(En)gendering post-conflict agency: Women’s experiences of the ‘local’ in Sierra Leone

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Abstract
This article explores how female agency and experience manifest in a local Sierra Leonean peacebuilding program known as Fambul Tok. While post-conflict literature, namely transitional justice and peacebuilding, has become more critical in recent years, there is still a tendency to generalize both the ‘local’ and ‘women’. There is, however, much greater scope to delineate how local programs shape and are shaped by women in these settings. While Fambul Tok was, at least theoretically, meant to better align with the needs and priorities of Sierra Leoneans, including women, the empirics suggest that female engagement ultimately results in a wide range of outcomes, which are not necessarily more ‘empowering’, ‘transformative’ or ‘good’ than international programs. Drawing on original empirical data from Fambul Tok, this article highlights the complexity of gendered power relations within these programs and how individual women have multiple, diverse and contested forms of agency and experiences within local settings.

Keywords
Agency, Fambul Tok, local, peacebuilding, Sierra Leone, women

Introduction
There has, in recent years, been a critical engagement with literature on post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation processes, particularly peacebuilding and transitional justice. Scholars have interrogated some of the foundational assumptions underlying these disciplines and concepts, while simultaneously employing a range of theoretical frameworks to better understand particular dynamics within these processes and programs. Two key strands that have been developed in this critical literature are feminist theory and engagements with the ‘local’. There is, however, little engagement about female experience and agency within the ‘local’. Combining these two lines of critique, along with new empirical data, is where this article’s contribution lies.

There is some discussion about how prioritizing the ‘local’ or local approaches can reinforce gender imbalances (Branch, 2011; Friedman, 2015) and some acknowledgement that peacebuilding programs (local or otherwise) are inevitably the subject of pre-existing
social, political and economic structures (Millar, 2016; Obradovic-Wochnik, 2018). Yet, there is limited empirical analysis of how these local programs are shaped by, and as a result of, women. In fact, much of the literature often refers to how these processes and programs help societies move past violent experiences and tend to generalize the very people (i.e. ‘locals’ and ‘women’) they are seeking to analyze. These processes do not always acknowledge the highly individual and often diverse nature of post-conflict experiences and agency. Drawing on empirical analysis of a local peacebuilding organization in Sierra Leone, and focusing on women in rural communities, whose experiences are often marginalized, this article engages with critical, particularly feminist, literature, to better understand the diversity and fluidity of female roles in local programs.

Feminist scholarship, generally speaking, explores the particular effect of processes on women. When used to engage with transitional justice and peacebuilding, this literature provides nuanced approaches to post-conflict discourses, namely a ‘textured understanding of . . . power relations’ (McLeod, 2015: 48), signalling particular elements, such as personal experiences in the context of societal structures of gender inequality (McLeod and O’Reilly, 2019). As Christine Sylvester points out, women’s experiences and agency within war are crucial to understanding how war itself plays out (2013: 1). I will argue that this framework can be extrapolated to the post-conflict setting as well. More specifically, the article will examine how gendered experiences and forms of agency can act as a lens to ‘zoom in’ on particular spaces (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2015) in order to highlight the often individual and diverse nature of women in local programs.

This article will examine these gendered dynamics through the interactions of a Sierra Leonean peacebuilding organization called Fambul Tok. It began operating in 2008 by a Sierra Leonean human rights activist named John Caulker. The program design was largely developed through a partnership between Caulker and an American, Libby Hoffman, whose organization, Catalyst for Peace, was Fambul Tok’s primary donor. This small organization had approximately 20–30 core staff who were all Sierra Leonean and worked in six of the 14 districts (at that time). Following on from broader trends in the early- to mid-2000s, Fambul Tok sought to mobilize cultural and traditional mechanisms to facilitate reconciliation ceremonies for rural Sierra Leonean communities. The program attempted to address the perceived justice and reconciliation gap left by international peacebuilding and transitional justice processes, namely the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), who were critiqued for not adequately incorporating local needs and priorities. One of the key gaps the organization highlighted was in relation to female victims of the 11-year conflict (1991–2002), who could not or chose not to participate in other transitional justice and peacebuilding mechanisms. Due to the fact that Fambul Tok was run by and for Sierra Leoneans, there is an underlying assumption that cultural considerations were taken into account. This, however, does not mean that women were also part of such considerations. In fact, women’s experiences and the ways they employed agency in relation to Fambul Tok were diverse. Using feminist frameworks to analyze these experiences within a local setting, I will illustrate how various power dynamics played out within Fambul Tok’s programs. Sometimes women’s roles reinforced existing patriarchal structures, while other times they demonstrated different forms of agency – whether in the form of action or inaction, speaking or silence – to shape the program for individual and communal preferences.
This analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in rural communities in the Bombali district between 2014–2016. I gained access for research in large part because I had volunteered with them during my Master’s in the summer of 2012 and built a rapport with staff. The Bombali district was chosen based on national and district consultations with staff members. The villages where I conducted research were based on where the organization had already decided to work during that period. I conducted participant observation at meetings leading up to and at the reconciliation ceremonies in the communities where Fambul Tok was operating, discretely attending and documenting these events, with the permission of both the organization and community leaders. I returned to these communities independently afterward to conduct semi-structured individual interviews with an independent research assistant.2 (Please see the Interviews Cited section at the end of this article for details of the six interviews referred to in this article.) Since I am examining experiences and agency through a feminist lens, I also seek to mitigate the extent of my own inferences. As noted by Jessica Auchter (2012), scholars frequently invoke an agential framework, inscribing meaning and categories of analysis onto particular research and, in so doing, they are taking away women’s agency and framing their actions in order to fit particular narratives. Therefore, while I engage with empirical evidence and use an intersectional lens to analyse these points, I do not intend to conclude whether this is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, whether the program was or was not effective, or to what extent it was empowering or emancipatory, but rather let ‘the actions speak for themselves’ (Auchter, 2012: 134). This is in an effort to illustrate a multi-faceted image of how agency was deployed and for what purpose, and the diverse meanings that accompanied it, to illustrate how ‘justice’ and ‘reconciliation’ are not just societal processes, but also individual.

