**Indicators and Success Stories:**

**The UN Sustaining Peace agenda, bureaucratic power and knowledge production in post-war settings**

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***Abstract****: Most discussions on knowledge production in peacebuilding and conflict management have focused on the study of epistemic communities and strategic coalitions of global and local actors. This article shifts the focus away from who produces knowledge to the underexplored question of how knowledge is generated, repackaged, deployed or ignored. Combining sociology of knowledge approaches with feminist governmentality scholarship, I critically interrogate the role of reports as knowledge production artefacts and report writing as bureaucratic practices that serve to design and implement UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) projects on Sustaining Peace. Specifically, I analyze the role of reports and reporting in four PBF projects on gender and reconciliation in Liberia, and I show how through the mechanisms of persuasion and homogenization, reports serve not only to measure success and failure and to produce contextualized knowledge, but also to exert symbolic power, (re)producing authoritative knowledge on women, gender and reconciliation and giving legitimacy to external interventions. Studying how knowledge is produced instead of who produces it enables us to apprehend the entanglement of the local and the global and overcome simplistic binaries and oppositions, all while paying attention to how the production of knowledge, and its silences, remains embedded in global power relations.*

**Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to the Folke Bernadotte Academy’s generous invitation to participate in an academic workshop in Monrovia, Liberia, in November 2019, where I presented the first version of this article. I am also grateful to Caitlin Ryan, Stéphanie Martel, Yolande Bouka, David Paternotte, Amandine Lauro and Katharine Millar for insightful discussant comments on earlier drafts of this article. Many thanks to Roxani Krystalli, Aiko Holvikivi, Devon Curtis and Pol Bargués-Pedreny for conversations that shaped my thinking on this topic. Thanks to the three anonymous reviewers and to the editorial team of *International Studies Quarterly* for making the publishing process smooth and generative. My most sincere gratitude to the director of the Center for Action Research and Training, Kou G. G. Johnson, who provided high-quality research assistance during my time in Liberia. I extend my gratitude to my interlocutors in Liberia, in recognition of their generosity, time, stories, rides and meals shared and without which this project would have been never seen the light.

**Introduction**

The role of the international community is to sustain peace. This is what concurrent UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council concurrent resolutions on Sustaining Peace (A/RES/70/262 and S/RES/2282) determined in 2016, in response to the findings of the 2015 review of the UN Peacebuilding Architecture marking its 10th anniversary. The resolutions make it clear that although Sustaining Peace is not a redefinition of peacebuilding, there is a recognition that the goals and aspirations of the three institutions forming the peacebuilding architecture - the Peacebuilding Commission, the Peacebuilding Support Office and the Peacebuilding Fund - needed to change. First, the Sustaining Peace agenda needs to focus on prevention of conflict and to go beyond crisis management and post-conflict intervention by addressing structural inequalities, exclusions and marginalisation that undermine social cohesion and that are often behind the root causes of war. Second,Sustaining Peace identifies inclusivity as its key feature, and engagement with a diversity of local actors as essential to advance national peacebuilding processes. Third, it locates the primary agency for conflict prevention at the local level and thus focus on the provision of long-term support to national and local actors. Finally, and crucially, it recognises that peacebuilding is essentially political and local (Advisory Group of Experts, 2015), and that past failures stem from a very technocratic approach to peacebuilding, in which rapid interventions were designed using Western-based policy prescriptions and expertise. Ultimately, the Sustaining Peace resolutions recognise new, more pragmatic ways of constructing, recognising and legitimating indigenous knowledge, resources and capabilities for the promotion of reconciliation, inclusive development and resilience in post-conflict zones. The Sustaining Peace resolutions come at a moment of profound review and transformation of the United Nations and the publication of a series of agreements and reports, such as the report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the World Humanitarian Summit, which all emphasize the significance of conflict prevention.

Numerous scholars have studied the failures of peacebuilding initiatives in producing sustainable peace. One dominant strand of the literature has used empirical research to explain how lack of knowledge on and about the local is to blame for these failures (Goetschel and Hagmann 2009; Autesserre 2014; Bakonyi 2018). Other critical scholars have highlighted instead the adverse effect of conceiving international interventions as technical solutions to technical problems that do not take into account the political, social and cultural context in which these take place (Ferguson 1994; Li 2011). Rooted in debates on the paradoxes of new local-sensitive ways of intervening and the need to better know the political, social and cultural context (Mac Ginty 2012), the local turn in peacebuilding has been criticized for having had limited impact and for failing to bring an emancipatory peace (Richmond 2012). Despite good intentions to promote local ownership, the local subject inevitably gets subjected to international redefinition, reinterpretation and bureaucratization dynamics (Hirblinger and Simons 2015).

Studies on international intervention suggest that the quest for more detailed and accurate knowledge about the local is deeply embedded in the managerial nature of interventions, delimiting the type of knowledge it generates and determining the mechanisms through which knowledge is to be produced (Hönke, Müller and Stepputat 2012; Hönke and Müller 2016; Bakonyi 2018). It is therefore all the more surprising that the co-constitution of knowledge and political order through the cooperation between local and international actors has barely drawn the attention of IR scholars. By focusing on how authoritative, expert knowledge is generated in sustaining peace interventions and through which artefacts, this research contributes to the emerging scholarship on knowledge production in peacebuilding.

Through a fine-grained analysis of the Peacebuilding Fund epistemic activities, this article argues that despite the commitment to inclusivity, everyday practices and local knowledge and experiences, the United Nations Sustaining Peace agenda and its funding relies on top-down meaning making technologies that reveal the maintenance of colonial and racial hierarchical power relations that have long pervaded peacebuilding work. Second, the article asks critical questions about the political work and effects that knowledge produced on and about gender is doing in projects aiming at justice and reconciliation. It argues that the need to show outcomes and efficiency results in an instrumentalization of gender equality to the broader goals of Sustaining Peace, while feminist objectives such as prioritising diversity and inclusion in decision-making processes are abandoned. The article does so by combining a post-colonial and feminist governmentality perspective (Griffin 2009; Prügl 2011, 2016; Reeves 2011) with insights from the literature on the sociology of knowledge (Swidler and Arditi 1994). Ultimately, the article shows how a focus on positivist emphasis on the numerical representation of reality as a way to measure interventions in an ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ manner and to generalise findings contradicts the very aim of the Sustaining Peace agenda because it has prevented the opening of spaces for messy engagement with the everyday mundane experiences of project beneficiaries that do not fit neatly into boxes.

The theoretical and methodological reflections here seek to advance a transversal and relational reading of the emergence of knowledge authority in peacebuilding that gives insights into how knowledge *is* produced in post-war settings and with what *effects*, rather than *how* it should be produced (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014). This move towards ‘how we know what we know’ enables a reading of these managerial international interventions as sites where ‘messy’, unstable and uncertain knowledge (re)production on and about the local context is reorganized, streamlined and reassembled to make it coherent, authoritative and legitimate. As such, it is possible to apprehend the entanglement of the local and the global and to overcome simplistic binaries and oppositions of the local versus the international, all while keeping in sight power and normativity implications. This focus sheds light on broader deficiencies within the international order and the UN Agenda for Sustaining Peace that leave racial, socioeconomic and gendered violence intact and that reify harmful colonial systems of knowledge production.

