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'Good boys, gone bad': Navigating Youth Mobilisation and Gender in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone

Abstract

Theories of peacebuilding often tend to position youth as either positive forces for change or negative sources of destruction and criminality which plays into stereotypical, bifurcated views of youth. Based on qualitative field research, this chapter challenges this orthodoxy by drawing on social navigation theory to understand how the ambiguous positioning of young people within ongoing post-conflict reconstruction efforts in rural Sierra Leone fed into their ambiguous actions during the recent Ebola outbreak, reflecting a more nuanced and grounded concept of how peace is maintained on a daily basis through informal, ordinary actions. Young men in particular are the focus for peacebuilding efforts and youth mobilisation, but are also imbricated in complex patriarchal hierarchies which has seen them both exploited and persecuted during the reconstruction period whilst also exploiting their own new found freedom. As I explore, both young men and young women are actively involved in maintaining peaceful relations in Sierra Leone, but both groups are forced to navigate complex social norms and negotiate multiple economic and political barriers whilst trying to access education and employment opportunities. Through understanding these non-violent navigations, I show how a more complex concept of young people as dynamic but flawed peace agents might emerge.

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the role of young people in fragile and conflict settings. While policy discourses have predominantly focused on the perceived risks to stability in countries with large youth populations (Urdal 2006) and high levels of youth unemployment (Cincotta 2008). Others have emphasised that young people can make a significant contribution to peace and post-conflict reconstruction (Agbiboa 2015). In

December 2015 the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, which calls for the participation of young people in all relevant processes aimed at bringing peace and stability, and may create momentum for supporting the participation of young people in peacebuilding. While there is an emerging literature on everyday youth activism that emphasises the constructive role that young people can play in their communities (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015), few of these studies are situated in fragile and conflict-affected settings. This chapter addresses this gap by analysing the everyday tactics and strategies with which young people respond to living in an insecure environment, and their motivations for being active citizens.

This chapter addresses a current gap in the literature on non-violence and civil resistance by analysing the tactical capacities of youth agency in conflict affected and fragile settings of young people engaged in creating cultures of non-violence (Shock 2013; cf Norman 2010). Rather than focussing on strategies that directly confronts violence or conflict, the research presented here focusses on a setting where a legacy of violence inspires a cultural focus on non-violence, peaceful reconstruction and cultural regeneration. Whilst this landscape is inevitably shaped by the legacy of conflict, and the underlying root causes of conflict that remain ever present, this approach destabilises the rigid boundaries between both violence and non-violence, conflict and non-conflict and the categorisation of youth as agents or victims (Agbiboa 2015; also see Oosterom 2022 this volume).

Sierra Leone has had a long history of violence which has been compounded by recent economic difficulties and the 2014 Ebola crisis. Consequently, young people in Sierra Leone are navigating out of the violent worlds they have inherited they are also navigating between different types of non-violence, be they earning a precarious livelihood, community mobilisation or migration. Based on interviews with young people and youth activists in each setting this study found overwhelming evidence of the multiple ways in which young women and men make life liveable for themselves and others and mitigate the fragility of the post-conflict setting in non-violent ways. Through subtle, everyday actions that can easily go unnoticed they contribute to peace, security and development, sometimes having significant impact. The study also found evidence of how young people actively negotiate with state and military actors for the benefit of their communities, using informal tactics. Such instances may

offer valuable insights for how youth participation might be supported, while at the same time youth initiatives can be accompanied to become more inclusive and accountable and include the voices and interests of young women.

This chapter proceeds as follows: firstly, I discuss the methodology which encouraged young people to define and explore their understanding of citizenship and non-violent action; secondly, I situate the Sierra Leone case in relation to the burgeoning literature on youth and non-violence; finally, I discuss the range of ways young people expressed their engagement with non-violent mobilisation and modes of citizenship through our findings.

Methodology

This chapter is part of a wider study which aimed to show how young people contribute to the formal and informal processes that address conflict-affected settings at the local and national level, and to what extent their actions have impact. It focused on settings where violent conflict, in the past or present, have been a major driver of political, social and economic instability that have had a direct impact on the lives of young people. Fieldwork was carried out between October 2016 and January 2017 by two researchers and four youth researchers identified through the network of Plan offices, who received thorough training in the key concepts, research ethics and methods. In total, the Sierra Leone team conducted 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 22 key informant interviews (KIIs) in Sierra Leone, to capture the changing views of young people FGDs were split evenly between younger (14-18/19) and older (19/20-25) youth and between men and women. Among the KIIs in each country were ordinary youth, youth activists and representatives of civil society organisations and government actors.