This article is divided into four sections. Firstly, I explore the critical peacebuilding literature in conjunction with feminist discussions in peacebuilding and transitional justice. Second, I examine how gender dynamics manifested in Sierra Leonean transitional justice and peacebuilding programs and Fambul Tok’s approach to incorporating women within Sierra Leone’s local peacebuilding agenda. I will then turn to the empirical data from women who participated in Fambul Tok’s programs to illustrate through women’s experiences that they were both subjects and agents in shaping them. Feminist transitional and peacebuilding scholars frequently like to invoke agency as a demonstration of the possibilities of emancipation, highlighting the positive ways in which agency is employed to co-opt, appropriate and resist particular structures, when, in fact, agency is not always emancipatory or transformative. I will ultimately argue that examining local relations with an empirical case study deconstructs the homogeneity of women’s experiences by illustrating the diverse and multiple forms of agency enacted differently over time. These experiences and perspectives were, however, largely individual and contingent upon pre-existing status. Thus, agency cannot wholly be understood as positive or negative, but results in a diverse range of experiences for women within the ‘local’.

**Gendered and feminist perspectives in transitional justice and peacebuilding**

There has been an increasing recognition and incorporation of gender literature into post-conflict studies, particularly transitional justice and peacebuilding, over the last decade.
In the initial wave of transitional justice proceedings, which largely addressed injustices of authoritarian regimes in eastern Europe and South America in the late 80s and early 90s, feminist discourses were largely absent (Arthur, 2009). When gender roles did gain recognition within the discourse, much of the gendered transitional justice literature focused on how institutions (such as courts and truth commissions) failed to adequately incorporate or address gender-related crimes and, when they did, they largely framed women as victims (Bell and O’Rourke, 2007). Similarly, initial waves of peacebuilding were predominantly top-down, state-centric solutions addressing instances of armed conflict. It was not until the 1990s that peacebuilding operations began to incorporate aspects of gender equality (McLeod and O’Reilly, 2019).

While this recognition was a positive shift, in practice these programs continue to essentialize women and reproduce the gendered hierarchies that peacebuilding programs were, at least theoretically, attempting to dismantle (Hudson, 2016; Shepherd, 2008). For example, in both transitional justice and peacebuilding narratives, women have been broadly categorized in one of two ways: as victims or peacemakers. First, victim narratives about sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) have been used in transitional justice proceedings to underscore the extremity of violence and symbolize the suffering that war frequently entails (Kent, 2014; Ross, 2003). In reality though, such violence is often a prominent feature of social life in peace time too, which then becomes weaponized during war (Abdullah et al., 2010; Boesten, 2010; Sigsworth and Valji, 2012). Second, women are understood through their maternal roles as caretakers which make them somehow better positioned to promote peace. Nicole George (2016) discusses the widespread expectation that women will advocate and help build peace because conflicts get in the way of being dutiful caretakers. These frames ultimately generalize female experiences and reproduce patriarchal understandings of gender roles, which obscures the various ways women employ agency in times of both war and peace.