The article exemplifies the proposed conceptualization through the analysis of four projects on gender justice and national reconciliation implemented in Liberia since the enactment of the Sustaining Peace agenda and funded through the UN Peacebuilding Fund. The Fund is the UN’s peacebuilding financial instrument of first resort to sustain peace and prevent conflict in complex transitions. It has four priorities: the implementation of peace agreements; dialogue, reconciliation and coexistence; peace dividends; and the provision of basic services. Furthermore, it dedicates 40% of its investments to the promotion of gender-equality, either through the general call for projects or its special call for proposals under the Gender and Youth Promotion initiatives. A Gender Marker 4-point system tracks the financial allocation of projects that promote gender equality. The fund prioritises funding to those projects that have gender equality as a principal objective (Gender Marker Score 3) and those which have gender equality as a significant objective (Gender Marker Score 2). In turn, these initiatives serve to implement the Peacebuilding Commission’s Gender Strategy (2016) that was approved at the time of the birth of the Sustaining Peace agenda. It seeks to ensure a more structural and systematic integration of gender perspectives across its work and to improve stocktaking of women peacebuilders’ messages from the field, in accordance with the goals of inclusivity and engagement with a diversity of local perspectives that sustaining peace requires. This is important because the information produced in the reports of the Peacebuilding Fund projects is regularly referenced and summarized in the Peacebuilding Commission statements and meetings (DPPA/PBSO 2020) and serves to justify donors’ investments.

I draw on findings from the analysis of the key reports produced on each of the four projects and semi-structured interviews with report writers to first explore the ways in which knowledge on and about gender is produced, administered and exchanged in PBF projects and second, to unpack the logics, relations and mechanisms of power behind the processes of knowledge assembling, repackaging and claiming. I show how reports and their production context are managerial technologies that act not only to measure success and failure and to produce contextualised knowledge, but also to exert symbolic power, fabricating governable objects and terrains, legitimizing certain practices and structuring international policy-making interventions. Although I am cognisant of the limitations of an analysis focused on only four projects, a detailed examination of the reports produced in these projects will bring important insights on larger patterns of global knowledge (re)production and justification of narratives on international intervention.

Liberia’s fourteen-year civil war (1989-2003) that was fought over political grievances and socio-economic malaise (Klay Kieh 2009) ended with the signature of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that included the establishment of the United Nations Mission in Liberia. The reconstruction process included the usual Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration program (Basini 2013), Security Sector Reform (Karim 2020) and the organisation of elections (Bøås and Utas 2014). UNMIL finally closed its doors on March 2018, but issues of socio-economic development and equality were preventing reconciliation (Cheng 2018). In an attempt to correct this and with the support from the UN Peacebuilding Commission, the government of Liberia developed its Strategic Roadmap for National Healing, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (2013). Since then, several UN Peacebuilding Fund projects seek to implement some of the Strategic Roadmap prioritises and to tackle socio-economic injustices and inequalities as a means to ensure national reconciliation.

The article proceeds in five parts. First, I interrogate the literature on knowledge production in peacebuilding interventions. In this section, I do not aim to define knowledge production or to establish with certainty how knowledge on international policy processes is generated. Rather, I intend to locate the birth of debates about knowledge production within the disciplinary and historical context of liberal peace and the reproduction of power dynamics in the international order. Second, I explain my theoretical research design, unpacking how this project contributes to methodological debates in the study of technologies of knowledge production and to feminist approaches to governmentality. I also offer some reflections on methods. The third and fourth sections provides an empirical analysis on the role of the reports as communicative and measuring technologies of knowledge production within the framework of the Peacebuilding Fund in Liberia. In particular, I examine the rationalities, subject-positions and mechanisms through which knowledge is produced and given authority and legitimacy in reports. I study the theory of change of the projects, the indicators and objectives, as well as the success stories identified in order to examine the ways in which women and women’s organisations are made meaningful in these projects. I compare the written reports with an analysis of interviews undertaken with implementing partners and writers of these projects in order to open the “black box” of technocratic expertise and understand how particular representations of gender justice were acted upon, determining inputs, outputs and measuring performance, at the expense of other alternatives. In the last section, I offer some concluding remarks.

**Knowledge production and gender expertise in peacebuilding**

The focus on knowledge production is clearly positioned within the well-documented critical turn in peacebuilding scholarship in the last ten years (Jones 2015). For this scholarship, knowledge production mechanisms are essential to international interventions as these render local settings intelligible by producing ‘truths’ and ‘facts’ about these settings (Goodhand and Sendra 2013; Lewis 2017). One strand of literature is strongly concerned with the epistemic authority of experts and organizations (Littoz-Monnet 2017a; Goetze 2017) and explores how dominant knowledge on international peacebuilding is maintained (Machold 2020; Sending 2015; Merry 2016). Autesserre (2017) explains how when an intervention becomes risky, policy-makers tend to rely on foreign expertise and business as usual instead on local knowledge. Blieseman de Guevara advances the notion of a “battlefield of ideas”, in which policy-relevant knowledge is produced and sold in a marketplace fashion by powerful “knowledge entrepreneurs” (Bliesemann de Guevara 2014; Moe and Müller 2018) reducing the space for the production of critical knowledge (Bliesemann de Guevara and Kostić 2017). These scholars have criticized the dominance of “liberal”, “global” or “international” expertise vis-à-vis local knowledge (Richmond 2006; Björkdahl and Höglund 2013). They argue that international organisations govern post-war populations through their knowledge production activities, such as the production of indicators and indices (Löwenheim 2008; Jaeger 2010), encouraging “de-politicized and de-contextualized engagements […] that favour models that are already legible to the field and its ‘best practices’, rather than innovations that may extend or challenge the field as we know it” (Nesiah 2016, 34 cited in McAuliffe 2017, 180). It is precisely their ability to present themselves as impersonal and neutral that is central to the assertion of their authority and legitimacy to intervene (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). They criticize the idea of ‘knowledge transfer’ from the Global North to the Global South as a solution (Cooper and Packard 1997, 2), the neoliberal culture and structural conditions under which such knowledge transfer is generated, producing expert and data inertia through the use of numbers, benchmarks, rankings, indicators and other quantitative technologies (Merry 2016; Littoz-Monnet 2017b).

