A feminist opening of resilience: Elizabeth Grosz, Liberian Peace Huts and IR critiques

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Published online: 13 August 2022
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Abstract
While the United Nations (UN) and other international organisations have celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, critical scholars claim that the agenda has rarely been able to foster resilience. They show how programmes have only slowly and partially achieved gender balancing and parity in war-affected countries. The limitation we identify in the debate between policy and critique is that resilience has often been reduced to an egalitarian project—where mechanical policies and schemes are deployed to ameliorate the conditions of women, enhance their participation in decision-making and pursue the equality between women and men—to advance in sustaining peace. In this article we complement the existing critiques by engaging with the feminist writings of Elizabeth Grosz, as well as with indigenous feminist practices in Liberia. We nurture a feminism that affirms the agency and inventiveness of women to begin to reimagine resilience as difference: a resilience that thrives outside governance structures and the confines of neoliberal policymaking.

Keywords Difference · Equality · Feminism · Grosz · Liberia · Resilience

Introduction
In October 2020, policymakers hosted a myriad of webinars and roundtable discussions, as well as published dozens of toolkits, timelines, interactive websites and policy briefs to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Since then, they have recommitted to continuing the work that still needs to be done to protect women from sexual and gender-based violence, to guarantee equal access for women and
girls to humanitarian and development assistance and ensure their full and meaningful participation in all peace and security efforts (UNSCR 2020). Resilience has become a dominant policy framework through which communities can improve their ability to cope with man-made crises or natural catastrophes, notably by tapping into the ‘underexploited’ women’s mediation and negotiation skills (Bourbeau 2018; Juncos and Joseph 2020). With an emphasis on greater inclusion and conflict prevention, policies to foster resilience have helped strengthen the implementation of the WPS agenda (Juncos and Bourbeau, this issue). For policymakers, resilience is the icing on the twentieth anniversary cake.

International Relations (IR) feminist scholars have also taken the opportunity to publish commemorative special issues and commentaries that criticise the tamed and selective adoption of feminist demands by international institutions. They claim that as a result, the agenda has been narrowed and watered down, distorting or even betraying its spirit and transformative potential (i.e. Shepherd 2020a, b; Krystalli 2020). Critics push for a more radical, inclusive, demilitarised and, in sum, feminist implementation of the WPS agenda for the third decade of its existence.

In this article, we are similarly concerned with the ever-disappointing partial adoption of feminist demands in gender-sensitive international programmes to foster resilience and peace, although we provide a complementary perspective based on affirmation first, instead of on critique, and then affirmation. We believe that by continuously critiquing the interpretation, translation and implementation of the WPS agenda by programmes of resilience, these critiques are reenergizing policy approaches to learn, recompose and endure, only to inevitably fail again (Zalewski and Runyan 2013). As we show in the first part of the article, both policymakers and their critics tend to reduce resilience to an egalitarian project, where bureaucratic institutions and mechanical policy initiatives are deployed to pursue gender equality and advance in sustaining peace, compensating women for socio-economic injustices and increasing their participation in decision-making (Hudson 2021). Although critiques have rightly shown that further initiatives, funds and efforts are needed to achieve gender balancing and parity, we claim that feminist critiques are often stripped from their aspiration to transform the existing gender power relations, as soon as they are selectively taken up and channelled through funds, projects, and deadlines to strengthen resilience. Shall we wait another decade, hoping that the implementation of the WPS agenda will succeed and finally catch up with its transformative potential?

Alternatively, other than critique, we mobilise an affirmative feminism to consider how resilience thrives outside governance structures and the confines of neoliberal policymaking. Compared to other disciplines where critical and affirmation feminisms co-exist and complement one another, IR feminism—including our own previous work—has concentrated on critique of gender power hierarchies before the prospects of emancipation. Generally, it is assumed that openings to new possibilities for societies to become more equal come after necessary disruption and critique of current approaches. This is problematic because it has prevented the discipline from exploring different knowledge systems and practices, capable of escaping neoliberal reappropriation, and imagining alternative presents and futures. Therefore, we argue for a shift in focus: rather than studying the effects or limits of specific
resilience policies on gender equality, we suggest pondering the specific practices that enable women to become resilient in post-war contexts. Affirmation is intended to complement necessary critical perspectives on the implementation of WPS, so long as affirmation is understood as existing prior to (or separated from) critique (Bargués-Pedreny 2019).

In this article, we rethink resilience and critique through a twofold manoeuvre. First, we draw on the writings of feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, who has been surprisingly ignored in most IR discussions. Grosz began her academic career in the 1980s, at the University of Sydney, trying to develop a ‘corporeal feminism’ that could express and affirm women’s particular experiences, which were necessarily different from men’s and humanist (male) definitions of identity; to do so, she built on an anti-essentialist, non-biologistic, non-reductionist notion of a sexually specific female body, which is continually becoming and generating new ideas, meaning and effects (Grosz 1987).

Together with other Australian ‘corporeal’ feminists such as Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, Grosz not only critiqued the patriarchal discourses that assigned a fixed corporeality to women but also distanced herself from the Anglo-American post-structuralist feminist tradition of Judith Butler and others, who underlined the non-coincidence between the real (nature, sex) and its representation (language, gender) to destabilise dominant systems of representation of the real (Colebrook 2000). ‘In contrast with Butler’s attention to conditions of representation, speech, and discourse, Grosz’s early work attempted to think of the body as that which marked representation with its own force, difference, and motility’ (Colebrook 2000: 84). Although Grosz’s philosophy has evolved beyond feminist concerns, she has kept nurturing a feminism of difference that goes beyond the pursuit of equality and the removal of binaries and hierarchies. For Grosz, the engine of difference, of endless variation and multiplicity is sexual difference. But this sexual difference is not about essentialising and reproducing a heteronormative order. Rather, it is about the bifurcation of life into at least two sexes, at least two kinds of bodies that love each other.1

Other feminist perspectives, particularly in the Black feminist, Afro-feminist and post-colonial tradition, have similarly drawn attention to the limits of (liberal) projects of rights and equality, as well as to the critiques that are meant to improve them. Afro-feminists emphasise how women from African descent are already living and expressing other approaches to gender justice based on their difference to men (Acholonu 1995; Nzegwu 1994; Tamale 2020). Here, the focus is mainly on Grosz because her work has matured in opposition to the equality project of the liberal feminist tradition as well as to post-structuralist critiques that emphasise the deconstruction and unsettlement of the assumptions and binaries that sustain power

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1 Feminist critiques that argue that Grosz reproduces an essentialising and binary discourse tend to miss the point. Indeed, a key concern in her work has been to challenge biological determinism and essentialism. For Grosz, life (ontology) is characterised by the dynamic and unpredictable production of ever more difference, of differentiation; and this constant production of difference is propelled by (at least two) sexually differentiated bodies. See Trappes (2019).
(and this ‘critique’ of the critique we are trying to bear in IR debates). We suggest that a move away from epistemological questions on the limits of policies to ultimately achieve gender equality or the eradication of inequalities (i.e. critique) towards ontology and the productive force of difference (i.e. affirmation) can stir debates and critical work on resilience in IR.