Over the past 15 years, post-conflict discourses have become increasingly critical, reflecting on how different groups in society uniquely engage with their experiences of war, authoritarianism and violence, as well as the institutions and programs that have been developed to address peace and justice. A key shift in both transitional justice and peacebuilding has been an engagement with the ‘local’ – a contentious (and broad) term that frequently refers to the people and places outside official institutional and governmental processes and ‘whose voices are least likely to be heard’ (Hughes et al., 2015: 818). While these debates have further shifted the gender focus from government officials and top-down policies to more engagement with ‘ordinary people’ and ‘the everyday’ (Randazzo, 2016; Richmond, 2009), much of the critical literature also reproduces and essentializes the social categories they have attempted to critique. For example, while the international–local dichotomy has been heavily scrutinized by critical peacebuilding scholars, the response of focusing on hybridity presumes that notions of international and local are fixed (Chandler, 2013). Furthermore, scholars like Heidi Hudson have pointed out how fixations of the everyday and the local have ultimately produced a ‘sanitized picture of the local/traditional as gender-neutral and depoliticized, where chiefs still speak on behalf of rural women and other marginalized’ (2016: 196) populations, thereby often ignoring individual experiences and (gendered) agency within these post-conflict contexts.
More recently, scholars have demonstrated the benefits of using feminist theory to engage with these critical concepts in order to address the ‘gender gap’ in post-conflict literature. Feminist scholarship offers analytical tools to deconstruct homogenous categories, such as the ‘local’ and ‘women’. Laura McLeod (2015) and Stefanie Kappler and Nicolas Lemay-Hébert (2019), for example, have engaged feminist theory to delineate how power relations manifest within these critical concepts. Lemay-Hébert and Kappler have illustrated how employing intersectionality – a concept now central to feminist theory which refers to the various components that make up one’s identity – in peace and conflict studies can help overcome many of the critiques surrounding the constructed binaries (such as international–local) in its sub-fields and allow for engagement ‘with power relations that shape the formation of identities in peacebuilding contexts’ (2019: 161). McLeod has similarly argued that employing feminist theory can unpack power relations and the logics underpinning critical concepts, like hybridity. She contends that a feminist lens can shed light on how mundane (often personal) practices and experiences can operate alongside macro-political process to shape post-conflict initiatives (2015: 52). While I agree with McLeod, further empirical engagement is needed to dissect the diversity within ‘localism’ that she highlights (2015: 61), particularly amongst women, in order to better address the often-generalized status of women that Hudson (2016) has critiqued.

In order to engage with the nuances of women within the ‘local’, it is necessary to understand how experiences and agency manifest. Following on from McLeod (2015), I also argue that feminist scholar Christine Sylvester’s notion of ‘experience’ is useful for delineating diversity in post-conflict settings. She understands experience as the broader physical and emotional connections that people live ‘with their bodies and their minds and as social creatures in specific circumstances’ (2013: 5). While Sylvester uses ‘experience’ as a frame for better understanding war, I argue that this can also be extrapolated to better understand individuals, specifically women, navigating transitions and peace(building). As noted by Julian et al. (2019: 211) engaging with experiences during conflict not only enriches our understandings of conflicts themselves, but can also aid peacebuilding. They note how ‘experience is universal in the sense that we all experience everyday social reality, it is also personal in that it cannot be generalised’ (Julian et al., 2019: 216). By magnifying different (particularly female) experiences, diverse and complex understandings of both conflict and peace emerge.

Further, conflict experiences inform post-conflict experiences – both on individual and societal levels. These connections and continuities deserve more significant attention. The experience framework can also illustrate how other non-violent experiences within communities, or even with the very institutions that are meant to help individuals move past their war-related experiences, inform individual agency and personal perspectives. The experience frame can, thus, be extrapolated to better understand individual subjectivities in post-conflict, specifically local, programs. As McLeod (2015) points out in relation to experience and hybridity, by engaging with diverse, personal experiences, we better understand how power relations shape negotiations between international and local.

In addition, documenting experiences within these (local) contexts is also part of data collection during fieldwork. Allowing different individuals to tell their narratives
centralizes what is important to them (thereby allowing informants to create transcripts as they see fit). These narratives provide more nuanced, comprehensive insights into the often undervalued ‘everyday’ (Campbell et al., 2019) within periods of conflict and peacebuilding and, in turn, provide a foundation for understanding how different types of knowledge have been produced (Julian et al., 2019; Martin de Almagro, 2018). Therefore, I argue that engaging with an experiential framework, both conceptually and methodologically, provides a more comprehensive understanding of power relations amongst women solely within the ‘local’.

Furthermore, this article builds on McLeod’s argument by examining the role of agency alongside experience. As Sylvester points out, experience is intimately connected to the body, ‘a unit which has agency’ (2013: 5). Agency can, therefore, be an active part of experience. Gendered agency has increasingly been analysed in post-conflict processes and manifests in different ways. Björkdahl and Selimovic (2015), for example, look at the various critical, creative and transformative forms of gendered agency that women use to negotiate patriarchal, post-conflict structures, countering the notion that women are passive actors in these processes but positing that they engage through multiple and diverse modalities. As Hanna Ketola (2020) points out, though, agency has frequently been framed in post-conflict literature as a mode of resistance, including by Björkdahl and Selimovic, who focus some of their discussion around resisting modes of gendered domination. While I agree that much of the transitional justice and peacebuilding literature overemphasizes agency as resistance and misses some of the nuances of these discussions, Björkdahl and Selimovic’s engagement provides a good starting point that highlights diverse agential modalities in post-conflict processes.