By contrast, approaches inspired by new materialisms paint a less straightforward picture by emphasizing the unstable nature of knowledge making communities (Demortain 2017) and demonstrating the role of artefacts and technologies in producing the reality they seek to measure (Berten and Leisering 2017). These approaches claim that in order to be successful knowledge entrepreneurs in ‘evidence-based policy-making’, it is essential to access or possess ‘local knowledge’ and ‘local expertise’, as well as the ability to align this local knowledge with current international needs and wants. Therefore, working together with local Global South actors and knowledge is what gives credit, authority and legitimacy to knowledge entrepreneurs and the ‘lessons learned’, ‘best practices’ and ‘success stories’ they produce and promote (Mou and Müller 2018). Drawing the attention to the dynamics of competition and contestation over what legitimate knowledge is, other scholars have demonstrated that epistemic communities of peacebuilding operate not as places where knowledge is created, but rather as “sites of a constant struggle over how to define which qualifies as valid knowledge” (Bush and Duggan 2014, 233; Lemay-Hébert and Mathieu 2014). As such, the production of expertise is the assembling of the “ever-shifting constellations of actors, institutions, data and forms of expression” (Leander and Wæver 2019). Although they recognised that knowledge making and meaning making are unstable, and that what qualifies as valid knowledge varies and evolves over time (Bueger 2019), these perspectives suggest that practices of assembling may have systematic effects, such as creating “ignorance” by promoting specific forms of knowledge at the expense of others, reproducing power relations (McLeod 2019; Leander and Wæver 2019, 1–11; Bakonyi 2018).

Critical scholars from indigenous, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives have demonstrated how knowledge production processes in international spaces result in ‘epistemic injustice’ (Shilliam 2016) and (re)produce the racial-epistemic conceptual hierarchies of ‘traditional’ versus ‘expert’ knowledge (Taylor 2012: 393) that have historically accompagnied the European heteropatriarchal and colonial project (Escobar 2007). They seggregate humans into the modern, Western men with scientific rationality and epistemic authority to produce ‘objective truths’, and the primitive and traditional women and non-Western men, as the objects of knowledge production. Alternative knowledges that challenge the cognitive framework of modernity and produced by those below in the racial-epistemic conceptual hierarchy are seen as irrational, irrelevant and even as an obstacle to ‘social progress’ (Harding 2008), and so they are erased, expropriated or co-opted (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). For these scholars, if new peacebuilding approaches have understood the limits of conventional ways of knowing, they should radically engage with and restitute indigenous and feminist knowledges and visions of life (Mignolo 2012), which are always plural and contested (Bustelo et al. 2016), concrete (Rosenow 2019), situated (Harding 2008) and committed to the transformation of unequal power relations. If the radical challenging of the legacies of liberal peacebuilding and Western worldviews (Brigg 2016: 65), such as ideas about the objectivity of scientific knowledge and the existence of a universal truth are not taken seriously, even the most progressive social projects on peace and justice are doomed to fail (Harding 2008).

Nevertheless, although this research has made a powerful case that the knowledge produced by international organisations and epistemic communities is gendered and colonial, and as such greatly influences how global issues are governed, the question of *how* (gender) knowledge on international peacebuilding and conflict management processes is generated, repackaged, deployed or ignored, and with what consequences for global politics continues to be underexplored. The need to gather knowledge and expertise on how to do gender-sensitive peacebuilding has led to the prioritisation of a more systematic analysis and planning process of gender and peace initiatives, performed by designated gender professionals and the deployment of this knowledge through various technologies in order to “reshape conduct in practices and institutions” (Dean 2010, 27). This has resulted in contradictions in the Sustaining Peace agenda between the need to include other ways of knowing and the political nature of conflict prevention, and the need to frame problems and solutions through material technologies such as reports that embed knowledge claims in their technical, universal nature (Johnson Ross 2019; Bustelo et al., 2016; Ferguson 2015).

**Reports as everyday bureaucratic practices of (gender) knowledge production**

By combining a sociology of knowledge perspective on how bureaucratic practices exercise power and authority through the production of knowledge (Littoz-Monnet 2017b; Jones 2020) with feminist governmentality insights on how feminist knowledge is increasingly used as population management in post-war settings (Reeves 2012; Kunz, Prügl and Thompson 2019), the following sections seek to understand the *practice* of knowledge production in Sustaining Peace projects and its implications in terms of (gender) justice. If Sustaining Peace is about prioritising local experiences and knowledge, how is (gender) knowledge (re)produced and arranged to make an international intervention and its objects possible, through which mechanisms and with what rippling effects?

As tools through which international organisations claim expertise, reports constitute an essential part of what Merry (2016) named after ‘technologies of accountability’ in an ‘audit culture’. They offer an entry point as to how knowledge is produced, negotiated and distributed from the ground up in post-war interventions, disaggregating complex social processes into standardised data from which the world “can be described, classified, understood and improved” (Mignolo 2005, 36). They therefore have technical, but also social epistemic objectives, as certain ideas, concepts and theories are being (re)produced. I consider PBF projects are useful entry points for Sustaining Peace discussions and policymaking. As the last report on the PBC Gender Strategy (2020) indicates: “ Two MS [Member States” representatives thought that without the availability of Peacebuilding Fund information, their Ambassadorial statements would often mostly be broad statements of support rather than being able to draw on specific experiences of women peacebuilders in the country” (2020:9).

Within the framework of the UN Peacebuilding Fund, reports are *communication* technologies and they provide the *dominant policy templates* pointing to problems to be addressedand contributing to ‘technical assistance’ for the transformation of deficient national structures and capabilities of post-conflict countries. Entrenched in wider neoliberal and neocolonial logics of progress and greater efficiency and professionalism, they are social technologies that build *rationalities* to justify particular modes of rule and social problem constructions, and determine who peacebuilding is for through the fabrication of interventionary *subjects and objects*. They operate technical, ‘undisputed’, coherent and universal instructions over practices and norms considered irrational, anachronistic, traditional or arbitrary (Merry 2015) to deal with complex peacebuilding problems (Kennedy 2016, 7). This, in turn, hinders the dialogue and diversity needed to understand social and political challenges and to design context-specific solutions, reproducing racial and gendered structures of the global order.

Second, reports are also *measurement* technologies that provide positivist and quantifiable knowledge to create “internationally comparable statistical classifications” (Merry 2016, 62) and to discipline countries and organisations receiving funding. Indeed, through the development of indicators and benchmarks as monitoring and evaluation instruments, UN Peacebuilding Fund reports are used to generate large bodies or data, producing feedback for ‘oversight, accountability and learning’ and to facilitate ‘more rapid and effective calculation of performance indicators at the project level’ (PBF, Strategic plan 2017-2019, 20). These, in turn, will help ‘to establish the basis for the release of performance-based tranches as well as the Fund’s global performance’ (idem). Success or failure are then determined in relation to ‘universal’ standards and desirable outcomes, such as productivity, profit and (national) economic growth, that have been developed in one part of the world without due regard to the diversity of existing perspectives, homogenizing practices across time, cases and spaces.

Reports therefore reproduce the geopolitics of knowledge, constructing global spaces of classification, equivalence and universality through two interrelated mechanisms: *persuasion,* based upon a logics of *neutrality,* through the depiction of the universal quality of benchmarks; and *homogenization*, based upon a logics of *efficiency*, through the foregrounding of carefully curated success stories and best practices (Mac Ginty 2012, 291). These logics work to give legitimacy and epistemic authority to the designer of the ‘evidence-based’ intervention but are also instrumental in the *depoliticisation* and *decontextualization* needed to evacuate risk and uphold the appearance of the technical character of the intervention, in which comparability and replication are possible and desirable.