Second, we document the current activities carried out by female peace activists in Liberia as well as their subjective experiences in relation to the implementation of resilience projects. We build upon the set up and evolution of one of the most acclaimed instruments of post-conflict reconstruction and resilience in the country, the Peace Huts initiative, which combines traditional understandings of conflict resolution with international funding and programmes for women’s empowerment. Putting forward the case study of two groups of women which use the Peace Huts in a strikingly different manner (as a place to correct the existing inequalities, or as a place to cultivate difference), we seek to examine how Liberian women understand feminist resilience in their own ways. The first group of women, working as an NGO under the leadership of Leymah Gbowee, the Nobel Peace Prize winner for her contribution to the Liberian peace process, collaborates with international donors to implement projects on women’s empowerment and gender equality to obtain sustainable peace. The second group, which has received less international attention, does not participate in these projects, but rather uses the Peace Huts as sites where weekly meetings enable the affirmation of a collective female identity as community peacebuilder that reinvents itself in the everyday life of the post-war context. We claim that understanding how these women peace activists have been producing knowledge and political practices to improve their everyday life beyond the state and international governance logics can help overcome the danger of selective adoption of critical feminist IR perspectives.

The analysis and reflection of women peace activists in Liberia is based upon focus groups and field observations during three fieldwork visits to Monrovia and rural areas since 2013. We organised four focus groups, consisting of 10 women each, with women belonging to Peace Huts in three different counties in Liberia between November 2018 and August 2019. Focus groups and not individual interviews were the best method to collect data. We were not as much interested in individual attitudes, but rather in the group interactions and social representations. It was important to listen to women’s groups collectively and discuss their everyday experiences as members of Peace Huts. In addition, organising the focus groups in the physical space of the Peace Huts also enabled us to observe and engage with the different activities organised by the women. It was our own positionality and privilege as Western academics that gave us easy access to the intimate spaces created in the Peace Huts, take photographs, and occupy a considerable space on the agenda for the day. The focus groups were co-facilitated by an interpreter of Liberian English, who not only assisted us with framing and translating of questions, but also help women feel more at ease with our presence. It is important to note that it was precisely our encounter with these women and listening to their accounts of resilience and reimagining through their own cosmovisions that we, as Western academics, questioned our deeply hegemonic ideas of resilience and started a journey towards unlearning them. We have also conducted content analysis of documents from our
existing archive, including reports and background documents on the Peacebuilding Fund, Spotlight and Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund projects implemented in Liberia, to help us understand the logics and process of women’s organisations selection and the type of collective action funded by the UN, and then contrast with the work that women in the Peace Huts were doing.

When juxtaposing Grosz’s writings on life and difference with the struggles and experience of Liberian women, we are not applying theory to a particular case. Instead, we read both as theoretical resources that are useful to see the current limitations of IR feminism, as well as to imagine the operationalisation of new ideas and trajectories. Starting our analysis from affirmation and difference is not, of course, without limitations. As we discuss in the conclusion, the first is that projects of affirmation are easier to be enacted from a privileged position where one can be oblivious to oppression and redefine herself. The second limitation is that affirmation is less prepared to correct the shortcomings of peacebuilding agendas than critique (at least in the short term). The intention here is not to jettison critique or propose a disengagement with policy programmes. Rather, our aim is to suggest that IR feminism might combine and enact both strategies to re-think the discipline and bring a richer future into being. But affirmation must not come after or build upon critique. Openings of resilience can be found here and now, elsewhere than in the endless wait for disruption and promise of transformation of the existing international order.

When critique overpowers feminist perspectives in IR

In the dominant narratives of Western feminist thought, feminism has historically developed as a critique of patriarchal forms of oppression and public policies that have silenced and marginalised women. In the late 1960s, the second wave of feminism emerged as a liberation movement related to women’s experience of discrimination and inequality in the job market or before the law, in private and public life. The main concern was to reject patriarchy to enable (when or if abolished) the liberation of women from structural inequalities based on sexual difference (Friedan 1963; Millet 1970). According to David Duriesmith and Sara Meger, the three key tenets underpinning radical feminism are: ‘the belief in the transhistorical oppression of women by men (patriarchy); the role of sexual relations in establishing this oppression; and a commitment to revolutionary emancipation from patriarchy by abolishing oppressive sex/gender roles’ (Duriesmith and Meger 2020). Although the influence of ‘radical feminism’ has often fallen into oblivion and has even been dismissed by some feminist IR theorists, as Duriesmith and Meger deftly explain, we seek to argue that liberation of women from oppression represents the dominant logic (one of critique, where the yes of women comes after the no to patriarchy) that has propelled feminism in IR.

Today, a plurality of feminist perspectives on IR—such as cultural, post-structuralist, postcolonial, Black, indigenous, and queer—coexist and are less essentialist and more attentive to intersectional forms of discrimination than earlier waves of feminism. While examining these perspectives falls beyond the scope of the article (Prügl and Tickner 2018), we seek to suggest that in most contemporary feminisms
on IR, and those studying peace and conflict, in order to enact progress in research and ordinary life, and thus place women’s life and thought at the centre, the critique of unequal gender relations and power hierarchies comes before the prospects of emancipation. ‘Fundamental to this potentially emancipatory imaginary, its possibility and practice, is the exacting critique of gender for which feminism is known’, write the editors of a recent forum on Marysia Zalewski’s feminist interventions (Kinsella and Shepherd 2020: 3; Sisson Runyan 2020).

Thus, IR feminism first seeks to challenge, disorder, even smash the established liberal order, highlighting tensions and contradictions, and in the process of disruption, resistance and demolition, create new orders (Kinsella and Shepherd 2020). As part of the broader project of critiquing modernity, IR feminism destabilises coherent and linear narratives; it confronts hegemonic knowledge and unveils forms of closure, as they possess violence against and exclusions of women and other collectives (Zalewski 2013; Rosenow 2019). The assumption is that the critique of the knowledge that has sustained patriarchal systems opens up possibilities for societies to be equal. As Anne Sisson Runyan argues: ‘Such non-knowing forestalls sureties by creating uncomfortable openings, not comforting foreclosures, for endless recastings of feminist oppositional knowledge that keep it alive and (re)generative’ (Runyan 2020: 336). In these readings, openings come after opposition and critique.