There are, however, many ways of understanding how agency is exercised, even through more passive action. Discussing war-related experiences is central to many transitional justice and peacebuilding programs, which have claimed that silence can inflict further injury, deny acknowledgment to victims and ultimately be an obstacle to healing (Eastmond and Selimovic, 2012; Obradovic-Wochnik, 2013). Silence is often interpreted as a type of inaction or is somehow imposed and, as a result, is the opposite of agency. However, as Johanna Mannergren Selimovic (2018) points out, there is both disabling (meaning imposed) and enabling (articulations of experience and part of communication) functions of silence. Silence is then not necessarily passive, but can be, at least in part, an active choice. By choosing not to speak, silence can act as a desire to not relive particular experiences, and a signifier of a quieter, much more subtle transition process, or in some cases, a refusal to be further shamed by perpetrators. There is thus an ‘active quality of silence’ (George and Kent, 2017: 519) which deserves further scrutiny. Ultimately, silence takes on different forms and meanings at different points in time.

Inaction is, therefore, also a form of agency and is particularly relevant in the Sierra Leonean context where social forgetting was part of navigating memories of the conflict (see for example Shaw, 2007, discussed in further detail below). Agency, then, is never fully active, constrained, passive or transformative. Rather, agency is fluid and analysed here ‘within the context in which women are able to act’ (Hume and Wilding, 2019: 253, their emphasis) in order to emphasize the different, individual and highly personal ways in which females experience post-conflict programs. Drawing on research with Fambul Tok, this article links different forms of agency to deconstruct homogenous narratives of
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women. It thereby showcases the diversity of individual female experiences and further unpacks power relations within local post-conflict settings.

**Women in conflict and post-conflict Sierra Leone**

Fambul Tok is a Sierra Leonean peacebuilding organization created shortly after the 11-year (1991–2002) civil conflict. Over the course of the conflict, various armed groups manifested at different periods, including the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), the sobels (soldiers by day, rebels by night), the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and the West Side boys. Individual and group allegiances were constantly shifting, making it difficult to differentiate ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides. All armed groups perpetrated horrifying acts of violence against civilians, but especially against women. According to the Truth Commission report, ‘[W]omen and girls were raped, forced into sexual slavery and endured other acts of sexual violence, including mutilations, torture and a host of other cruel and inhumane treatment’ (TRC Report, 2004, Vol. 2: 14).

These accounts do not, however, provide a comprehensive picture of women during the war. As Chris Coulter argues, Sierra Leonean women ‘were neither ill-fated victims with no agency, nor ferocious perpetrators in command of their own destiny’ (2009: 150; also see Ibrahim, 2006). Sierra Leonean women – whether or not they had been the subjects of wartime violence – most often negotiated their circumstances using what Mats Utas refers to as ‘tactical agency’ (2005: 408), which sometimes meant perpetrating violence and at other times being the subjects of (sexual) violence. Other women experienced economic hardship, but may not have been physically harmed. Wartime experiences significantly varied amongst the female population and would, therefore, produce diverse ‘post-conflict’ experiences.

Neither the wide range of female experiences, nor female priorities more broadly, were taken into consideration when the Sierra Leonean transitional justice and peacebuilding programs were being designed. One primary example of this disconnect was the notion of publicly speaking about wartime experiences. Sierra Leonean women were, generally speaking, wary of providing testimony at both the TRC and the SCSL. Of the 7700 statements taken by TRC officials, 36% were made by women (TRC Report, Vol. 1, 170) and even fewer spoke in public hearings. The desire to speak about the conflict was an assumption made by the architects of the TRC, who presumed this would be a cathartic release for traumatized individuals. According to one statement taker, when women provided testimonies, they often gave a general overview of particular events that occurred and the communal suffering that ensued, but rarely did they stray into personal or intimate details, such as sexual violence (Friedman, 2017).³

While the TRC sought to highlight their efforts of inclusivity, they were, in fact, relying on the emotional labor of the testimonies of a small group of women that ultimately paints a homogenous picture of victimhood and extreme violence. Volume III, Chapter 3 of the report summarizes women’s experiences, largely highlighting how women were ‘particular targets of malice and violence’ (p. 86) and even blaming women for their own inability to overcome patriarchal structures: ‘The biggest stumbling block to enhanced women’s participation lies in the outlook of women themselves’ (p. 228). Thus,
institutional goals of extracting particular ‘violent’ narratives and framing women as victims were prioritized over the needs and values of many Sierra Leonean women, as well as nuanced perspectives of their wartime experiences.

The SCSL also claims to have made big strides on behalf of women. The Court did, for example, set international legal precedents by acknowledging sexual slavery as a crime against humanity and recognizing forced marriage as criminal (Oosterveld, 2014). However, the actual participation of women in the Court’s processes was fairly minimal. According to Coulter (2009), women did in some instances provide testimony to be used in the Court, but later retracted their statements out of fear of the consequences. They did not see themselves as contributing to ‘delivering justice’ or ‘bringing peace’. Rather, by publicly discussing their role in the war – as victims of sexual violence, or as bushwives – they were contravening the community status quo of silence, some out of fear of repercussions from former rebels or their communities, while others simply did not desire discussing their experiences.

