanding of masculinities during peacebuilding processes and of doing masculinities research in peacebuilding contexts.

Introducing the contributions

Erin Baines, in 'Unspeakable: Reflections on Relational Approaches to Research in Post-Conflict Settings', explores conflict and post-conflict masculinities through the identities

[29]Baines, in this issue, explores how fatherhood resulting from conflict-related sexual violence produces complex emotional attachments, alters social relations within families and communities, and generates care practices and ethics of responsibility. These effects present as relevant to peacebuilding in opposition to discourses that deem perpetrators irrelevant or antithetical to peacebuilding processes. Erin Baines, 'Unspeakable: Reflections on Relational Approaches to Research in Post-Conflict Settings', *Peacebuilding* 12, (2024).

[30]Myrttinen, in this issue, reflects on the challenges of using the masculinities terminology generated by NGO and academic practice in qualitative fieldwork in post-conflict contexts. Henri Myrttinen, 'Violence and Hegemonic Masculinities in Timor-Leste: On the Challenges of Using Theoretical Frameworks in Conflict-Affected Societies', *Peacebuilding* 12, (2024).

[31]McMullin, McCrownsey, and Shilue, in this issue, discuss how research participants in Liberia articulate nuanced insights about gender alongside worries about how researchers could use those insights, and how participants worry about whether research enquiry into gender masks ulterior motives to disadvantage young men in peacebuilding recommendations and assistance projects. Jaremey R. McMullin, Deimah Kpar-Kyne McCrownsey, and James Suah Shilue, 'Good Ones and Bad Ones: Gendered Distortions and Aspirations in Research with Conflict-Affected Youth in Liberia', *Peacebuilding* 12, (2024).

[32]In this issue, Asmawati, Duriesmith, Ismail, and Syah identify three categories of failure that inadequately capture masculinities; namely gender as women and children, gender as 'LGBT', and gender as 'other people'. To amend these tendencies, they propose as alternative strategies 'reading' gender, strong objectivity, and in-depth methods. Asmawati Asmawati, David Duriesmith, Noor Huda Ismail, and Sultan Fariz Syah, 'Locating Masculinities in Conflict: Researching Conflict-Related Masculinities beyond the Colonial Gaze', *Peacebuilding* 12, (2024).

[33]See, in this special issue, Georgina Holmes, 'Digital Peacekeeping, Cyborg Soldiers and Militarised Masculinities: A Posthuman Critique', *Peacebuilding* 12, (2024).

[34] See, in this special issue, Gabriele Abels, Andreas Hasenclever, Maximilian Kiefer, Maike Messerschmidt, and Hendrik Quest, 'Interviews on Masculinities in Post-Conflict Contexts as a Process of Three Translations', *Peacebuilding* 12, (2024).

[35]Westendorf, in this special issue.

and experiences of ex-combatants who fathered children as a result of conflict-related sexual violence in northern Uganda. She uses Judith Herman's concept of the unspeakable ('traumatic events that take place outside socially validated reality')[36] to probe ex-combatant fathers' experiences in relation to rules and regulations regarding sex and sexuality within the Lord's Resistance Army and to analyse how marriage and becoming fathers in a coercive context shaped their experiences before and after their demobilisation. Re-storying ex-combatants as fathers is not about erasing or eliding their wartime and post-war violence but about enquiring into the social impacts of unspeakability and about wondering what is lost when the peacebuilding narratives and trajectories of perpetrators are excluded because they are deemed irrelevant to peace studies. Baines establishes how child tracing activities, reunions with fathers or paternal relatives, and mediations between maternal and paternal clans are all important peacebuilding sites, painful and fraught processes through which reconciliation and reintegration are lived and experienced.

In research terms, Baines argues that a relational approach to a research project fosters 'intimate, steadfast, and mutually giving relationships' between researchers and participants. In doing so, a relational approach offers possibilities to engage with unspeakable knowledge such as the love that fathers feel for offspring born of sexual violence. Such an approach offers, as Baines writes, 'a way to be with the myriad, complex and complicated ways men express their relationships to children in a context in which their love is forbidden, their grief impermissible'. Focusing on domestic sites of paternal responsibility, love, and care recasts peace as something more than the absence of insecurity. Baines invests hope that relational approaches to interviews with ex-combatant fathers can build knowledge about peacebuilding beyond Western-centric conceptualisations; namely, beyond how Western-based approaches to demobilisation and justice position ex-combatants as persons without histories, where narratives about ex-combatants centre ex-combatant motivations and propensity for violence.