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| **Mechanism** | **Logics**  | **Discursive effects** |
| Persuasion  | Neutrality | Depolitisation |
| Homogenisation  | Efficiency  | Decontextualisation |

*Table 1: Reports as knowledge production artefacts*

Feminist literature on governmentality has demonstrated how knowledge is rearranged to fit a specific understanding of reality that sits uncomfortably within the deeply critical nature of feminist work (Prügl 2011; Reeves 2012) and how gender expertise is a political and social phenomenon (Kunz, Prügl and Thomson 2019). First, international institutions such as the UN tend to prefer the employment of what they perceive as more clear-cut, positivist methodologies and ways of measuring that provide ‘universal’ data to be operationalised as policy. This masculine and neocolonial logics of ‘universal’ knowledge as a currency (Escobar 2007; Shilliam 2016) goes against feminist, indigenous approaches that tend to generate situated knowledge from and about everyday mundane experience and that question claims to ‘complete truth, objectivity or self-knowledge’ because these are, in practice, rarely cognisant of the prioritisation of the masculinised ways of experiencing and seeing the world (Harding 2008). By their refusal to engage with an influx of alternative gender knowledge, the UN organizational logics and practices institutionalise ignorance of how knowledge production processes are gendered (Cavaghan 2017).

Second, to be valuable for international institutions, thus, gender expertise is transformed and understood as a set of technical and universal insights that can be learnt and applied (Dersnah 2019). It is not that situated, experiential knowledge is not included. Liberian women’s voices are ‘heard’ in the Peacebuilding Fund reports under analysis, but their knowledge is ‘curated’ and integrated in the form of ‘success stories’ inasmuch as they reinforce and do not contradict knowledge produced by the expert. Rather than drawing from the diversity of everyday experiences of women to promote innovative ideas, these experiences are used to support ‘best practices’ and efficient interventions, constructing an encompassing ‘gender narrative’ as a way to advance institutional change (Griffin 2009; Prügl 2011; Reeves 2012). Acceptable stories of what a gender initiative is for and what it can achieve are therefore important and necessary to afford gender initiatives authority and legitimacy. Gender is framed as an organisational issue enacted in systematic, instrumental and measurable ways (Hurley 2018). As Hurley rightly claims, ‘specific stories facilitate the construction of those broader gender narratives’ (2018, 442), as well as the production of individual and collective gendered subjectivities, helping the organization that produced the report ‘to promote the relevance of new gender initiatives and overcome resistance’ (2018, 442). Gendered and racial hierarchies of knowledge production are being restored in the name of practicality, and projects and solutions keep on reinforcing the status quo that policymakers are invested in defending, rather than transforming intersectionally unequal power relations.

***Methods and methodology***

I selected the four projects that focused in Liberia on gender and the promotion of the Peacebuilding Commission Priority area 2: the promotion of co-existence and peaceful resolution of conflict.[[1]](#footnote-1) Two projects had a Gender Marker Score of 3 (GM3) and two had Gender Marker Score of 2 (GM2). I paid particular attention to more recent publications such as training and learning manuals, and major flagship reports together with background documents such as the project proposal, the original and revised theory of change (ToC), the monitoring and evaluation framework, and baseline studies. The projects are “Strengthening Women’s Rights and Participation in Peacebuilding” (GM3), “Reel Peace: Using film to support stability in Liberia” (GM3), Cross border cooperation between Cote d’Ivoire and Liberia for Sustainable Peace and Social Cohesion” (GM2), “Community-based Truth-Telling and Atonement Project (Palava Huts)” (GM2). The four projects seek to prevent conflict by training rural women in leadership and negotiation skills, as well as on basic economics and trade. The implementing partners are always a mix of several UN programmes and funds, and local NGOs or civil society organisations. This makes a total of 30 reports – project concept documents, semi-annual reports, progress reports, financial reports and final reports - and other official documents produced by the PBF and the PBC since 2010, and 2000 pages. From a feminist governmentality perspective (Prügl 2011), it is necessary to recognize documents such as reports as discursive artefacts and deconstruct the discursive formations that constitute local communities, in this case, women and women’s organisations, as objects of knowledge production (Mitchel 2002). This allows me to identify what is to be learnt about and governed, when and how, and to what ends. I then address the mechanisms and logics that develop in the production of knowledge on the intervention object and what effects these mechanisms produce.

 My method of analysis entailed a close reading of documents and their inductive coding. As in all discourse analysis, I developed my argument during this process of coding and analysis, by comparing my emerging interpretations with existing literature. I then checked for intra-rater reliability by re-coding randomly selected segments (Stemler 2001). Finally, I also draw from 20 fully anonymized semi-structured interviews I conducted in November 2018 and in July 2019 in Monrovia. I interviewed, individually or in teams, professionals in key roles in the management and implementation of the UN Peacebuilding Fund projects, including the production of reports. The report writers were always located in Monrovia, and were project managers working either for the UN programs or for the NGOs in charge of implementing the projects. I argue that if we are to understand how we know what we know about gender justice, how the success stories that figure in the reports are chosen and why, how the tensions found in the reports are downplayed in interviews and how certain representations are made politically legitimate, it is necessary to conduct a knowledge sociology of the ‘dispositional logics’ (Pouliot 2013, 45) that orient knowledge production practices. Representations of women and gender-sensitive peacebuilding articulated and acted upon by peacebuilders are in this sense more interesting from a perspective of the categories of perception, values and visions that shape knowledge on how to act. This brings a focus on dispositions and knowledge in a de-abstracted form in relation to concrete problems within and struggles over gender-just interventions.

I compare my analysis of written reports with the analysis of interviews conducted in order to understand how knowledge is re-arranged and assembled before its presentation in the form of reports to the Peacebuilding Fund. I coded the interview transcripts in the same way I had coded the written material, ran word frequencies and re-coded randomly selected transcripts. I then compared and contrasted the results of both coding results. Here, I am not interested in standing at a distance from my interlocutors, pointing out all the ways in which they inadequately or inconsistently conceptualized gender or wrongly implemented their interventions. Rather, the aim is to unveil intraorganizational power struggles and tensions by paying attention to the subjective process behind the production of allegedly objective knowledge and reveal the unknowns and silences, the contested and the contingent behind the production of project reports, such as the selection of data and material report writers use, subsuming the social context and intervention object to managerial rationality (Bakonyi 2018; Dernash 2019).

**Reports as communication technologies: Rationalities and dominant policy templates**

In its website, the Peacebuilding Fund praises itself for being able to ‘respond quickly and with flexibility’ and to ‘catalyze processes and resources in a risk-tolerant fashion’. The recognition that peacebuilding is context specific, risky and political contrasts clearly with the way in which the concept reports of the funded projects present seemingly natural and linear ordering of facts, and narratives of progress from war to sustainable peace. The assumptions behind these ordering of facts nonetheless (re)construct colonial difference through the presentation of thinkable and practicable solutions, which are always already tied to specific geopolitical interests and ideologies, such as profit and (global and national) economic growth, as well as good management of natural resources. This first empirical section of this article demonstrates how reports on the four PBF projects under examination produce new gendered rationalities of intervention and contribute to the fabrication of rural women in Liberia as community reconciliators.