Thus, Sierra Leone’s main post-conflict programs did not include or align with female priorities, and, in some instances, actually did more harm than good. These institutions were designed without taking nuanced cultural (and particularly gendered) aspects of the conflict, and society more broadly, into consideration, and ultimately painted an essentialized picture of women as wartime victims. They evidence how transitional justice and peacebuilding architects prioritize the institutional and program design, such as a court or truth-telling mechanism, without necessarily accounting for the diversity and multiplicity of needs and experiences. Social structures and cultural norms are secondary considerations and such aspects are often incorporated as an afterthought, if at all. In this instance, it often meant that women were caught between the expectations of transitional justice institutions and those of their communities. Thus, the unintended consequences of these institutions were in large part that, rather than transforming gendered hierarchies, they reaffirmed the female victim narrative.

Female engagement with Fambul Tok: agency and experience

Fambul Tok was created in response to many of the critiques levelled against other post-conflict institutions. In a report by the TRC Working Group for Sierra Leone led by Fambul Tok’s founder and current executive director, John Caulker, it was argued that the TRC was not designed in a locally or culturally sensitive way. Fambul Tok was thus founded to help facilitate community reconciliation by creating mechanisms that were more culturally relevant – its legitimacy made possible in large part by the fact that the founder and employees are all Sierra Leonean. In addition, the organization’s programs were, at least in theory, supposed to be designed by the communities themselves. In particular, the program was created for rural Sierra Leoneans who could not or were unable to participate in other post-conflict programs. In actual fact, though, women’s experiences of the program suggest that the organization, like other post-conflict processes, reinforced gendered hierarchies and presumed the need and desire for truth-telling.

A key component of the program was to ensure that women’s participation was incorporated across the different activities the organization facilitated. Their book states: ‘We have incorporated women’s participation into every aspect of design and implementation,
and into every community structure we help put in place’ (Fambul Tok book: 80–81). Fambul Tok understood women to be a crucial part of the reconciliation process, but, according to interviews and observation, female experiences with the organization were mixed. Women were at certain points subjects of the organization’s agenda, which at times reinforced ‘traditional’ gender hierarchies, as well as more general unequal relations between Fambul Tok workers and communities. At other times, women employed their own agency and actively shaped the program, resulting in a variety of experiences.

The bonfire ceremony was Fambul Tok’s focal event. This ceremony, designed and implemented by Fambul Tok staff with some help and input from community stakeholders, was a space where individuals (both victims and perpetrators) could come forward in front of the community and discuss their war-related experiences. If, for example, the person who harmed someone was present, this person could step forward and apologize. The victim would have the chance to publicly forgive. In every case, one community hosted the actual ceremony and other villages in the surrounding area (or section) were invited to attend, but this often required various meetings and discussions leading up to the bonfire, which required women to communicate and coordinate various tasks to ensure the event was ‘correctly enacted’ according to the organization’s parameters. The ceremony itself often incorporated ‘traditional’ social components, such as rituals, dancing and music throughout the evening that some women took part in, through a variety of roles, while others did not take part at all. After the bonfire ceremony, the organization encouraged women to form groups referred to as Peace Mothers, which could better enhance their livelihood through various economic activities, such as communal farming. Examining this program through a gender lens illustrates how local programs are not necessarily more emancipatory or transformative than global initiatives, but rather highlights how different women navigate agency within particular (program) structures and ultimately, how women enact and are subject to diverse and multiple experiences.

**Bonfire preparation: reinforcing gender roles and hierarchies amongst women**

Prior to the actual bonfire ceremony taking place, there were initial meetings and preparation, where women were expected to actively participate in an effort to make them feel empowered and part of shaping the program. However, the activities leading up to the ceremony actually reinforced traditional female roles and emphasized communal hierarchies. Simultaneously, though, women actively engaged and capitalized on particular aspects of the program. At initial meetings where Fambul Tok introduced their program, they only engaged with key community stakeholders, which meant only prominent women such as mammy queens, chairladies, secret society leaders and wives of chiefs or pastors attended. The key message that framed the need for the program was that ‘unity leads to development’. The implication was that unresolved war-related issues were dividing people and, to overcome this, they needed to be discussed for people to become united, which would ultimately bring development (broadly defined). This logic is predicated upon two assumptions: first, that community members still harbored war-related traumas, and second, that discussing them publicly was going to help them move past their experiences.
The prominent female stakeholders who attended the initial meetings were both subjects of the organization’s agenda, and leaders in shaping the program. In initial meetings, women were often subject to critique for not acting or engaging in ways expected by the organization’s staff. For example, in one meeting, two women were scolded and told to separate because they were ‘too chatty’. They were also often called out by Fambul Tok’s staff for not answering questions or contributing as much as the men, suggesting a lack of sensitivity amongst Fambul Tok staff in relation to gender relations and inequality. It is not uncommon that in mixed-sex groups, women do not speak as freely as men and so to put them on the spot is intimidating. Thus, while participation and local input were highlighted by the organization as key attributes of their approach, women were, at times, subject to particular expectations that did not feel natural or comfortable.