Research was conducted in the Northern region across Bombali, Kuinadogou and Port Loko districts which were heavily affected by both conflict and Ebola and recently targeted for youth interventions. Authority in Sierra Leone is currently in the process of devolution with power being delegated to locally elected 'district councils' who also work with local authority figures such as chiefs, 'paramount chiefs' (the chief of chiefs) and civil society actors (Fanthorpe, and Maconachie 2010; Jackson 2007). Made up of five districts in total, the Northern region encompasses several different chieftaincies, and it was considered courteous

to consult with chiefs before entering an area to conduct research (Acemoglu, Reed, and Robinson 2014). Interviews with local authority figures and chiefs were also included in the research programme. Though Sierra Leone is 69% Muslim, the Northern Region is 85% Muslim with a Christian minority, the widespread practice of traditional religions and medicine is still common, especially in rural areas (Richards 2005). Due to time constraints and availability of respondents, not all relevant donors and civil society organisations could be interviewed and therefore important programmes that enable youth participation may have been missed.

Context: Youth in Sierra Leone

In February 2018, sporadic outbreaks of violence around Freetown, the sprawling capital of Sierra Leone between young supporters of the opposing political parties were greeted with counter protests and brutal police crackdowns. However, much of the commentary around this political violence focussed on young people, labelling them as 'domestic[i] terrorists' or 'good boys, gone bad' (Mitton 2018) and mirroring the intergenerational ruptures which prompted political and violent action during the civil war (see Boersch-Supan 2014; Bolten 2012; Fanthorpe and Maconachie 2010; Richards 2005). The outbreak of negative depictions of young men during the Elections thus reflects the multiple forms of marginalisation and deprivation faced by youth in Sierra Leone including low employment levels; informal/ precarious work; sexual exploitation; substance misuse; and crime (Enria 2012; 2013). The state has failed to recover in the wake of decades of conflict and has weak institutions and weak systems of participation leading to the exclusion and disenfranchisement of large groups of young people (See Edwards, Yilmaz and Boex 2015). This situation was further exposed and compounded by the recent Ebola outbreak (2014) which claimed nearly 4,000 lives, devastated the country's health infrastructure, limited migration and further damaged the already weak economy (Diggins and Mills 2015). Currently the government is stable but relies heavily on outside assistance and foreign Aid to maintain basic amenities and services and is mistrusted by the general population (See Edwards, Yilmaz and Boex 2015).

As recent research has noted, in spite of the lessons learned during the Civil War, young people continue to operate as a subordinate class, often marginalised, excluded and exploited (Boersch-Supan, 2012) with many joining gangs or participating in illegal or precarious work to escape oppressive eldership systems (see Diggins, 2015; Enria 2012). Added to this, the

mainly negative focus on young men continues in a concerted media campaign against, for instance, okada drivers and unofficial political gangs (known as 'cliques') which has been fomented by police harassment and sporadic episodes of violence (Finn and Oldfield 2015; Menzel 2011). These tensions have perpetuated the lingering intergenerational tensions which led up to the conflict and have continued to create feelings of economic and social marginalisation amongst youth including the strong reaction against mistreatment from chiefs and elders, prompting young people to 'revolt' against their elders and the corrupt state in pursuit of recognition and empowerment (Tom 2014). This has led to a surge of youth mobilisation structured around Western human rights discourses aiming to 'to secure economic and political advantage' as 'youth who view traditional authorities as corrupt and failing to protect their interests against politicians are claiming accountability from below)' (Ibid: 335; see also Enria 2012). For young women especially this has opened up opportunities to challenge entrenched patriarchal structures and mobilise around specific issues such as FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) and SGBV (Sex and Gender-Based Violence) (see Oosterom et al. 2017). In the next, section, I situate this context in relation to the literature on Non-Violence and agency which points towards the optimism inherent in youth mobilisation, countering the complacency and corruption which characterises elite governance in many precarious settings.

Non-violence and Youth Agency: Navigating from Conflict to Post-Conflict

There is increasing evidence that involving young people in participation processes can help establish, or re-establish, mechanisms of peacebuilding, conflict resolution and reconciliation, enhancing the ability of states to nurture stability and security (Agbiboa, 2015). Young men in particular are often seen as agents and perpetrators of violence and conflict, presenting beleaguered post-conflict states and the global development community a persistent problem in need of solution (Honwana, 2014). However, recent studies have shown how young people have adapted to these types of post-conflict settings by marshalling resources and mobilising their peers, making positive contributions to social renewal (Binn and Oldfield, 2015; Christiansen, Utas and Vigh, 2006; Cole and Durham, 2008; Jeffrey and Dyson, 2013). In fact for, for some young people, these forms of activism create "resilient support mechanisms, [to] retool themselves as political actors to build a better world, as well as

materially resist various inequalities to actually improve their lives and those of others' (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010: 481).