**Feminist critique of international peace governance**

Critique has been particularly strong and exuberant in the context of international peace and security governance. Feminist advocacy networks and transnational NGOs had been pointing out for years the absence of women in decision-making, as well as the need to have a gender perspective across peace interventions. As a response to these critiques, and since the establishment of the WPS agenda in 2000, the UN has tried to mainstream gender\(^2\) in its peace operations and to increase the participation of women through a strategy of equal opportunities and inclusion. Over the past two decades, the WPS agenda has mobilised impressive efforts at mainstreaming gender in international peacebuilding and reconstruction initiatives, and yet in policy and academic circles alike, there is a sense that implementation is falling short and that the agenda has been unable to advance gender equality to the degree its feminist proponents envisioned (Kirby and Shepherd 2016; Waldron and Baines 2019).

Although critical scholars have noted the growing commitment to gender equality and women’s empowerment in international interventions, they have

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\(^2\) While ‘gender mainstreaming’ is a contested concept (Krook and True 2012, 121; Lombardo and Meier 2006: 161–62), the UN formally defines it as ‘a gender perspective in all policies and programmes so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively’ (United Nations 1995, para. 189) and as ‘a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality’ (ECOSOC 1997, IV.I.A).
identified two main problems with the ways in which the agenda has been implemented. First, the liberal feminist approach that has equated gender with women. Scholars criticise that the agenda has primarily relied on a descriptive representation frame that promotes sex equality and not gender equality, slowly increasing the number of female bodies in decision-making structures and in the security forces without adding qualitative and substantive changes in the positions women hold, or the tasks and responsibilities they are assigned to, or the funds gender units receive (Cohn and Duncanson 2020; Kirby and Shepherd 2016; Ellerby 2017; Hudson 2021). Relatedly, critics claim that women are included only to fulfil certain feminine tasks that serve operational effectiveness (Basini and Ryan 2016). According to the critics, therefore, women’s capacity as political agents and peacebuilders is belittled, even undermined, because rendering a task ‘feminine’ perpetuates gender stereotypes and contributes to its subsequent devalorisation (Gentry 2017), and depoliticisation (Shepherd 2017).

Second, feminist scholars acknowledge that the spirit of those who advocated for the existence of the WPS agenda, which was to facilitate the development of antimilitarist politics of peace and dismantle the power structures that uphold the core tenets of liberalism and its everyday forms of inequality and insecurity, has been betrayed (Wibben et al. 2019). Scholars denounce that the agenda has ended up legitimising and normalising militarised peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes, based on dominant state-based, masculinised and pro-violence ideas of security (Stern and Zalewski 2009; Jauhola 2016; Hudson 2021; Ryan, this issue; Berry, this issue). Even when ‘prevention’ is a key concern in these resolutions (with potential to unleash a transformative vision for peace), it is in practice accorded with a logic of militarism (a task for peacekeepers, police or the military) or accorded with a logic of ‘elite-centric security politics’ (related to activities such as countering terrorism or violent extremism) (Shepherd 2020c). The agenda ‘leaves the “war system” intact’ (Basu and Confortini 2017). Instead, critics suggest, if the UN is serious about transforming the existing global social and political inequalities, the priority should be to ‘do’ gender in a way that recognises ‘gender itself is a power relation’ (Shepherd 2013: 12), preventing the many everyday risks that jeopardise women’s security, such as corruption, the lack of property and inheritance rights, or the lack of citizenship rights and economic opportunities (Cockburn 2007; Cohn 2008; Cohn and Duncanson 2020).

In sum, although feminist IR scholars praise the efforts of the UN and other international partners in their recognition that gender is foundational to peace and security governance, much remains to be done to broaden and deepen gender equality in peace and security. While we are sympathetic and endorse these critical approaches that have been vital to identify the limits of interventions and to suggest ways forward, our concern is that these critiques are too often taken up and (mis)adopted by rationalities and temporalities of liberal governance. Instead of disrupting hegemonic policy frameworks, critique unwillingly feeds them. The problem is not only that most IR feminist critics fail to offer a counter-hegemonic alternative (Madsen and Hudson 2020), but also that in their dialogue with governance structures they often operate ‘inside a structure of power that [they] both challenge and help to sustain’ (Abrahamsen 2003: 190).
Adopting the critiques: gender, resilience and the sustaining peace agenda

As it enters its third decade, the WPS agenda has seen ten Security Council Resolutions, 98 UN member states have adopted National Action Plans (NAP), and there is an ever-increasing number of partnerships of international, regional and local actors for its implementation. These policy frameworks have increasingly been mobilised around the idea of fostering resilience, an approach which reconfigures international intervention away from liberal and state-centric perspectives, and towards bottom-up and inclusive initiatives for peace (see, further, Bourbeau and Juncos 2021; Juncos and Joseph 2020). Adapting and sprawling, resilience policy interventions have advanced the WPS agenda in two areas, seeking to meet the demands of the academic critiques presented in the previous section: (1) the privilege of localisation mechanisms and funding to support local level women’s groups, ensuring that women participate as mediators and peacebuilders throughout the whole life cycle of the design, formulation and implementation of policy programmes, and (2) the endorsement of conflict prevention and sustained assistance to attend societal concerns over prolonged periods of time.

First, it has become a truism in resilience policy reports that placing women’s agency at the centre is a *sine qua non* condition for the successful transition from fragile to resilient societies (United Nations Security Council 2020; Klugman and Mukhtarova 2020; World Bank and UN 2018). When facing a new emergency or crisis, such as Covid-19, the emphasis is invariably on ‘the importance of women’s full, equal and meaningful participation to an effective pandemic response and to peacemaking efforts’ (UN Women 2020: 3). The annual Secretary General report on Women, Peace and Security reads: ‘Although the primary responsibility for handling public health emergencies lies with the State, women’s groups have demonstrated that they are essential leaders in emergencies and play a key role in maintaining social cohesion and preventing further conflict and instability’ (UNSC 2020: 2).

Unlike previous approaches, which relied on elite-driven (usually male) leaderships, the concern of current interventions in conflict-affected societies is to broaden the participation of grassroots movements, and to include as many women as possible to advance in gender equality and sustainable solutions. For instance, in a partnership between the UN and civil society organisations, the Women’s Humanitarian and Peace Fund (WHPF) funds gender equality initiatives that integrate women’s organisations throughout the life cycle of the projects: ‘they are not beneficiaries anymore, but partners, and they are an integral part of the country-level board that selects the projects’ (Interview 1; see also Martin de Almagro 2021).