These select female stakeholders were, however, also largely in charge of facilitating and ensuring the events surrounding the bonfire were correctly enacted. They had to collect communal donations (monetary and material) for the meal prior to the ceremony from as many households in their communities as were willing to contribute. They were also in charge of the shopping for the meal, often meaning that select women would travel hours and stay the night in a town elsewhere, as surrounding villages also attended and this meant buying substantial quantities. The women also collected the majority of the firewood for the bonfire itself. Thus, these preparations, which required a lot of planning and physical labor, could be disruptive, with some women having to abandon their regular farming activities to ensure the preparations were done. In some instances, preparations even caused conflict between women. In one village, two women spent much of the morning of the ceremony fighting because they both wanted to do the cooking in their respective part of the amalgamated town. This was eventually settled by Fambul Tok staff intervening and it was agreed that they would cook on the boundary of the amalgamation. These examples, however, demonstrate that the actual onus of ensuring the preparation and enactment ‘behind the scenes’ leading up to the ceremony was largely the responsibility of a particular set of women. Thus, while Fambul Tok sought to promote women’s empowerment and transformation, their program, at certain points, actually reinforced traditional gender roles, caused tensions among women, and disrupted everyday activities.

While there were certainly expectations placed on these women, their agency was, of course, fluid and they took advantage of the circumstances presented by Fambul Tok’s program. During the cooking preparation prior to the ceremony, for example, women from surrounding villages came to help. These women are not often able to see one another and so the bonfire provided an opportunity for people to socialize and catch up with friends. Women gossiped and chatted about their children and families. At certain points during the preparation they would begin dancing. At one ceremony, a woman from an adjacent village started to beat a canister to make music while others were cooking, providing a lively atmosphere. Thus, women were the facilitators of ensuring key components of the event occurred, but they capitalized on the opportunity to come together as friends and reaffirm social bonds. None of this, however, had anything to do with reconciling wartime experiences. Rather, these women appropriated this space for their own enjoyment, to discuss contemporary issues and gossip with friends. Observing these various phases leading up to the bonfire demonstrated how much responsibility for
the event was on women, but they also saw themselves as benefiting from it. As one chairlady stated: ‘The women did more than men for the bonfire. But there were many women around and it made me happy . . . [It was] empowering for women’ (Interview 1). This emphasizes how, while there may have seemingly been a burden on women, some individuals did feel empowered by activating agency in particular parts of the program.

Those involved in these preparations were, however, a select number of women (namely female stakeholders), as participation did not necessarily extend to all women in the community. The quote above is, for example, from a chairlady in the hosting community, and, while it felt empowering for her to be part of organizing a big event for an NGO, she is also already in a position of leadership and would often be called upon to organize such events. Other women I spoke with who did not associate with stakeholders were not even aware an event was taking place on the day of the ceremonies. Thus, women’s roles and participation in Fambul Tok’s program varied and actually reinforced existing leadership structures and communal hierarchies amongst women, rather than transforming them.

**The bonfire ceremony: locally (gender) sensitive truth-telling?**

In their media, Fambul Tok explain that, within this bonfire space, hierarchies disappear and this allows women to discuss war-related experiences: ‘women [can] share all kinds of unexpected stories, even stories that accuse their leaders.⁴ In another context, a woman who calls out a chief in public, much less accuses him of a crime, can be thrown in jail. But Fambul Tok’s approach to reconciliation transcends even this social rule’ (Fambul Tok book, 2011: 81). Thus, the organization differentiates themselves from other forums, such as the TRC, by claiming to create set-aside, culturally relevant spaces in familiar settings where women feel safe to publicly discuss traumatic experiences and comfortable accusing community members of crimes perpetrated against them. My research, however, suggests this was a simplistic assumption and there are risks in presuming that local engagement automatically equates to a more gender-sensitive approach. Women had nuanced perspectives of the bonfire ceremonies, particularly their experiences of speaking publicly and listening to accounts about the war. Often when the bonfire began, a Fambul Tok staff member explained the purpose of the program to the audience, which would then be followed by some dancing and music. The music would abruptly stop and the testimonies component of the ceremony began, enacting what felt like a significant rupture in the program. As people began to speak about their war-related experiences, the crowd often dispersed, demonstrating a lack of interest or willingness to engage with war-related stories.

Many women were disturbed to both hear and speak about war-related experiences at the bonfire ceremony.⁵ While men also expressed mixed feelings about their bonfire experiences, women were seemingly more vocal about their objections. One woman stated: ‘If a person has done bad, you just forget, if you keep saying it, it will distress people, so don’t say it out’ (Interview 2). Another woman stated: ‘Some things should be discussed in public, some in private. Some of the stuff discussed at the bonfire should
have been private (such as the incident where one boy accused another of stealing during the war). This should have been discussed privately. Blaming in public is not necessarily good’ (Interview 3). Thus, while the purpose of the bonfire ceremony was to provide a more intimate and culturally sensitive setting to discuss and reconcile war-related experiences between community members, speaking publicly still directly contravened the norms and values of many women. Changing the setting and audience did not change the fundamental lack of desire for publicly discussing these experiences.