However, whilst youth participation has become an increasingly mainstream policy focus within development, interventions are often too narrowly defined to be effective or 'too episodic to be meaningful' (te Lintelo, 2012: 90; see Özerdem and Podder, 2015). This is especially the case in fragile or 'at risk' contexts where youth participation may be low on the state's priority list in the face of emergency relief or national reconstruction (Hilker and Fraser 2009). Moreover, young people often have a different perspective on the very nature of participation and democracy to those engaging them in participation programmes and processes, seeing certain modes of engagement as either coercive, elitist or lacking true transformative potential (Cele and van der Burgt 2016; Fusco and Heathfield 2015). For example, in Nairobi Kenya, Forti and Maina (2012) discuss how youth ironically lament their opportunities denied them by the government but also fail to take advantage of the programmes or polices which are available. They identify an urgent need for better promotion, awareness raising and explanation of youth programmes to address this mismatch, noting how the current disparity between the state and its young people is actually fuelling frustration and feelings of marginalisation, making integration into state-led initiatives even harder.

As I explore in this paper, in Sierra Leone, young people's agency in conflict –affected settings is often highly 'ambiguous' (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012), marked by both tactical and strategic navigations which may encompass physical movement and mobility; forms of social mobility and self-development; engagement with state, community and international agencies; as well as ambivalent feelings, motivations and actions. As a number of existing studies emphasise conflict-affecting settings are highly dynamic and insecure, forcing young people to navigate and deploy tactical agency ad hoc, as it were. Using De Certeau's (1984) distinction between tactics and strategies, Honwana (2006) argues that, in conflict settings, agency among youth is often 'tactic agency': focused on responding to immediate needs and returns rather than 'strategic agency' aimed at achieving long-term goals. As such, I draw on Vigh's concept of 'social navigation' to understand how young people in Sierra Leone move, adapt and thrive in increasingly precarious contexts where their route to the future is marked by uncertainty. Drawing on Bourdieu and De Certeau, Vigh (2006:238) observed how his young informants in

Guinea-Bissau were constantly renegotiating the trajectories of their lives, using a range of manoeuvres, performances and socio-cultural capitals to make the best of their situation suggests the concept of 'social navigation' as an 'analytic optic' to understand how agents seek to move within the social terrain and are moved by the social terrain' (ibid. 13-14). For Vigh, this was particularly relevant in conflict –affected areas where young people 'struggle to expand the horizons of possibility' and allows us to make sense of the ways young people 'navigate networks and events as the social terrain of their lives are embedded in oscillates between peace, conflict and (at times) warfare' (ibid. 55). However, other more recent studies have turned Vigh's theories to contexts such as economic insecurity in old age (McQuaid et al 2021) offering new productive ways of theorising young people's agency in diverse precarious contexts.

Addressing this ambiguity, scholars have demonstrated the importance of investigating young people's *motivations* for undertaking certain activities and explore how they link to broader social and political processes (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015:117). Yet there is evidence that suggests the distinction between the tactic and strategic, and between private and public action, is not as clear-cut (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015:117). NGOs play a vital role in this process mediating and brokering forms of participation and filling in the gaps between young people and inadequate formal provision or simply redirecting state resources where they are most needed (Frederiksen 2010). For example in the context of Nairobi, Thieme (2013) has shown how young people got involved in the politics of waste management despite resistance from the state. In the context of rampant unemployment and state disinterest, youth-based NGOs have been quite effective in reshaping local understandings of waste and recycling and turning reinvent garbage recycling into a form of environmental activism. Thieme's analysis, shows how encouraging 'positive' youth action can simultaneously make the informal activities of young people more meaningful but may also provoke feelings of ambivalence and frustration as they engage with the formal structures of the state (see also Oosterom 2022 this volume; Oosterom 2018; Osteroom et al 2016).

Furthermore, the data presented below suggests that the gender dimensions of youth participation need to be more fully explored (see for example Krause 2019; Pruitt 2015). As Krause (2019: 1480) argues, the experience of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings are usually presented through a victimhood narrative that foregrounds their suffering

and the violence inflicted on them (see also Pruitt 2015). Whilst these experiences are important to collect and address, recent studies have shown that women and girls experiences of conflict/ post-conflict and wider forms of social fracture are multi-dimensional and varied, covering a huge range of activities and experiences (Krause 2019). Rather than simply passively experiencing violence, young women and girls are often involved directly or indirectly as both perpetrators and victims of conflict and violence, undergoing experiences of trauma, rites of passage and post-conflict discrimination comparable with those of their male counterparts (Coulter 2008; Honwana 2006; Krause 2019; Utas 2005).