Second, the prevention of conflict is increasingly prioritised over military intervention and hard-security matters. The focus on prevention is linked to the idea of building resilience societies, which requires that support is sustained across time, well before the war begins and long after it ends (World Bank and UN 2018). This long-term perspective on peace consolidation resists the tendency to strictly centre on expeditious state-level, diplomatic negotiations and police and military deployments. Instead, work on prevention is slow, concerned with gradually integrating the social fabric of society by addressing all dimensions and root causes of conflicts, as well as their multifarious effects (UNSC 2020: 17).
This shift towards prevention is significant because it was the most neglected pillar of the WPS agenda up until the birth of the 2015 Sustaining Peace framework. As pointed out by critical scholars, this disregard had resulted in a failure to address the gendered drivers of conflict and seize opportunities for social amelioration (Basu and Confortini 2017). At UN level, seeking to correct this error, several resilience-building initiatives are now prioritising and showcasing prevention projects. As a case in point, the Women’s Humanitarian and Peace Fund’s latest brochure showcases the results of their funded projects in Burundi and Colombia on women’s roles in building peace through community dialogues that prevent dangerous outbreak of violence (WHPF 2020: 8). At national level, this increased attention to conflict prevention has also been enacted in the latest iterations of National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS. In their analysis of the dataset of available NAPs for the implementation of WPS, Hamilton et al. (2020: 5) find that the number of NAPs that seek to prevent conflict has increased exponentially since 2015.

Critical scholars are aware of how resilience-informed programmes of intervention have recently attempted to correct the limits of top-down, state-centric and quick-fixed approaches and move towards engagements that support bottom-up initiatives and are implemented over long periods of time (Bourbeau 2018; Chandler 2014; Juncos and Joseph 2020; Korosteleva 2020). However, they see this shift as limited, and rightly so. In the context of gender and conflict, critical studies also demand a more genuine effort to include women in the practice of peacebuilding and further demilitarise security agendas (Ruby 2014; Shepherd 2020c). Shepherd has examined how the integration of ‘prevention’ in the WPS agenda, although constituted as a means to move security away from military logics and take women as political actors, fails to achieve these objectives. ‘The WPS agenda purports to offer a transformative vision for peace, but its articulation of prevention in accordance with dominant logics of militarism and security render such transformation unlikely, if not impossible’ (Shepherd 2020c: 17). As if giving policymakers another chance, Shepherd critiques current programmes of prevention and demands further revisions, so that the idea of sustaining peace prevails over security and military logics: ‘[I]t may be that working to reconstruct prevention in the WPS agenda is a necessary precondition for enabling the transformation of the war system that feminist activists and advocates desire’ (2020c: 17). Similarly, the efforts and energy dedicated by the UN to integrate the critiques and do better at implementing the WPS agenda through the creation of the WHPF and the funding of locally owned, long-term conflict prevention projects give hope. As if it was a diligent, hardworking student, the UN eagerly applies lessons learnt and counts on future critiques to keep on trying. Why has critique been so easily taken up and adopted by international policymakers?

While we agree with the feminist IR critiques, and policy frameworks have only selectively or narrowly integrated feminist concerns in implementation phases (Fraser 2013), we add to the discussion that the problem of selective adoption is in part due to the overly ‘critical’ and not enough ‘affirmative’ outlook that feminism has adopted in IR. Because critique reduces resilience to an egalitarian project, where the equality between women and men in conflict-affected societies must be pursued through enhanced programmes of intervention and assistance, although it is never attained. Even if feminist scholars underline difference and call to resist the...
coherence, equalising and universalising tendencies of norms and policies (including the patchy implementation of gender policy initiatives under the WPS) (Gitau, this issue), difference tends to be invoked only to challenge and correct inequalities, exclusions, and silences. Difference is rarely considered generative and, as such, it is ultimately mis-used, adapted or co-opted to improve the governance of peace and security. In their deepest sense, egalitarian projects reflect the value of the dominant position, men, which appears unreachable for women; and, wickedly, critiques of these egalitarian projects also overshadow the potential to become other for women, as well as developing alternative norms and positions (Grosz 2011: 144–48).

In sum, the ideal of equality facilitates the accommodation of critical demands into governance logics, where changes occur gradually, in a mechanical and piece-meal way. Instead of destabilising and transforming governance, critique gives direction and legitimacy to policy programming that learns, adjusts, and continues: resilience policy programmes, which also adopt self-critique as a modus operandi, demand more participation and inclusion of women, more compensation measures and more funds, as well as longer time-horizons (Bargués-Pedreny and Martin de Almagro 2020). As we begin to explore in the second part of the article, a feminist affirmation of difference, a feminism which does not start with the critique of intervention and the quest for gender equality, might help create alternative feminist visions of present and future temporalities, and alternative subjectivities and voices much harder to co-opt by the discourses, logics and practices of the peacebuilding hegemonic order.

**Affirmative feminism at critique’s end**

In the first part, we have argued that feminist critiques of international interventions have been co-opted by governance logics to foster resilience that works mechanically towards an ever-receding equality between women and men. This often implies that progress is gradual, slow, and only minimal concessions are made to women, while the more radical promises of feminist critiques wither away.

In this part, we seek to re-energise feminism in IR by looking for inspiration at two different sources that have as a common ground the ambition to affirm difference—rather than critique unequal relations—and women’s powerful and expansive capacity to invent and elaborate new thinking. In so doing, we open up resilience and understand it as an inventive force for the elaboration of different futures, rather than as a policy project to gradually reduce inequality.

The first source are the philosophical writings of Grosz who has been widely neglected in IR debates, although she has worked on feminism for four decades and has influenced numerous other disciplines such as cultural, literary studies, art, and architecture. The second is an exploration of the feminist ideas that are born within the situated practices of the Liberian women’s movement for peace to overcome the everyday challenges that living in scarcity poses. We do not seek to use the former source to interpret the latter (or vice versa); rather, their juxtaposition provides useful insights to discussions on resilience in post-conflict processes and IR more broadly. Affirmative feminism also comes with certain weaknesses, as we will
Elisabeth Grosz: reorienting feminism towards difference and the new

While the second wave of feminism could be described as egalitarian, because authors focused on critiquing the exclusion of women from positions of power, the idea of difference came to influence feminism since the 1980s (Bock and James 2005; Fraser 1997). Some opted for claiming the right of women to be ‘different’, in a strategy to value the gender-specific contribution of women, such as motherhood, and delegitimise the false assumptions of impartiality or gender neutrality (that hide a systemic bias towards male-defined norms) of the egalitarian feminists (Squires 2001). Other post-structuralist feminists such as Judith Butler, Joan Scott, Gayatri Spivak, Eve Sedgwick, notwithstanding their differences, pursued a strategy of deconstruction of binary oppositions such as man/woman, male/female or the ‘feminist equality versus difference’ debate (Scott 1988). They resisted essentialist understandings of difference and on this ground sought to constantly confound, undo and destabilise identities and binary forms of representation (for example, see Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1990; Spivak 1986).