Furthermore, of the four bonfire ceremonies I witnessed, only one quarter of the people who spoke about their wartime experiences were women. In one interview after a bonfire, Aminata,6 who was a farmer and did not hold any particular social status in the community, stated that she spoke out of a sense of obligation, because Fambul Tok were guests of their community and speaking about war-related experiences was the program agenda. This sense of obligation was also bound up in the broader ‘reconciliation leads to development’ narrative. She participated in the bonfire ceremony with hope that the organization would provide other types of much-desired development assistance. At the bonfire, she had given an overview of her wartime experience, discussing how the rebels had taken everything and burnt down her husband’s and father’s homes. After the bonfire, however, she was uncertain about whether speaking had been the right thing to do: ‘The talking was troubling, I was afraid and ashamed. Afterward, some said “Why did you speak out? War don don.” Others said I was brave but said “If it were me, I wouldn’t speak, war don don.” Be it good or bad, I said it out’ (Interview 4). The act of discussing war-related experiences was not necessarily empowering or cathartic for Aminata. It did not help her reconcile, but rather drew both admiration and critique from other community members. This particular experience not only illustrates diverse female perspectives on the act of publicly speaking about their trauma, but also how those who did speak were seen by others in the community.

These female perspectives align with other literature on speaking publicly about war-related experiences in Sierra Leone. Many anthropologists (Kelsall, 2005; Millar, 2010; Shaw, 2007) have, for example, suggested that people did not speak ‘to a point of release’ at the TRC and that public testimonies were projected in a ‘detached and clinical way’ (Kelsall, 2005: 365). Fambul Tok, while framing themselves as more local and better in touch with the needs and priorities of Sierra Leoneans, including women, did in fact reproduce universal ideas about the powers of truth telling – narratives peddled by organizations that Fambul Tok had been created in response to. For women in particular, though, ‘coping with memories of pain, humiliation, and violence was often a private and not public event’ (Coulter, 2009: 173), which was also reflected in women’s experiences at the bonfire ceremony. Some women chose not to participate or take part in either the preparations or ceremony at all and it is important to note that silence, or inaction, should not be mistaken as a passive act. Since listening to war-related stories was undesired by particular women, many actively chose to leave and neither spoke nor listened to these accounts, thereby enacting a particular type of agency. These inactions are, as Nicole George and Lia Kent note, ‘an exercise of choice’, and while ‘this choice may not be made freely and autonomously, agency is nonetheless present’ (2017: 520). Further, those who felt a sense of obligation to speak publicly in order to ‘enact the program correctly’ were not necessarily constrained but rather made active choices with
the knowledge and hope of desired assistance. Thus, these diverse engagements and perspectives all involve mobilizing different types of agency ‘within the contexts in which they are able to act’ (Hume and Wilding, 2019), ultimately resulting in a wide range of experiences and outcomes.

The individual: multiple and fluid experiences and forms of agency

Finally, individuals did not just have a single experience but, rather, multiple, even conflicting, experiences at different points in time in the context of their engagement with Fambul Tok. Bintu, for example, had a much different experience at the bonfire ceremony from Aminata, discussed above. While Aminata seemingly regretted speaking publicly, Bintu had a positive experience speaking at the bonfire. She did, however, appropriate the space for an alternative, more pressing discussion. When she stood up to speak, she provided a brief overview of the conflict, in an effort to recognize and align with the program agenda. However, the majority of the time she actually spoke about an issue regarding her son, who had been outcast due to theft accusations. This incident had caused a rift between herself and other families in the community. She emphasized how speaking out on this particular issue was beneficial: ‘It felt good to speak because I had things on my mind, and I felt relieved after I spoke’ (Interview 5). Upon revisiting the village a few months later, another community member told me that this public apology had in fact helped her reconcile with the conflicting family and her son had been able to peacefully return to the community. Bintu’s experience with the ceremony and speaking publicly had, therefore, been positive and led to reconciliation between herself and community members.

Importantly though, Bintu is a mammy queen (a leadership position) who inevitably has significant social capital in the community. Her standing provided a certain confidence to not only speak, but actively diverge from the organization’s agenda. Simultaneously, though, Bintu’s privileged female position in the community also meant she had responsibility toward ensuring the program was enacted ‘correctly’. As part of the preparations for the bonfire, she was responsible for collecting material donations from community members, such as food and money. When she failed to solicit a sufficient amount, she was publicly reprimanded by the chief in front of Fambul Tok staff, as well as by staff members themselves.