***Gender Justice and Natural Resource Management***

Since the total of concession agreements cover over 40 percent of Liberia’s territory and affect about 30 percent of the rural population (World Bank 2018, 32), it is not surprising that peace and reconciliation are understood as unattainable if natural resources are not properly managed. The four projects regard the potential conflict between communities and investors over land and natural resources as a ‘dysfunction’ that must be ‘fixed’ (Mac Ginty 2012, 300) and training and supporting women’s local networks as mediators is the solution. The idea is that women are persuaded to see the benefits of participating in the extractive economy for social and personal development, and ensure its well-functioning without challenging it: “The extractive industries and all other large scale uses of land for the extraction of non-renewable materials must ensure that women are able to participate around land use and natural resource management, and that the distribution of revenue from these natural resources benefit men and women equally”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

These assumptions are not accidental. They constitute the product of careful, considered decisions, shaped by the realities of peacebuilding bureaucracy, funding availability, and the politics of agenda-setting.[[3]](#footnote-3) As such, nowhere in the reports do the constructed solutions challenge neoliberal economic policies of peacebuilding and reconstruction as structural concerns that ultimately undermine what any good feminist gender-sensitive and gender mainstreaming policy could achieve.[[4]](#footnote-4) Instead, reports take them as a intrinsically good for sustaining peace, and propose the support of “stronger linkages between the women groups and the concession companies” as a way to “minimize negative impacts of concessional activities on communities while maximizing the socio-economic benefits from the concession investments and avoid community backlash and violent disturbances in the 23 communities”[[5]](#footnote-5). In sum, it is precisely “in mitigating and preventing conflicts over natural resources” that “women have a key role to play”[[6]](#footnote-6) and gender justice is understood as making sure that women have a seat at the negotiation table on the integration of Liberia in the global neoliberal economy, even as it perpetuates racial, gender and ethnic inequalities. This explains why the Peacebuilding Fund projects work mainly with individuals and structures that had previously and successfully worked with international organizations (Bakonyi et al. 2015, 76).

Interviews revealed that unconventional insights that differ from the dominant template of win-win situation of ensuring gender justice and promoting sustainable peace through neo-liberal economy of land exploitation and natural resource extraction, were dismissed for being divisive, ignorant and deviant: “Communities don’t understand concession agreements. Concessions are not NGOs, and so as a post-war country, if we want investors, we have to give up rights” (Interview 10, Monrovia, November 2018). Similarly, implying a disconnect between women and peacefulness that could be read across all of the reports, one interviewee explained how it was important to involve women in community negotiations with concessions because in one particular community women started losing jobs, livelihoods and rights “and they became very violent” (Interview 15, Monrovia, November 2018). How the political program of exploitation of natural resources through land concession could be in some circumstances detrimental for women’s rights, and how some women did not really see it a win-win situation is nowhere to be seen in the context analysis of the reports, and clearly contrasts with their overarching theory of change: having women at the forefront of the negotiations between communities and concessions is the best way to achieve justice and to avoid conflict.

***The production of the rural woman as a governable object of intervention***

The concept reports of the four projects recognise the specificity of the historical and cultural context of the interventions and dedicate specific sections for its analysis. Nevertheless, the activities proposed articulate with broader neoliberal economic rationalities and they encourage and reproduce the gendered, racialised and classed modes of personhood in the generic figure of the Liberian rural woman as central. In particular, they produce liberal ideas of female natural (re)productive capacities to deliver a range of results, such as economic growth, care and mothering, reconciliation and sustainable peace: “The project will create a protective environment that enables rural women to protect and secure their rights to natural resources as well as land while building community cohesiveness, values and a spirit of cooperation.”[[7]](#footnote-7) It is because women “are naturally more concerned about the welfare of their communities”[[8]](#footnote-8) that it is ‘important that women acquire skills to engage constructively the system’.[[9]](#footnote-9) If rural women are given a seat at the table and trainings on negotiation and leadership, then ‘their ability to make informed decisions regarding the sustainable exploitation of natural resources in their communities’,[[10]](#footnote-10) with the implicit assumption that these informed decisions will result in women’s acceptance of external exploitation of resources, while at the same time contributing to sustain their communities ‘through the maintenance of the local food economy’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Without many resources, women are expected to carry the full weight of reconciliation and sustainable peace on their shoulders and be successful there where the state and the international community have failed.

The complex intellectual exercise of producing knowledge on how gender dynamics influence the past and current social, economic and political situation of Liberia in order to better is translated in practice into a box ticking exercise to make sure that “gender is mentioned in the report” and into a basic mathematical task of counting female bodies to ensure that “50% of beneficiaries are women” (Interview 14, Monrovia, November 2018). This instrumental understanding of gender and an essentialist conceptualisation of gender as women are even more evident on GM3 projects, who have gender equality as its primary objective. In *Reel Peace*, *if* women are trained and supported to create a national network of women film makers, *then* peace and stability will be improved as the project “will help reconciliation, create inclusive conversations and support development in new ways”.[[12]](#footnote-12) With a video-recorder and some training, film making is understood to be “a significant force for [gender] justice”.[[13]](#footnote-13) Similarly, one of the objectives of *Strengthening women’s rights* is to organise groups of rural women into Concession Community Women Development structures so that they can “peacefully resolve and demand for the changes they wish to see without necessarily resorting to violence and teaching others to do the same.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Indigenous knowledge is not therefore used to design targeted, context specific and political interventions to ensure women can lead the lives they want. Rather, women’s knowledge and experience are co-opted to ensure communities acquiesce to the pursuance of foreign and national economic interests.