For example Coulter's (2008) study of women and girls in the Sierra Leone war has challenged dominant narratives around the conflict being primarily to do with dangerous, disenfranchised young men. As he notes the armed rebellion of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) included a large number of women in the various forces, estimated at between 10 to 30 percent with children making up half of the RUF fighting forces, a third of which were girls (p. 56). As he described, women and girls had a number of different roles within the armed groups but significantly at least half had received military and weapons training (Ibid.: 59; cf. Mazurana and Carlson 2004). However, whilst some female fighters joined voluntarily, the majority were forcibly abducted (p. Ibid.: 59; cf. Mazurana and Carlson 2004). Moreover, even though female fighters often occupied positions of authority or of higher status, the majority of women and girls were also forced to be 'wives' to male fighters and were repeatedly subjected to sexual violence, rape, and gang rape (Coulter 2008). As other studies have noted, this plural experience of young women needs to be accommodated in post-conflict reconciliation programmes if young women are not to remain multiply silenced in peacebuilding efforts (Krause 2019; McKay 2004; Maclure and Denov 2009).

For a deeper understanding of non-violent action among youth in Sierra Leone and to what extent these are more political and strategic, I now analyse the spectrum of young people's motivations and experiences of citizenship, and how these link to broader social and political processes of how youth identity formed. I then discuss the implications of these findings in relation to the gendered politics of youth mobilisation and participation, and the possibilities of understanding young people's nuanced and partial entry into non-violent action and dialogue.

'We are the future leaders': Peace as Progress in Sierra Leone

> *"We are the future leaders and if you are taking decision that will affect us and we are not involved, I don't think that is good. The decisions you are making will affect the youth in the long run and therefore we should be part of the entire process." (Kii Boy 19-25 Koinadogu)*

For young people in Sierra Leone, endemic poverty, the lack of reach from government services and social protection and a lack of incoming solutions to their problems has resulted in an admirable 'DIY' mentality to community development that fed into their mobilisation during the recent Ebola crisis. In this context, engagement with community level activism had become an important part of everyday life following the civil war, resulting in a vibrant patchwork of NGOs, both local and global; other civil society actors; and community spaces dedicated to the reparation of social relations or development objectives such as training, health or awareness raising. Given the lack of readily available formal , or even informal, employment, for some young people everyday activism had become a 'way of life' operating as a substitute for daily labour and offering a way of maximising their skills, training, networks and reputation without necessarily the corresponding financial reward.

For some young men this meant becoming part of 'youth cliques', a more benign and less well organised version of the Nigerian vigilante groups (Mitton 2018). As I have explored earlier, 'cliques' are often derided in the national press as a corrupting force on young men in particular, offering an increasingly institutionalised route into both political patronage and street violence (Mitton 2018). However as examples from Nigeria have shown, where vigilante gangs are well-established components of the political machinery, gangs can play an important mediating role between ineffective government and local communities as well as absorbing large numbers of young men in informal employment (Meagher 2007; Pratten 2008). As this informant notes, in the context of social and moral breakdown the status of cliques in Sierra Leone is more ambiguous and these youth are informally organising to sort out problems and resolve community disputes and encouraging other young people to do the same.

> *In my school, I have been a welfare advocator trying to talk to some of my colleagues who are engaging in this thing called 'cliques', I use to go to them engage them so that can the reality in life and stop doing the bad things they are doing. For instance here in Kabala, we a common practice here now wherein if you have a dispute with someone, you can come now and give me money to deal with the person you are having a confrontation with.*

For most young people we spoke to, the cliques were an urban phenomenon and were not part of their daily life but were representative of a broader move into community mobilisation and activism which were becoming more organised and uniform. For example, a number of civil society actors spoke of their involvement in development and community work from a young age, which has helped them to, in turn, support and inspire young leaders and activists. Many of these longer term actors developed their expertise in community led development during and after the civil war, adapting their skills, spaces and networks to different development issues over the years and encouraging a group of young leaders to follow in their foot-steps.

For example, the manager and founder of the Youth Partnership of Peace and Development' (YPPD) started when he was 18 after in 2005 to become active participants in the 'truth and reconciliation process' by helping their conflict affected peers with the 'aspiration of integrating young people back into society after the war'. One of their roles, emulated in other contexts such as Rwanda, was to take the findings of the reconciliation process into communities via a mobile cinema before becoming an integral part of the 'West African Network for Peace Building' that fosters peace and conflict resolution across the region. More recently they have become advocates of youth-led development with programmes on education, child protection, governance and accountability. In one recent innovative project they used short videos and plays to capture a range of social problems and relay them in a community setting. An approach that again has been replicated in places as far afield as Mexico.