Elisabeth Grosz’s work on life and difference is intended to reorient feminist theory towards a new way of seeing difference as a biological process which is unpredictable, dynamic and continuously produces more difference, rather than as opposed to identity. According to Grosz, the limitation of the previous approaches, including post-structuralist perspectives, is reducing difference to questions of their relation to identity. That is, they understand difference as that which is oppressed or subverted by identity systems—even when the focus is on how difference deconstructs identity and binaries, or even when the strategy is to complexify oppression through intersectionality (Grosz 2011: 92). Because these critical formulations, as we have seen in the previous section, have unwittingly stimulated policies of support or compensation for women or other marginalised groups, at their best, they have prompted policy programmes to foster resilience and gradually correct the inequalities of current social conditions. Instead, Grosz argues: ‘difference cannot be equalized, and social marginalization cannot be adjusted directly except through the generation of ever-more variation, differentiation, and difference’ (Grosz 2011: 94). She thus suggests thinking of difference ‘in itself’, a process that has neither a self nor an opposition or comparison before its becoming. ‘Difference is the generative force of the universe itself, the impersonal, inhuman destiny and milieu of the human, that from which life, including the human, comes and that to which life in all its becomings directs itself’ (ibid.).

For Grosz, difference becomes ontological, it is irreducible to sameness, it is real and inevitable, and emerges in sexual difference. ‘Sexual difference is
ineliminable, the condition of all other living differences without itself having a fixed identity. Sexual difference is the principle of radical difference, the failure of identity, destination, or finality. It is the eruption of the new, the condition of emergence, evolution, or overcoming’ (ibid.: 103). She follows Luce Irigaray to argue that nature is sexed, made up of at least two sexes, two types of beings, male and female, that although radically different, incommensurable, are appealed and come together and love each other. As side-effect, through relations of reproduction, the two create new differences. That is, sexual appeal is not oriented towards reproduction (although it is its companion) but is driven by feelings, desire and taste for each other, enhancing each other’s beauty. She explains it this way:

Sexual selection is a new kind of bifurcation in life, between male and female (or variations thereof), which can never be restored to unity, and with it, the vagaries of taste, desire, appeal, and intensification that make up sexuality. Sexuality leads to reproduction but that is not its purpose; sexuality attenuates life by making it beautiful, intensifies the everyday by making it spectacular, exciting, intense, stimulating, not a preparation for something else but the experience for its own sake. (Ibid.: 141–42)

Sexual difference introduces at least two different beings that appeal to each other and are the engine of life in all its forms, colours, openness, and becoming.

Irigaray’s and Grosz’s work has been criticised by other feminists for privileging sexual difference over other types of difference such as class, ethnicity, or race, that are more meaningful or salient in specific contexts of discrimination and oppression (Tzelepis and Athanasiou 2010). It is certainly true that sexual difference often does not play a direct or a prime role in specific struggles that concern women (Tamale 2020). Yet, the point here is to see that for Grosz (and Irigaray before her) sexual difference accompanies and intervenes in all other differences; it transmits them across generations, while at the same time it opens them up towards greater difference:

The immeasurable and unrepresentable difference between the sexes, a difference that is not calculable or representable in any fixed frame, is an ontological force, a force larger than and lived through individuals that infects all other differences and ensures that they too are lived in sexually specific ways... The opening up of humanity through sexual difference is an opening up as well of class, race, ethnic and sexual relations to difference, to variation, to multiplicity, to change, to new future. (Grosz 2011: 111–12)

In sum, a feminism that underlines sexual difference as the force of life and endless variability that is irreducible to identity (as difference is always more than, or prior to, an opposition or a comparison with identity) is relevant for the current argument for two reasons. First to see the limits of international interventions (and their critiques) that strive for the transformation of gendered discourses and structures of inequality and discrimination in conflict-affected societies, as well as to explore opportunities to see women as full subjects, who express themselves and act differently, creating new concepts and giving another meaning to what exists.
In the first sense, Grosz is close to the perspectives of Black feminist theorists, who have also denounced egalitarianism and initiatives that demand greater inclusion of women in prevention tasks and post-conflict reconstruction. Because attempts to revise, improve, and pluralise the institutions that monitor, control and murder black people are indeed reinforcing anti-blackness (Hartman 1997). In their views, being a Black person equals ‘social death’, ‘precluded from the category of the human’, as it is ‘open to gratuitous violence’, ‘natally alienated’ and ‘generally dishonoured’ (Wilderson III et al. 2017: 8). Blackness is produced by anti-Black thinking and violence, and therefore it is not possible to ‘affirm Blackness itself without at the same time affirming anti-Black violence’ (ibid.: 10). Since attempts to recognise, include, empower or give voice to Black people to amend current institutions and practices will ‘only ever result in further social and real death’, these authors opt for ‘abolition’ (ibid.). In IR, these anti-egalitarian views have permeated in critical and postcolonial studies assessing programmes of international governance. For example, Parashar (2019) has explained how missions to promote gender equality and protect women in the global South become neo-colonial projects that reduce Southern countries and their citizens to mere recipients, rather than knowledgeable and capable agents. Others have recognised that regardless of how bottom-up or locally-sensitive intervention programmes have become, the ‘retreat’ or ‘withdrawal’ of external actors and missions is the only way to avoid the continued imposition of external priorities (Rutazibwa 2014; Bargués-Pedreny and Randazzo 2018).

Grosz is certainly not opting for ‘abolition’. Grosz does not seek to suppress the current feminist articulations that are based on ‘freedom from’ oppression, because they are politically relevant and necessary to contest structures of oppression that constrain female liberty and cement the inequality of men and women. However, she warns that feminism must not only be a project to foster resilience, as in international interventions that work patchily towards equal and inclusive societies, even if these projects and policies could, in their ideal form, transform societies and structures to undo all hierarchies and achieve gender equality, as critical feminists urge.³ Grosz considers feminism—both projects for equality and their critiques—as ‘not sufficient’, ‘for it at best addresses and attempts to redress wrongs of the past without providing any positive direction for action in the future’ (Grosz 2011: 61). While feminist critiques have been important to correct structures of oppression, feminism must, according to Grosz, broaden its aims and aspirations:

instead of linking the question of freedom to the concept of emancipation, or to some understanding of liberation from or removal of an oppressive or unfair form of constraint or limitation, as is most common in feminist and other anti-

³ Irigaray (1993: 6) raises this question to show the limits of egalitarian projects: ‘In politics, some overtures have been made to the world of women. But these overtures remain partial and local: some concessions have been made by those in power, but no new values have been established. Rarely have these measures been thought through and affirmed by women themselves, who consequently remain at the level of critical demands. Has a worldwide erosion of the gains won in women’s struggles occurred because of the failure to lay foundations different from those on which the world of men is constructed?’
oppressive struggles and discourses, I want to explore concepts of life where freedom is conceived not only or primarily as the elimination of constraint or coercion, but more positively as the condition of or capacity for action. (Ibid.: 60)

She seeks a feminist theory that stems from conceptions of autonomy and freedom that are linked to action and processes of becoming different (ibid.: 71). To be sure, she is not interested in an autonomy based on the subject who is free to choose among various options unimpededly, as in a liberal free will position — because the liberal subject remains static, separated from and unaffected by its actions and choices.