It is not only that projects equate gender with women, but that women all have the same experiences, interests and ideas. In producing the female-directed films, *Reel Peace* participants will collaborate with women that have worked in other PBF projects and that already have an international presence, such as those working in the famous Peace Huts of Liberia, who will act as ‘trainers and community amplifiers. When asked how films directed by women could bring gender-sensitive justice, my first interviewee indicated that women were ideally placed to tell other women’s stories: “we bring the three of them together [one woman from government, one from a civil society organisation, and one from the media] in each county to tell a bigger story about women issues in that county; and so they [the films] are representations of the voices of the collectivity of the women, and not necessarily their own voice” (Interview 1, Monrovia, November 2018). This simplified representation of women as a collective of unison voices contrast clearly with the fact that “people have different ideas about what is reconciliation” (Interview 14, Monrovia, November 2018). This assumes that all women are first, a homogeneous group, ignoring ethnic relations and the divisions between rural and urban women in Liberia, and second, that they are all going to have the same priorities, contrary to the men who can have different ideas on what is reconciliation and who to go about it. *Strengthening women’s rights* also targets women in “ongoing capacity building and strategic networking between the women groups and other existing functional peace huts to create a foundation for the emergence of a “network of mutually supportive women-led and gender responsive community-based mechanisms in each of the 5 counties targeted.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The embedded logics of modernity and coloniality are central to the reconfiguration of rural women as governable objects of intervention. All of the projects describe and essentialise the Liberian rural woman in contradictory ways, asserting and denying women’s capacities and expertise. As Green’s (2000) findings on participatory approaches in Tanzania, and Bakonyi’s (2018) study of decentralisation programme in Somalia, by always depicting rural women in a position of vulnerability, these reports produce spaces in Liberia where intervention is needed and justified. Most of the projects refer to ‘vulnerable women’ as lacking the necessary resources that would enable them to succeed in crisis management and identify a general lack of capacity of these women to articulate demands and participate in decision making simultaneously asserting and denying women’s expertise. Rural women are understood as being “the most vulnerable” in *Reel Peace* and therefore, working with them through film-making will help turn them into a “robust network of local peacebuilders”. The main objective of *Strengthening Women’s Rights and Participation in Peacebuilding* is no other than to “support women’s rights and participation in peacebuilding by reaching approximately 1150 rural and most vulnerable women at the grassroots level across 23 key concession communities in 5 counties”. The two GM2 projects always include women together with other categories including the other “vulnerable populations”.

Following a logic of linear progress, their potential as mitigators and preventors of conflict “can only be realised if they are fully informed and capacitated on relevant issues”.[[16]](#footnote-16) As the concept note of the Palava Hut projects states, “[w]omen will be provided with dedicated training in conflict management and consensus-building or compromise” and this will include lectures about the various acts and policies related to land rights and use. Once these ‘vulnerable women’ are trained, they will perform in appropriate ways, “work through [potential conflict] situations without creating new challenges of non-recognition”[[17]](#footnote-17) and “proactively and positively engage communities, authorities and other stakeholders to demand for delivery of services; natural resources investment dividends and other social services that will result in enhanced social cohesion and building of trust among communities, concessions, as well as concretize the legitimacy of governments, thus making a critical contribution to the peacebuilding process in Liberia”.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Women’s needs regarding reconciliation in this way are not tackled, as they don’t need to reconcile, to be healed or to transform an economic system. They are not considered political actors or perpetrators of violence during war, but managers and mediators of those who were. And finally, they are considered as responsible entrepreneurs that will ensure sustainable results. The exit strategy of one of the projects already predicts that “women will start new micro-scale joint business ventures that will enable them to perpetuate their activities through this income generation”[[19]](#footnote-19) as they will also receive “additional basic business development training and resource mobilization for the women to establish micro-scale joint businesses at their respective communities after the project ends”[[20]](#footnote-20). The coherent form of these abstract ideas about rural women as both, the most vulnerable and ‘superheroines’ (Shepherd 2008) is not due to their innate characteristics – remember those women who ‘became very violent’-, but rather to the conscious efforts behind its production, to the “machinery” that makes certain ideas “resound” (Mitchell 2011: 68).

Contrary to the homogeneous discourse contained in the reports, the wide variety and sometimes contradictory ideas about why rural women should be at the forefront of reconciliation projects in the interview data was surprising. Some of my interlocutors clearly reproduced discourses on rural women as vulnerable victims who suffered the most during conflict and whose views should be now taken into account in peacebuilding activities. For others, it was precisely because rural women had always been skilled negotiators as “[t]hey have always being talking and negotiating with their husbands, even though they were not recognised” (Interview 1, Monrovia, November 2018), that they now had the legitimacy to participate in reconciliation and peacebuilding activities: “Now it is their time to talk” (Interview 1, Monrovia, November 2018). Still, the same legitimacy that got them there – being mediation experts and having local knowledge- is contradicted by the need to train them in conflict resolution and mediation in all reports. The legitimacy of women as mediators and as knowledge producers rests on its association with the contextual, experiential knowledge that they bring, as well as their assumed peaceful nature, but it remains conditional to women’s gaining appropriate management and negotiation skills. Ultimately, interventions are legitimised by presenting them not as the exercise of social engineering that they are, but as part of a new agenda of supporting previously marginalised local stakeholders.

**Reports as measurement technologies: mechanisms, logics and discursive effects**

By examining both, progress and final reports on the projects, this section shows how the mechanisms of persuasion and homogenization work to privilege an idea of gender justice as ‘universal’ through a logics of neutrality, and an idea of progress through logics of efficiency in which only those subjects who subscribe to neoliberal values of economic growth, profit and productivity can reach sustainable peace. I argue as well that the problem is that these measurement mechanisms and their logics work to depoliticise and decontextualise the conditions of possibility of these projects and their results, and therefore work against the philosophy behind the Sustaining Peace agenda: that peacebuilding is a political and context-specific endeavour. An analysis of these mechanisms unveils the geopolitical economies of knowledge through which the Peacebuilding Fund produces its truth, defines its authority and legitimises its (re)production.

***Counting women: Persuading through precision***

As a starting point, each one of the four projects has clear transformative notions of empowerment and justice, focusing on women’s benefitting from ongoing economic planning, creative video making and cross-border trade. Paul Gready and Simon Robins define transformative justice as “change that emphasizes local agency and resources, the prioritization of process rather than preconceived outcomes, and the challenging of unequal and intersecting power relationships and structures of exclusion at both the local and global level” (2014, 340). Reflecting these tenets, all of the concept reports deploy a very comprehensive notion of how socioeconomic rights are linked to political, human rights and developmental aspects of sustaining peace. What is surprising, however, is that such desirable transformative, political outcomes are deemed to be achieved through a fairly consistent focus on more conservative, measurable activities and outputs.

Persuading the reader that the transformation of marginalized rural women into empowered citizens capable of occupying their “rightful place as self-actualizing and demanding subjects” (Rose 1996, 60) was successful is based upon demonstration of their participation in a series of trainings in negotiation skills and conflict resolution and other capacity building activities, such as in film-making, business management or consensus-building. The most common outcome indicator in all of the four projects is the proportion or number of women participating in community meetings.[[21]](#footnote-21) The Palava Huts project measures the participation of women in the Community Based Truth Telling and Atonement program, and claims success in the participation of 250 people in their trainings and events, “with females accounting for 43.2% and males 56.8%, a remarkable shift from a male-dominated Palava Hut.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Quantifiable indicators such as this certainly show that the resources committed to the project were put to use, but they translate social life into commensurate categories, presenting information in a simple and unambiguous way and a pretended logics of *neutrality*, while camouflaging the assumptions, motivations and values that shaped data collection, such as the need for quick results, and determined what is counted and what is ignored (Merry 2016).