Georgina Holmes interrogates how digital technologies have come to transform peacekeeping and peacekeepers' consciousness in 'Digital Peacekeeping, Cyborg Soldiers and Militarised Masculinities: A Posthuman Critique'. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with British soldiers who had been deployed to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2020–2021, Holmes shows that technology has resulted in peacekeepers replicating the syntax and discursive framing devices used in online virtual game worlds to create distance between themselves and the 'peacekept'. Using posthumanism and Bourdieusian practice theory, the article demonstrates that this distance has allowed peacekeepers to stabilise their militarised masculinities despite operating within increasingly centralised UN peacekeeping systems that disempower peacekeepers. Conceptually, the article advances scholarship on how technology is reshaping gender and race power relations in peacekeeping, as male peacekeepers' roles shifted from front-line 'hot' combat to adopting the role of an 'information processing device'. At the same time, the increasing prominence of bacteria and viruses during peacekeeping operations has undermined peacekeepers' sense of masculine impermeability. Responding to soldiers' felt loss of purpose, and their

[36]Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2022 [1992]).

increasing consciousness of vulnerability, Holmes outlines how soldiers use gaming terminology to process humanitarian intervention spaces. Methodologically, the paper pushes scholarship on militarised masculinities to further integrate posthumanism into the analysis of peacekeeping, showing how digital technologies are altering human consciousness and a sense of self as militaries increasingly use technology to augment soldiers.

Henri Myrttinen reflects on his experiences as a Western scholar and practitioner in the field of gender-based violence prevention in his article, 'Violence and Hegemonic Masculinities in Timor-Leste: On the Challenges of Using Theoretical Frameworks in Conflict-Affected Societies'. He finds that conceptual frameworks from academic and international development discourses, such as 'hegemonic' and/or 'violent' masculinities, build knowledge about the lived realities of men in post-conflict Timor-Leste only to a certain degree. The resulting gap in understanding especially concerns the common conflation of various expressions of violence with notions of masculinity, which Myrtinnen's research participants strongly rejected. Using hegemonic and violent masculinity as framing devices did not do justice to the complexities of people's everyday lives, to various enactments of physical violence in Timor-Leste or to their contextual meaning there. For the researcher-outsider, enactments of physical violence might seem easily attributable to masculine behaviour and, thus, constitute a form of violent, hegemonic masculinity.

But further interrogations explored by Myrttinen revealed that research participants did not view these enactments as violent. Hence, in these encounters, the question of epistemic violence becomes urgent, i.e. researchers must navigate the risks of imposing their worldview onto participants and work to avoid contradicting their interpretation of their own lives. The importance of such a navigation is especially acute for researchers whose work seeks to generate policy recommendations and outputs. Following from his reflections, Myrttinen urges researchers to critically engage with their own power position when researching masculinities in post-conflict and peacebuilding contexts, and to re-evaluate their own biases and assumptions. At the same time, avoiding epistemic violence through or within research encounters may not always be possible. Methodologically, he therefore argues for a more careful usage of conceptual frameworks such as 'hegemonic masculinities', or, if necessary, a rejection of such frameworks (by localising and contextualising researcher-generated analyses as much as possible in order to avoid reifying images and narratives of violent masculinities).

In 'Troubling Masculinities: A Feminist, Relational Approach to Researching Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Peacekeepers', Jasmine Westendorf proposes that feminist, relational interviewing facilitates a better understanding of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers in Nepal and Timor-Leste. Westendorf makes generative use of Fujii's elucidation of relational interviewing[37] and Ahmed's metaphor of the feminist ear[38] to *hear* the discordant views of international institutions and intervenors, and of local communities and 'the peacekept', on the issue of peacekeeper SEA. Relational interviewing generates collaborative dialogues and meaning-making between researchers and participants. Relational interviewing also foregrounds local perspectives and lived

[37]Lee Ann Fujii, *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).
[38]Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

experiences of peacekeeping in ways that challenge the dominant institutional perspectives of SEA as mere 'unintended consequences' of peace processes.

Empirically, Westendorf argues that her methodological approach enables her to locate peacekeeper SEA at the intersection of different axes of marginalisation other than masculinity and gender, namely race, coloniality, wealth and the north/south global political divide. She finds that those different systems of power create a context in which peacekeepers perpetrate SEA. This finding on how multiple axes of marginalisation combine to produce SEA contrasts with the institutionalised view of SEA, according to which an essentialised notion of men is asserted to be its root cause. Correspondingly, relational interviewing also provides a possible way to unsettle power imbalances between researchers and interlocutors and to redress extractive research dynamics by supplanting concretised institutional viewpoints about SEA with localised knowledge.