Quite differently, drawing on Bergson’s understanding of freedom as related to ‘innovation and invention’, for Grosz autonomy lies in the ‘acts’ that both express the unique being of the subject and transform it into more than it is, unexpectedly (ibid.: 64—72). Most acts are insignificant and belong to the realm of the everyday, where activities are settled practices or habits. Yet some acts erupt from this background of ‘indeterminacy’, from the languid days of monotonous and reactive activities, to express and transform living beings. In this reading, women are autonomous and express freedom through their bodies, acts and movements, constantly redefining and reinventing who they are. This is close to Black feminists’ appreciation. African women engage with life questions and live through and develop communitarian norms that are different from African men, but also from the Western, liberal, individualised notions of gender equality and rights (Tamale 2020: 221—34).

Grosz’s understanding of women’s autonomy departs from most feminist accounts in IR in which ‘freedom is that which is bestowed on us by others’ (Grosz 2011: 73). The problem unearthed by Grosz is that when critiques of international intervention excoriate the agents, structures and processes that constrain women’s freedom and demand greater inclusion and participation, they often reduce women’s autonomy on whether it is recognised and enabled by the good will of others (authorities and regulations). The challenge for Grosz is rather different: ‘the problem is not how to give women more adequate recognition (who is it that women require recognition from?) more rights, or more of a voice, but how to enable more action, more making and doing, more difference’ (ibid.: 73). Hers is a feminism that assumes that women are already creating new concepts, new knowledge, redefining interests and inventing new relations through their actions, through their engagements with the world. ‘The challenge facing feminism today is no longer only to give women a more equal place within existing social networks and relations but to enable women to partake in the creation of a future unlike the present’ (ibid.).

This offers space to begin to re-imagine resilience as difference; resilience as more than a recuperative project of governance that aims at reconciling differences to cancel them and achieve gender equality and sustainable peace. This resilience is not facilitated or enhanced by policy initiatives, it is already vigorously expressed and experienced collectively in the ‘South’ (Hajir et al. 2021). It is not provided by outside actors or recognised by dominant subjects: it is ‘the agency and inventiveness, the positive productivity, that even the most socially marginalized subjects develop or invent through the movements they utilize and the techniques that
marginalization enables them to develop’ (Grosz 2011: 98). In the next section, we look at two groups of women in Liberia (one critiquing the existing unequal structures to sustain peace, the other affirming its autonomy as singular peacebuilder). The aim is not to apply or test the theory but continue thinking of resilience as a force oriented towards difference and the creation of new values for the future, rather than only as a project to narrow the gender gap.

**The women of the Peace Hut: opening up resilience to difference**

Women around the world have mobilised for peace in and out of formal structures of governance. For example, in Syria and Myanmar women’s organisations and networks have interceded with armed groups for temporary ceasefires to allow the passage of humanitarian aid (Muehlenbeck and Federer 2016). In Kyrgyzstan, where traditional customs and laws determine women’s roles and duties, rural women bargain with patriarchy as the easiest and efficient manner to influence post-conflict reconstruction and social reconfiguration (Ismailbekova and Megoran 2020).

In this section, we seek to think affirmative feminism through an exploration of two instances of situated practices of resilience from women’s grassroots in Liberia: the first one conceives resilience as an egalitarian project, and the second as a practice of differentiation that falls outside the remit of governance structures. Liberia is an appropriate case because a strong women’s movement—the Liberia Mass Action for Peace—mobilised Muslim and Christian women to stage sit-ins and other non-violent protests to put an end to the second civil war in the country (1999–2003). The movement also participated in the post-war negotiations of the Comprehensive Peace agreement in 2003 and influenced the establishment of the United Nations Mission to Liberia (UNMIL), the first UN peacekeeping mission with an explicit mandate to mainstream UNSCR 1325 and later the WPS agenda (Wamai 2011: 53). The movement, co-ordinated by Leymah Gbowee, Comfort Freeman and Crystal Roh Gawding, was also key in the mobilisation of women to vote for Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2005 and 2011, the first democratically elected female head of state in the African continent.

After the signature of the peace agreement, Gbowee co-founded the Peace Hut system to institutionalise the legacy of women’s Mass Action for Peace and to offer a differentiated space dedicated to intergenerational mentorship on peacebuilding and gender equality (Lawson and Flomo 2020). Peacebuilding interventions in Liberia have since then invested in the Peace Huts, providing capacity-building and skills training, as well as legal and financial aid to register as formal organisations. In turn, these newly created women’s organisations have welcomed their assigned role of implementers through a series of gender awareness-raising and community mediation activities. For example, with funding from UNWOMEN and several international NGOs, the women from the Peace Huts receive training in conflict mediation and develop entrepreneurial skills (Gizelis and Joseph 2016).

Peace Huts are a bottom-up mechanism created by Liberian rural women that draws on the traditional principle of restoring (gender) relationships and community harmony (Douglas 2014; Lawson and Flomo 2020). However, this engagement
with the international seems to have divided the movement into two distinct dynamics: those who have formalised into CSOs, and participate in (while also critiquing and seeking to improve) formal international liberal frameworks of action for gender equality and peacebuilding, competing for resources and media attention (Debuscher and Martin de Almagro 2016); and those who have kept on the margins and who reclaim the Peace Huts as popular, symbolic and physical spaces to hold informal meetings and explore solutions to community development issues. We are not suggesting a sharp binary, as we understand this differentiation is a heuristic device for analysis. Indeed, in both groups we will find elements of critique and elements of affirmation, but we argue that paying attention to these two seemingly contradictory trajectories through which the collective identity of being a female activist for peace is crafted is useful to rethink feminist critiques of policies to foster resilience.

One of the professionalisation projects funded by the Women’s Humanitarian and Peace Fund (WHPF) on gender equality is implemented by the Gbowee Peace Foundation, led by Lemah Gbowee, founder of the Mass Action for Peace. The project, which has been given publicity in several written media, seeks to train women peace brigades that will then mentor 5000 young women as peace advocates in the three counties of Montserrado, Grand Gadeh, and Lofa. The idea is to bring the Peace Hut philosophy to the most remote villages of the country so that local rural women will educate law enforcement officers about sexual and gender-based violence, and help transform long-held gender norms and stereotypes in the country, while disrupting gender inequalities that thwart sustainable peace. While the aims of the project do not differ substantially from the activities that women in the Peace Huts were already doing, it is the how to do so that changes: Whereas traditionally Liberian women mobilise their identity as biological or social mothers working under the constrains of socio-cultural norms and material realities of being responsible for the burden reproductive collective labour (Gbowee 2013; Lawson and Flomo 2020), this project seeks to end violence against women and transform socio-cultural norms as a pre-requisite for producing resilient individuals and sustainable peace (Bargués-Pedreny and Martin de Almagro 2020).