Another woman, Kadi, was the chair of Fambul Tok’s Peace Mothers’ group at the time I met her. Although I did not witness the bonfire ceremony in her village, she had been involved with the initial planning and preparations of the Fambul Tok discussions, which meant that she also reiterated the Fambul Tok narrative about the need for reconciliation in order to develop. However, Kadi made no secret of the fact that she did not enjoy engaging with the accounts of the conflict at their community bonfire ceremony: ‘I was not happy to hear the confessions [during the bonfire ceremony]. I would have preferred not to hear them’ (Interview 6). She did not wholly object or resist Fambul Tok’s agenda, though. After the ceremony, her section formed a Peace Mothers’ group to grow and sell cassava leaves. While the purpose of these groups was to provide women ‘an informal dialogue space to address issues from the war, or other issues they are facing’ (Fambul Tok book, 2011: 90), the group was, as Kadi stated, more a means of
obtaining another source of income and created a productive space for women from nearby villages to maintain social bonds.

These women both had mixed experiences in relation to the program, but in different ways and at different points in time. When these engagements are analyzed and delineated individually, it demonstrates the diverse, multiple and contested forms of agency and experiences these different women had in relation to the program. For example, Bintu was disempowered by the way she was publicly scolded for her inability to collect donations, but later felt empowered and relieved after having appropriated the bonfire space to apologize. This re-emphasizes how agency and experience cannot be understood as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ or ‘empowering’ or ‘dismenpowering’, but rather that these characteristics are fluid, multiple and frequently contradictory.

**Conclusion**

The ‘local’ in post-conflict settings has been subject to significant scrutiny in recent years and, while the literature has theoretically pointed to notions of diverse and multiple experiences, they have not necessarily been empirically examined, especially in relation to gender. Further, much of what has been analysed as local has often referred to national-level individuals or civil society leaders. Looking at female engagement with Fambul Tok, which was founded and run by Sierra Leoneans and worked in very rural areas, provides insights into more marginalized experiences, as well as the gender dynamics that operate in the functioning of a self-acclaimed local peacebuilding operation. This article demonstrated that, in spite of publicly stating the desire for women’s participation and empowerment, local organizations are not immune from patriarchal gender structures, and often reinforce them in the same ways as other, more international institutions, such as TRCs and courts. While Fambul Tok did not explicitly emphasize female victimhood in ways that, say, the SCSL did, the burden of the ceremony’s organization certainly fell to women, and the discomfort with which many women experienced public discussions related to the war suggests this local program also did not reflect their priorities and sensitivities.

Women in post-conflict contexts are frequently discussed as homogenous groups. While the literature has certainly moved beyond the ‘victim’ and ‘peacemaker’ narratives, women are still often represented with broad strokes. Examining women within the context of a local program, however, has demonstrated both the diversity of experience and perspectives within particular communities, as well as diversity of experiences over time. The agency examined here – enacted within particular structures – does not suggest distinct passivity, emancipation, transformation or empowerment, instead showing that agency consisted of elements of all or some of these different modalities at different points in time.

This is further reflected in the fact that there were multiple outcomes for and shaped by women. Some benefited from the program, while others were negatively impacted or simply chose not to participate. This was the result of a wide range of both structural and agential factors and ultimately meant that gendered agency was fluid, acting as simultaneously enabling and constraining within different contexts. Much like it is difficult to draw general conclusions about female experiences, the same can also be said for Fambul
Tok. It cannot necessarily be concluded as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, as impactful or not impactful, but rather shapes and is shaped by the individual participants with which it engages, resulting in a wide range of individual and communal outcomes.

Engaging with local programs is, however, not the only means of examining experience and agency in post-conflict settings. People engage in a wide range of everyday ‘unrecognizable’ mechanisms to move past their war experiences as well (Martin, 2016). In this case, though, what these empirics demonstrate is the various forms of agency, which result in diverse and multiple experiences of individual women. While McLeod (2015) argued that engaging with these personal experiences can help us better understand power relations between the global and international, it can, as evidenced here, also help understand dynamics within local settings and how (individual) women ultimately shape and are shaped by local peace(building) programs.

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Notes

1. Notably, the organization still operates, but with a different agenda unrelated to post-conflict reconciliation.
2. From an ethical perspective, I conducted interviews individually and with the utmost sensitivity and care. While I did inquire about wartime experiences after a few visits and some familiarity was established, participants led these discussions and I did not push for further information beyond what people felt comfortable sharing. This research was approved by the University of Edinburgh ethics committee prior to fieldwork.
3. This was notably my own experience in interviewing women as well.
4. Leaders reference village stakeholders, such as chiefs. Communal hierarchies would generally frown upon someone accusing a leader but, in this quote, it is suggested that this space disregards hierarchies and anyone can speak or accuse anyone, regardless of status.
5. In their article entitled The Local International Interface in Peacebuilding Experiences (2019), Boege and Rinck note that Fambul Tok staff emphasized the overwhelming desire to speak about rape and wartime experiences publicly. Speaking to the actual women who both attended and spoke at bonfire ceremonies (and I myself being present at a number of ceremonies), I did not find this to be the case.
6. Names have been changed for anonymity purposes.
7. A common Krio phrase often used to emphasize that the war is finished.
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