Crucially, quantitative arguments seem to have gained the status of best practice in policy persuasion, becoming powerful “rhetorical weapons” (Breant 2012, 156) and hiding what is otherwise “a local and particular perspective under abstract universalism” (Grosfoguel 2008, 214). Counting the number of women participating as a way to demonstrate success of the project is therefore more important than the quality of women’s engagement throughout the process and how women’s knowledge is put to use. Indeed, feminist scholars have demonstrated that while being present in debates and meetings is important, it does not, by itself, ensure meaningful participation or being heard (Karl 1995; Phillips 1991), in particular if women are economically, socially or politically dependent. In other words, while giving the reader the illusion of neutrality, of natural facts, the counting does not “necessarily provide an accurate picture of a situation or its explanation” (Merry 2016, 220). On many occasions the solution for ensuring participation of ‘as many women as possible’ is to offer a space reserved for women and women’s collective separately, ‘to ensure active involvement of women in these activities.’[[23]](#footnote-23)

Accounting for the number of women who received the trainings, the number of women’s collectives that are called to seat in negotiation meetings and how many people visualised a women-directed movie puts limits as to how we know and recognise gender-sensitive peacebuilding. Rather than ensuring an understanding of gender power dynamics and how these play out on the possibilities of having a real voice in contexts of economic scarcity in the aftermath of war, this counting contributes to organizing and cementing social structures by identifying juxtapositions of those with power (men, the elder, concession companies etc.) with the powerless (women) that need to be represented, given spaces and supported by the experts who know who has the power and who is marginalised (Cruikshank 1993, 38-40). Thus, these quantitative measurements incorporate organizational value biases and theories about social change that are shaped by “ideology, inertia, social and political influence, inadequate data, and the pragmatic compromises that poor data requires” (Merry 2016, 220).

Critically, the prioritisation of “what works” in order to sustain the system over inclusive processes of knowledge production and negotiation results in a *depolitisation* of interventions, in a narrow and segmented problem-solving paradigm that is presented as a-historical, a-political and ignorant of wider structural factors such as the power imbalances between rural communities and international extractive corporations (Mac Ginty 2012). What becomes important is the bureaucratic demonstrating the production of results in incorporating women into the structures of global governance and market mechanisms, not engaging in a dialogical process of inclusiveness and diversity which takes into consideration power relations required to produce feminist knowledge (Bustelo et al. 2016). To the question of what the reports are valuable for, one interviewee replied that “[b]efore, our reports were long narratives of with whom, which type of activities and where and how they had taken place, etc. Now we only need to report on results, on outcomes.” (Interview 7, Monrovia, November 2018) or as another participant said: “[t]hese reports are very useful to us because we want to know what our impact has been, share experiences and ensure we are helping the country” (Interview 1, Monrovia, November 2018). For the UN office, these reports “help the country office understand what they [project implementers] achieved in an easy and fast way, because we don’t have too much time” (Interview 14, Monrovia, November 2018). In sum, it is not only my concern that gender equality becomes a quantifiable knowledge object, and that gender becomes synonymous with women. My concern is also that these reports institutionalize reject and ignorance of the situated, plural, political and contested ways of producing feminist knowledge on and about gender and its commitment to transform intersectional and structural inequalities.

***Storytelling: Homogenizing narratives through success stories***

The authority of expertise is also conveyed in progress and final reports through the stories of success in project implementation. Despite the PBF explicitedly rejecting inter-country comparison, the reports seek to demonstrate that applying the same formula and proven best practices, results can be reproduced in other settings. This reinforces a wider narrative of a-historical positive progression and a transformation of women from objects of intervention into competent neo/liberal subjects, *homogeneizing* intervention situations and levelling out cultural and social distinctions. The pragmatic compromises that the reports do in their storytelling to demonstrate efficiency end up deepening rather than alleviating gender injustices, as women are being portrayed as a *homogeneous* and apolitical group, whose common femininity, if trained, will prevent conflict. As such, strong emphasis was placed in how the projects did nothing but display the enabling conditions for women to deploy their innate skills, as “we are not putting anything new into them” (Interview 7, Monrovia, November 2018). Rather, “women can breakthrough and have convincing power. All men in the room they have their own egos, but women, they are mothers, they are nurturers, so they can solve issues in an amicable way” (Interview 10, Monrovia, November 2018).

That individual women need to perform in expected ways related to these gender attributes of femininity was already pointed out by Gibbings (2011). Through these stories, the PBF project reports come to denote conspicuously female competencies and abilities that are attached to sex, and not considered as competencies and abilities in and of themselves (Hurley 2018). To the question of what is innovative or interesting about the project, one of the reports explained that “[l]ivelihood and income generation among community members are being enhanced through the cross-border trade fairs (dominated by women) that are strategically held on market days during the social cultural activities”.[[24]](#footnote-24) In another more flagrant example, “the women were given the sanitation contract to maintain the facilities and the community”.[[25]](#footnote-25) If the idea was to engage women’s knowledges and practices throughout the process of reconciliation and conflict prevention, the success story ends up being about ‘adding women and stir’.

Through the *homogeneous* figure of the rural woman and the extraordinary results obtained in terms of *efficient* conflict prevention, the particular and complex political and socioeconomic situation of each one of the local communities participating in the project is erased “as highly specific and variable case studies are filtered and reduced to replicable behaviours and specific skills” (Hurley 2018: 452). Some of the women trained to become mediators in conflict-prone concessions land, are part of one of the 8 Multi-Stakeholders Platforms (MSP) that United Nations Development Programme, together with the Liberia National Bureau of Concessions have funded to establish a unique and formal dialogue channel between communities and concession companies, so that “the concessions do not have to negotiate with different community groups” (Interview 10, Monrovia, November 2018). Put simply, the stories do not question whether the projects transform gender power relations or tackle root causes of conflict in Liberia, such as differentiated access to economic resources. Rather, success is translated as the further incorporation of women and rural communities into the existing structural hierarchies of global political and economic orders, through the acceptance of foreign exploitation of land in the interest of (national) economic growth and peace. The two overarching objectives – gender justice and conflict prevention in resource rich contexts – cannot be understood outside of the larger reconstruction frameworks that work within contemporary liberal ideologies of governance.

Homogeneization mechanisms and their efficiency logics enable *decontextualization.* It is not that the content of the reports is made up, or false, but it is fragmented and repackaged in a certain manner, precluding other ways of understanding as there is not much time for engaging with the lives of those upon whose shoulders fall reconciliation and conflict prevention. Ultimately, promoting gender justice is simply translated as either the inclusion of female bodies in community meetings[[26]](#footnote-26) or as using conspicuously female competencies to suppress violent conflict with extractive industries, as “all the women [were encouraged] to carry out a big awareness on the disadvantage of resolving conflict by violence”.[[27]](#footnote-27) This is in clear contradiction with the official definition of ‘gender-sensitive’ offered by the Peacebuilding Commission and the Peacebuilding Fund. From the report’s perspective, the story is clear, succinct and unequivocal. Nevertheless, the absence of detail on why there is conflict between villagers – men and women - and extractive industries, and how land and natural resource exploitation could be part of the continuous, marginalisation and violence against women, the success stories only serve to reinforce the long-term objectives of neoliberal rationalities and economic growth upon which interventions are done.