In July 2019 we visited a group of these mentored women in Montserrado. These women’s narratives reveal instances of individual empowerment and self-worth that clearly show that the project has been successful at raising awareness on gender equality to achieve sustainable peace. For example, Patience, an elected community leader participating in the project, was proud to explain to several newspapers that she had been successful in mediating between a man and his wife, while contributing to peace and justice to her community. As the 2020 annual report on the WHPF indicates, the project has increased ‘commitment to protecting the health and rights of women and girls’ (WHPF 2020: 45). It is through the training of women to detect sexual and gender-based violence that communal resilience can be achieved. This is what Lawson and Flomo (2020) found in the Peace Hut in the community of Totota,

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4 During August 2020, several articles in electronic and paper media, such as FrontPage Africa, Development Diaries, Market Watch, celebrated the new project called ‘Sustain the Peace’ and its preliminary results.
where the UN ‘He for She’ programme has persuaded men to pursue gender equality and empower women.

In July 2019, we also visited the first Peace Hut that had been built in the symbolic field of the Fish Market in Monrovia, where women from the Mass Action for Peace had been demonstrating every day for peace. Around 50 women, all dressed in their white t-shirts, were chanting and dancing to the same lyrics of the end of the war in 2003. Although the Peace Hut is sometimes used as a classroom for skills training and alphabetisation programmes funded mainly by UNWOMEN and feminist NGOs such as Kvinna till Kvinna, most of the time women use the Peace Hut to pray and converse on community challenges, without a clear agenda.

When asked about why they still meet every Thursday, they said that peace had not consolidated in the country, although warring factions had negotiated a truce almost twenty years ago (Focus group 1). Most of them were worried about the fate of their children in one of the poorest countries in the world and indicated that what was important was family and community survival in a context of poverty and lack of basic social infrastructure. For others, participating in Peace Hut meetings provided them with information, a sense of security and a shared moment of ‘being with friends, with soulmates’ (Focus group 2). In other words, these women were not simply interested in mediating and preventing conflict as ‘traditional’ peace-builders do when they praise formal negotiations and policies to achieve gender equality. Rather, they were exchanging their thoughts and preoccupations, while making sure that their families and community survive in an economy of scarcity, because ‘there are no jobs for our children, and we do not have the money to send them to school, so they become bad people’ (Focus group 1, Fig. 1).

For us, these gatherings are testimony of a feminism of difference, where women express and bring into play certain values (solidarity, intimacy, togetherness) and constitute alternative ways of performing resilience (acting and opening up, rather than contesting, to generate new experiences). These gatherings do not privilege the empowering of (female) individuals through capacity building as an instrument to cope with future risks. The meetings foreground the cultivation of the collective identities that were crafted through experiencing war and internationally-led interventions for peace (Sylvester 2013). These are not only acts of commemoration and memorialisation of the war, but also collective discussions about the violence experienced in the aftermath of an active conflict, which prevents meaningful peace in the everyday lives of these women. It is through the repetition of the mundane act of sitting down and meeting every week that they become, as a collective, a powerful site of exploration and resilience to the everyday structural violence that these women continue to suffer. The meetings are the stepping stone in an affirmation that, by its very existence, transforms sitting together into a political alternative to the hustle and bustle of track 3 mediation training and capacity-building workshops. A calm, unhurried, suspended in time, receptive and reflective way of resilience as difference that seems difficult to co-opt.

Importantly, these gatherings are very often seen as extraneous and esoteric by international peace organisations or members of civil society, who often struggle to comprehend their reasons and purpose, and who then prefer to place resources
The discussions and performances are seen as not particularly useful, above all when compared to the work pursued by the Gbowee Peace Foundation and other CSOs, because they are not specifically meant to critique patriarchal structures and statebuilding. Yet they hold a positive force, a (be)coming together in the Peace Hut which helps them affirm themselves as women peace activists, develop new answers and new symbols that are meaningful to them and their communities. It is this very act of affirmation that constitutes their critique—they are not critiquing to be able to enact their autonomy later, when gender equality is met.

They are, and have always been, resilient (irrespective of whether governance structures are sensitive to their situation). Having been part of the Mass Movement for Peace was central to how these women expressed who they are and what they are becoming as a collective, but they do not understand their engagement in peace activism as primarily or only about challenging subordination to gender and other social norms. Rather, their role as women from the Peace Hut is about the continuous fulfilment of their function in the community, reinventing its social and economic equilibrium. It is in these moments that they leave behind their daily household tasks that are considered menial and engage in collective

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5 A staff member of an international organisation whom we talked to refer to them as ‘those women who just sing’. Also, the leaking roof, lack of furniture and basic sanitary structures in the Peace Hut that we observed during our visit confirms women’s testimonies that donors have mostly moved on.
reimagining as social leaders. It is in this epic singing to life and female bodies that the community overcomes itself, distances itself from the militarised peace and the neoliberal post-war capitalist system that the activists behind the creation of the WPS agenda also sought to topple.

To be clear, this does not mean that these women never engage in protest and active participation in politics, but that their participation is not necessarily related to critiquing patriarchal structures or to transforming gender inequalities as a prerequisite to conflict prevention. Rather, they use the respect and legitimacy they enjoy as women as a political strategy to work at improving the everyday material conditions of their community (Lawson and Flomo 2020). For example, just at the time of our visit to the focus groups in July 2019, the collective was in the process of making some banners (Fig. 2) to remind the community of the importance of conducting in a peaceful manner the protests that had been scheduled in Monrovia against the government’s inability to tackle corruption, economic mismanagement, and injustice. As such, women understand their political work as different, complementary and of equal value to the work that men do in society, and as a commitment to strengthening and reviving their community, protecting it from the unrest and conflict that often emerges in the post-conflict economy of scarcity.

In sum, paying attention to the continuous construction of the collective identity of the women’s movement for peace in the Peace Huts challenges the narrative of women as mediators and conflict preventers from two angles. First, it shifts the focus away from a discourse that values the effectiveness of women’s skills to prevent conflict and build peace. The acts of these women are difficult to translate for policymakers, and to assimilate and incorporate into policies for building resilience and
gender equality. The focus instead is on their collective becoming that starts from an affirmation of life and difference.