In their contribution, 'Interviews on Masculinities in Post-Conflict Contexts as a Process of Three Translations', Gabriele Abels, Andreas Hasenclever, Maximilian Kiefer, Maike Messerschmidt, and Hendrik Quest also focus on interview methods as a way to understand and research masculinities in post-conflict contexts. Building on a practice-theoretical understanding of masculinities, they segregate the interview process into three 'steps of translation'. In a first step, abstract notions of masculinity have to be translated into concrete research goals. In a second step, these research goals are then translated into concrete interview questions that interview partners recognise as corresponding to their lived, everyday observations. During this second step, questions are not only formed a priori but are developed and co-created through meaningful encounters between researchers and participants. A third step then re-translates participant narratives into practices that also comment on wider configurations of masculinity that, although anchored to interview encounters, nevertheless exceed them. Their practice-based approach avoids reifying essentialised, pre-configured understandings of masculinity, and also allows for a meaningful co-production of knowledge with research participants. Together, the constellation of steps provides for a more nuanced understanding of masculinities.

Abels and her co-authors illustrate their approach to interviews as a process of three translations by analysing ex-combatant masculinities in Uganda, especially how societal masculinity presumptions about the origins and manifestations of normalised male violence shaped differential reintegration outcomes of men and women ex-combatants. Ex-combatant men, despite individual challenges, were collectively reintegrated because the instantiation of male violence was taken to be societally 'normal' and therefore forgivable. Meanwhile, because female violence was constructed as abnormal and therefore irredeemable, ex-combatant women have experienced a double victimisation, stigmatised in gendered ways as victims of male violence but also as perpetrators of abnormal (because female-perpetrated) violence.

In 'Locating Violence-Resistant Masculinities in Sites of Conflict', Asmawati Asmawati, David Duriesmith, Noor Huda Ismail, and Sultan Fariz Syah analyse the challenge of exploring masculinities in sites of conflict where they have been rendered invisible even to those who enact them. Drawing on experience conducting fieldwork with former combatants in Indonesia, and with activists pushing for violence-resistant masculinities in Aceh, the article explores common challenges when trying to interview men about gender in conflict contexts. In particular, it highlights the ways that

participants may reduce gender to relations with women, LGBT people, or men who fail to adhere to gender norms. They argue that in sites of conflict, failure to address masculinities more holistically will continue to result either in masculinities being overlooked entirely, or in misrecognition of masculinities that might resist violence during conflict. The authors propose three techniques for making violence-resistant masculinities visible in sites of conflict: fostering in-depth approaches to qualitative research; 'reading' gender without naming it; and, learning through 'strong objectivity' by speaking to those for whom masculinities are more legible. Finally, the paper considers the risks of such approaches, particularly in replicating the colonial gaze.

Jaremey R. McMullin, Deimah Kpar-Kyne McCrownsey, and James Suah Shilue, in 'Good Ones and Bad Ones: Gendered Distortions and Aspirations in Research with Conflict-Affected Youth in Liberia', approach peacebuilding and masculinities through a recognition mismatch between how conflict-affected young men see motorcycle taxi driving as a way to become good men and how other Liberians see motorcycling as a place where bad men become worse. They analyse the extent to which gender-responsive peace work (research included) risks constructing (and mis-recognising) conflict-affected young men as 'bad men' and therefore men who do not deserve peacebuilding support or recognition as peacebuilding actors. They explore how gendered misrecognition of conflict-affected youth entails the construction of motorcyclists as youth with 'excess masculinity', understood as recklessness, lasciviousness, and excess speed. Discursive containment of young men as actors who detract from peacebuilding rather than contribute to it evidences how peacebuilding theory and practice can fail to account for and recognise youth peacebuilding work. The authors additionally argue that such failures construct agency in dualistic terms (masculinity as excess *or* deficit, producing good men *or* bad), gloss over hyper-masculine violence committed by actors more readily positioned as peacebuilders (e.g. political elites and the police), and result in the exclusion of conflict-affected young men from externally- and state-supported peacebuilding efforts.

McMullin and his co-authors also ground cyclists' gendered quests for recognition within the research process, in which participants can mistake aspirations to talk about gender and masculinity as a threat to their identities and livelihoods. In turn, researchers can misinterpret participants' silence or discomfort as lack of knowledge about how gendered masculinity norms impact on and order social life after conflict. They advocate participatory research norms and methods, which seek to acknowledge the complex ways that gender courses through research encounters with conflict-affected youth. Such an approach, they write, could move discussion about 'good ones and bad ones' in the motorcycling transport sector away from damage-centred research.[39] A participatory approach also entails enquiring into the presence and absence of women in a sector presumed to be dominated by men, asking men and women cyclists to reflect on their status as men and women and contemplate the status of each other, and working with cyclists to acknowledge and implement their own ideas about how to counter stigma and misrecognition. They suggest that motorcycling, because it is a site of stigmatisation and

[39]On the dangers and effects of damage-centred research, see Eve Tuck, 'Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities', *Harvard Educational Review* 7, no. 3 (2009): 409–27.

misrecognition of young men, might be particularly important to understanding the challenges and opportunities of peacebuilding work.