When asked one of the implementers of the *Strengthening Women’s Participation* if having more women at the forefront of negotiations with concession companies have resulted in decreasing levels of domestic violence at home, she replied that there has been no improvement, and in some cases, the situation got worst (Interview 14, Monrovia, November 2018). What is more, while success stories about how “women are now sitting at the forefront of negotiations with concessions” (Interview 10, Monrovia, November 2018) abound in the reports, changes in levels of domestic violence were not measured at all, (re)producing the artificial division of private versus public sphere that basic gender-sensitive peacebuilding should avoid. On another interview, a participant recognised that one of the projects had completely failed as domestic violence rates went up because “husbands beat their wives after they had come home from evening literacy classes, as they thought they had been visiting boyfriends” (Interview 16, Monrovia, November 2018). These projects did not include analysis on the role of larger economic and social patterns of inequality and violence on domestic violence, failing to interrogate whether their interventions would reinforce, rather than eliminate everyday violence and gender inequalities.

This is important because newer projects tend to base their theory of change and rationale on these success stories and capitalise on their lessons learnt. For example, the *Cross-border cooperation* project proposes to “capitalize on the PBF project to support women’s empowerment, peace and reconciliation community initiatives both in Cote d’Ivoire and in Liberia which officially ended by the end of 2016”.[[28]](#footnote-28)Whereas coherence and continuity are laudable objectives, the projects and their reports are therefore incapable of imagining alternative visions and producing new knowledge of gender justice that could fundamentally transform the structural relations and root causes behind gender injustices. In sum, (re)producing knowledge about conflict and post-conflict settings boils down to power. In particular, while erasing alternative ideas and depoliticising subjects under universalistic pretensions, the colonial and patriarchal structures underpinning liberal peacebuilding and its governing logics reinforce the very exploitative dynamics and profound marginalisations that the Sustaining Peace agenda seek to contest.

**Conclusion**

This article has argued that despite its commitment to inclusivity, everyday practices and local knowledge and experiences, the United Nations Sustaining Peace agenda rely on top-down knowledge production and meaning making technologies that reveal the maintenance of the colonial and racial hierarchical power relations which have long pervaded peacebuilding work. Through a micro-level ethnographic analysis of reports and reporting of four Peacebuilding Fund projects in Liberia, I show how reports are managerial technologies of knowledge production that exert epistemic and political power, reconstructing colonial difference through the presentation of thinkable and practicable solutions and a natural ordering of facts and narratives of progress. While attention to and inclusion of indigenous knowledges and practices are paramount in the projects, these are only accepted if compatible with contemporary liberal ideologies of governance.

Examining the practices of knowledge production from a theoretical vantage point suggests that they do so through the interrelated mechanisms of persuasion and homogenization, which through logics of neutrality and efficiency work to depoliticise and decontextualise interventions. The Peacebuilding Fund project reports serve as a locus of knowledge production in which global templates encounter, mediate and repackage national and local knowledge in the form of success stories in order to ensure accountability and effectiveness. The result is a paradox: even though the Sustaining Peace agenda seeks to offer political, context specific and transformative solutions to address root causes of conflicts, the legitimacy and authority for intervention is based on the technical and universal nature of their knowledge claims. As a consequence, Peacebuilding Fund projects in Liberia, Sri Lanka and Colombia will look more and more similar, and less and less context specific.

The article also asks critical questions about the political work and effects that knowledge produced on and about gender is doing in projects aiming at diversity and inclusion. What should be a complex process of collective thinking and action to transform structures is translated into a more simple and rather technical task of providing trainings to women or to reserve seats in the negotiation table for female bodies, or other things which can be measured. In these depictions, where is the real engagement with indigenous knowledges and community priorities? Where is the context analysis that reveal the structural barriers and colonial histories of dispossession and exclusion that shape Liberian rural women’s lives and that seriously constrain their agency? And where are the responsibilities of the international community, if all the weight of conflict prevention and reconciliation falls on the shoulders of these women? With further research, we could extend these queries to look at the effects of marginalising other social categories – such as youth - in knowledge production processes and to compare knowledge production practices of different international organisations in order to understand variance in engagement with subaltern knowledges and with what effects.

Ultimately, the aim is not to provide a fixed definition of knowledge production in peacebuilding, but rather to offer an empirical and conceptual framework that opens up questions for further inquiry on how this knowledge is produced and what epistemic and political work this production does. In the cases under analysis, I demonstrate that the Peacebuilding Fund has been unable to imagine alternative ways of knowing and engaging with rural women without first transforming them into objects of intervention and incorporating them in the very same political and economic structures that reproduce the very conditions of structural inequality and gender injustice it seeks to address. Nevertheless, as Duncanson (2016) rightly puts it, to be gender-just and sustainable, peace and recovery need to be other than just compliance oriented and the return to the *status quo* that is the rebuilding of a patriarchal state in a neoliberal world order. It is not enough to count female bodies on the table and to include success stories by rural women to show outcomes and efficiency results in an instrumentalization of gender equality to the broader goals of conflict prevention. Rather, the Peacebuilding Fund should ensure that it engages with indigenous and collective ways of observing, measuring and evaluating knowledge, and that the collectives the projects seek to help are those who decide on what count as success and what is important to measure.

In sum, by paying attention to how knowledge is produced for peacebuilding practices, the article goes further than just revealing the technocratic workings of institutional power on marginal subjectivities and their implications in reconciliation and conflict prevention projects. It also demonstrates that these micro-relations almost exactly mirror the broader deficiencies and inequalities with the international order and the UN agenda for Sustaining Peace, leaving the structures that support racial, socioeconomic and gendered violence intact, and redirecting indigenous and dynamic learnings and experiences to fit truths and values dictated by the ever-present moral compass of liberal development and peacebuilding ideologies.

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1. These were the four projects that were in place in 2019 and early 2020. New projects on priority area 2 have been approved and started to be implemented since then. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Strengthening Women’s Rights* concept project report. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As Charli Carpenter (2014) rightly identifies in her discussion of advocacy networks worldwide, this phenomenon is not unique to Liberia or to projects funded by the Peacebuilding Fund. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Landessa report on Land Reform in Liberia (2018) estimates that The PPCA (Public Procurement and Concessions Act (PPCA) and the IA (Investment Act) appear to be unsatisfactory in its meager provision a gender-responsive, socially responsible legal framework for investment in land. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Strengthening Women’s Rights concept project report. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibidem [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Strengthening women’s rights, Concept Note [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Strengthening women’s rights, Annual Project Progress Report, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Strengthening Women’s Rights concept project report. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Strengthening women’s rights concept project report [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibidem [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Reel Peace* concept project report. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Strengthening women’s rights* concept project report [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Educare Final PBF Project Progress Report, “Strengthening Women’s Rights…, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibidem [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibidem [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibidem [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Strengthening Women’s Rights concept project report. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Strengthening women’s Rights, concept note. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibidem [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Community-based Truth Telling and Atonement Project (Palava Huts), concept note report. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Community-based Truth Telling and Atonement Project (Palava Huts), Half-yearly report, June 15, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cross-border cooperation, final report. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Cross-border cooperation, concept note report [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cross-border… initial concept note report. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)