Second, it foregrounds the location of feminist politics of difference, where women invent, create and dream, behind the backs of men, also behind the idea to become equal to them. The meetings are a site of self-cultivation as women: the act of wearing the white t-shirt does not serve here as a letter of presentation that enables participation in international interventions and resilience projects, detached from an essential self. Rather, these pieces of cloth are ‘critical markers’ (Mahmood 2012) of affirmation and a means of collective artwork. The meetings are sites that enable these women to enact the world through their own embodied practices and to enable the collective subjectivity of the post-war women with renewed capacities for mobilisation and resilience. To the external observer, such collective identity based on sexual difference is not without limitations as it may reinforce gender binaries and patriarchal ideas of heterosexual and hierarchical family structures in complex and contradictory ways. However, their refusal to include men inside their Peace Huts discussions to avoid men managing the collectivity (Focus group 1, 2 and 4) clashes starkly with how they embrace their collective identity as mothers, wives, and sisters in the community. Their collective mobilisation of a feminism of difference also works as a vital site of political agency. Their meetings are intimate, their intervention in the peace process seems experimental; to use Grosz’s words on what feminist theory could be, their action may be ‘about the invention of the new: new practices, new positions, new projects, new techniques, new values… [they] may invent new ways of addressing and opening up the real, new types of subjectivity, and new relations between subjects and objects’ (Grosz 2011: 83).

**Conclusion: limits and possibilities of affirmative feminism in IR**

Carol Cohn (1987) wrote well before the development of the WPS agenda that there are two tasks for feminist IR. The first one is the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses that claim to be the sole legitimate language. The second task is one of reconstruction, including and assembling diverse perspectives to nurture alternative visions. The problem we diagnose in this double-tasking is that the latter—reconstruction—never arrives because there is always more deconstruction to do. Thus, we suggest that if IR feminism wishes to create alternative visions of possible presents and futures, engender new ideas and concepts, it may have to repurpose the deconstruction of strategic discourses, logics, and practices.

This article has engaged with Grosz’s writings of feminism, as well as with radical indigenous feminist practice, to offer IR feminist theory ways to escape the misappropriation of critique by hegemonic discourses of (post)liberal peace. We have argued that the problem is in part due to the mostly ‘critical’ direction that feminism has taken in IR, compared to other disciplines where critique and affirmation co-exist and complement one another. Based on egalitarian ideals, critique has denounced resilience initiatives and policies that have been unable to do without hierarchical structures and discourses. Critical scholars have not only prompted policymakers to learn and adjust, enhancing their legitimacy, but sometimes have also
failed to see that women strive to become otherwise, and develop different positions and perspectives. Our concern is that the post-war resilience enacted by Peace Huts members is missed (even curtailed) if we hold onto a preoccupation with critiquing international intervention programmes. The question is: what do we want feminist IR theory to be and to produce? Can we explore different knowledge systems and practices that enable us to reimagine alternative presents and futures? In sum, we argue for a shift in focus: not to study the effects or limits of specific resilience policies on gender equality, but rather to ask questions about the specific practices of resilience that women cultivate in post-war contexts (see also Berry, this issue). This perspective remains hidden if our primary aim is to study how interventions fail to achieve their intended aims on peace and gender equality.

There are two limitations that haunt the affirmative feminism that we are putting forth here—one which seeks to affirm the doings of groups of women in their singular expression of life, thereby evading the partial and selective adoption by governance models. The first is that these projects of ‘affirmation’ could be seen to be enacted from a privileged position where one can redefine itself, imagine new horizons. Affirming energies and processes of experimentation and invention may appear capricious when others are fighting against discriminatory structures. It is for this reason that IR feminism should combine both projects—that of critique and that of affirmation—even if affirmation must never come after or build upon the grounds set by critique. The former can oppose racial, patriarchal, and heteronormative structures that have been normalised. The latter is about innovating and bringing about something new, something radically different.

Grosz understands the task of affirming autonomy and difference may sometimes be easier for privileged subjects whose life is not determined by the resistance to oppression. ‘It is perfectly obvious that a freedom to create, to make, to produce, is a luxury that can be attained only within a certain absence of constraint’ (Grosz 2011: 214). In this sense, it is more difficult to imagine examples of affirmation in contexts where war has ravaged social tissue, where resources are very scarce, and the main preoccupation are struggles for survival. However, the group of women in Liberia shows that it is precisely this struggle for survival, a rudimentary everyday affected by war and deep inequalities, what enables an affirmation of life through collective experience, action, and solidarity. ‘Even in the most extreme cases of slavery, or in situations of political or natural catastrophe of the kinds globally experienced in recent years, there is always a small space for innovation, and not simply reaction. … What is most striking about the extreme situations of constraint, those which require a “freedom from”, is that they do not eliminate a “freedom to”, only complicate it’, writes Grosz (ibid.: 214–15).

The second limitation is that affirmation rather than critique is less apt to contest and resist the limitations of hegemonic peacebuilding (at least in the short term). This problem has been flagged up by scholars who believe that affirmation preserves the status quo and is unable to revert the problems of domination and inequality that affect women and other groups (Alt 2019). We understand these critiques, as well as those that claim that a feminist political activism based on difference may coalesce around a dominant, binary view of gender that is exclusionary and limiting. Although it is true that neither Grosz nor the Liberian activists are immediately
contesting the existing structures, their feminism is the opposite of stasis and reductionism: they both affirm life as becoming, as ever elaborating and complexifying. The group of women which continues to come to the Peace Huts to discuss and pray demonstrates how their past collective identity of peace activist is moulding into something new in post-conflict times. They do not seek to transform gender relations, but rather to use their mobilisation capacities and the legitimacy acquired as women peace activists during the war to build a future for their communities that is untouched by the violent dynamics of post-conflict economies of scarcity.

Similarly, Grosz’s feminism is not static or repetitive, accepting what there is (and with this the actual experiences of injustice and pain), but affirms the process of differentiation, of becoming constantly other: ‘I dream of a future feminist theory in which we no longer look inward to affirm our own positions, experiences, and beliefs, but outward, to the world and to what we don’t control or understand in order to expand, not confirm, what we know what we are, what we feel. Feminist theory can become the provocation to think otherwise, to become otherwise’ (Grosz 2011: 87).

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-022-00264-0.

Acknowledgements The authors would like to thank three anonymous peer reviewers, the two editors of the special issue, Philipp Bourbeau and Ana Juncos, and the editors of Journal of International Relations and Development for constructive feedback that strengthened the manuscript. We are also grateful to Laura J. Shepherd, David Chandler and Caitlin Ryan for their thoughtful insights on earlier versions of this article. Our most sincere gratitude is due to the director of the Center for Action Research and Training, Kou G. Johnson, who provided high-quality research assistance during our time in Liberia. We extend our gratitude to our interlocutors in Liberia who have informed our understanding on resilience and affirmation in the aftermath of conflict.

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Publisher's Note  Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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