Conclusions

A fuller reckoning with the impact of masculinities on peace processes requires researchers to develop methodological tools that allow for conceptual complexity and account for participants' own understandings. The contributions to this special issue are united by a commitment to using ethnographic, reflexive, and/or participatory methodologies that collate and prioritise research participants' own situated knowledge, experiences, and claims. Furthermore, they all afford high value to respect, relationality, and empathy in dialogic research encounters. These values establish how encounters with research participants are moving, in terms of the emotional residue that lingers, yes, but also in terms of how research encounters can and should *move* research design, shifting it towards participant-generated knowledge of peace and gendered social relations and realities. Such a movement illuminates how gender identities and practices at the everyday level can clash with peacebuilding assumptions and projects – including gender-sensitive ones – that are scripted by external practitioners and researchers. The contributions locate participants' ideas about masculinities as both 1) a direct result of how international actors and researchers construct these concepts in terms that have resonance and dissonance with participants' own lived experiences, and 2) cut across the conflict and post-conflict experiences of men and women.

Since masculinities are plural, multiple, and contradictory, the contributions also highlight the complex roles and diverse identities of research participants, and how participants sometimes conform to but also sometimes resist broader masculinist expectations and ideals. Many of the contributors centre the experiences and ideas of their respective research participants precisely because peace processes have stereotyped and stigmatised these participants in ways that work against this insight about masculinities as complex and diverse, such as when academic or policy work assumes that ex-combatants' past deterministically and simplistically scripts their present. We believe the collated articles move beyond essentialised accounts of masculinity and binary representations of gender relations, and that they comprehensively highlight how narrow understandings and stereotypes have real-life consequences for peace processes and the people navigating them.

Taken together, the articles that follow contribute innovative concepts, arguments, and methodological tools and approaches. They build knowledge about how masculinities shape identities and social and political relations during peace processes, and how they impact on peacebuilding outcomes. They develop important case studies and empirical insights not previously or thoroughly explored, about ex-combatant fatherhood and youth peacebuilding identity, about peacekeeper SEA, digital peacekeeping, and gendered reintegration dynamics, and about diverse masculinities in post-conflict Bosnia, Indonesia, Liberia, Timor-Leste, Uganda, and the United Kingdom. And, they articulate research methodologies encompassing several tools and approaches, including interviewing, relational encounter, ethnographic practice, and participatory action. The articles' reflexivity about the research process mediates international and grassroot

understandings of how masculinity is operable during and through peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and peace research.

For several reasons articulated in this introduction, we view this special issue as a timely contribution to the ongoing relevance of feminist research to peace and conflict studies. We are convinced that this special issue's engagement with methods and ethics is not only highly relevant for researchers in International Relations and peace and conflict studies who might face similar dilemmas during their encounters with research participants but also for peacekeeping and peacebuilding practitioners engaged with gender-inclusive peace projects, gender mainstreaming efforts, and the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda. Overall, we hope that the contributions curated here will generate further thought about both the challenges and opportunities of researching masculinities during peace processes and will encourage community-building across research and praxis networks.

In engaging with both 'the what' and 'the how' of masculinities research in peacebuilding contexts, we explore with hope and optimism how reflexive, relational, and participatory approaches (approaches which emanate from feminist peace research) can create new ways to articulate plurality, dynamism, and contradictions (i.e. both violence-producing and peace-contributing) of post-conflict masculinities. Our hope comes from the observations our contributors make about how reflexive, relational engagement opens up creative space within the research process. Such hope is aligned in opposition to arguments that the persistence of hegemonic, violent masculinities dooms peace. This does not mean we are not aware of and alert to the trauma, injuries, injustices, and murderousness of dominant masculinities and their most violent forms. The memory and effects of these confirm the stakes and suggest, rather, that hope aligns with the dynamic, innovative, and hope*ful* narratives, ideas, activism, and labour of the research participants – men and women – foregrounded across the articles. Hopeful engagement creates opportunities for new and hybrid understandings of masculinities, and draws attention to new ways of engaging with research participants that challenge research preconceptions with regard to gender. If '[m]arginalization is always relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group',[40] then highlighting how that authorisation is constructed – but also routinely resisted and subverted – is potentially emancipatory. And, spotlighting diverse and potentially peaceful masculinities – and how diverse actors work to highlight the operability and effects of violent masculinities, charting practices and politics otherwise – is necessarily reparative.

Disclosure statement

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[40]Connell, *Masculinities*, 80–1, emphasis original.

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