Many of these advocates and activists benefitted from having community organisations and networks which were both embedded in communities for long periods and which were associated with spaces which could be used for a variety of community purposes. For the young people and civil society actors we spoke to informal, youth friendly spaces provided

vital platforms for opening dialogue between different social groups and were seen as an effective measure for mitigating the potential for a repeat of the conflict. For example, the 'Attaya Base' programme offered a friendly space for young people to drink tea and discuss social issues. There were also many examples of youth mobilising to perform everyday action, whether preventing disputes from escalating to promoting community relations through sport.

During the Ebola outbreak, young men especially were mobilised successfully by both NGOs and the government as part of a widespread sensitisation programme around hygiene. In a context where health workers were being assaulted and were generally mistrusted, youth were essential for reaching communities and engaging local people:

> *Youth were coming from NGOs and from the government to tell us about hand washing and the things we should do to remain Ebola free. we should not bury the dead and touch the sick and we should call 117 in case we are faced with any of the above situations as that is the only way to remain safe and they were also telling us not to eat bush meat and that OKADA riders shouldn't ride after nine in the evening.[ii]*

This informant details the importance of young people as mediators between health authorities and local communities poignantly describing how some local people thought of the 'thermometer as a gun' due to their fears of death from having a high temperature, resulting in many people avoiding seeking treatment as this informant explains:

> *I think the other issue was lack of sensitization and or education as that was evidenced during the time when we were working as volunteers. It was during the outreach we realised that people were referring to thermometers as a 'gun' but we were able to educate them that it has no harm and therefore they should have confidence in the health system and continue seeking medical attention. In fact what the health workers were doing was to allow you to rest each time your temperature is above thirty nine degree. We were also telling that, doctors will not give you illness that you don't have.*

My community Dwarzark was a hot spot during the Ebola outbreak and some of relatives and others in the community were afraid of coming very close to us as they do not have confidence in us. But because I was well informed, I was doing as I was told and that was the reason why I was going to quarantine homes. I think our sensitization helps a lot as people started seeking medical attention from that time for their various purposes. Therefore, increase in teenage pregnancy was as a result of lack of knowledge about Ebola.iii

In the spirit of DIY development, young people played a vital, but overlooked, role in working with communities to raise awareness and help people access treatment, further evidence of their ability to act with sense of ongoing social responsibility in their own communities. As this informant reports, youth played the role of 'broker' between medical and political authorities and local communities:

As a youth, one of the developmental contributions I have made is my participation in the constitution review process of which we made a position paper and it was given to the review committee. Also, during the time of Ebola, I did a lot of sensitization in the chiefdom and in the community where I was living at that time. We were also educating our people to stop eating bush meat as most of them were not listening to the advice of the health care workers

(Male Youth, 20, Koinadogu)

However, for many young women, their already precarious situations was compounded during the Ebola crisis by immobility, isolation and a lack of education. Teenage pregnancy, early marriage and secret abortion had increased during the outbreak as young women were forced to become more reliant on both young men and elder relatives for support, a situation compounded by the breakdown of their already limited access to healthcare. This also made them more vulnerable to ongoing issues such as FGM and SGBV. Women from minority ethnic and religious groups with more rigid ideas around early marriage were also more isolated and

more vulnerable, as were other discriminated against groups such as young disabled people and often stigmatised Ebola survivors.

For some young men this proved a turning point in their activist stories, pushing them to become more engaged in local politics. For example, Foday became more fully engaged in youth activism when he completed his secondary schooling. With his father absent, his mother supported his education by herself and he combines his youth advocacy work with helping her earn money to support his family. In his district, he is an active campaigner on the rights of women and the disabled, counting himself member of several voluntary organisations. He started volunteering for a local community organisation when his mother could not afford his school fees. Inspired by a visit from the ministry of social welfare, gender and children's affairs, he started working on youth outreach programmes, before eventually getting involved with PLAN Sierra Leone's youth advisory panel which promotes youth participation. One of his main interests is fighting for the rights of his female peers, as he explains FGM is normally practised during the 'dry season' which is when his network tries to bring traditional leaders and community members into dialogue with the young people he represents, often with limited success 'the traditional leaders and some community members will not be happy with us at they think it is a taboo for a male youth to discuss publicly issues relating to FGM. During this period, even if you invite them to participate in your programs they will not honour your invitation.' Part of the problem, he told us, is the lack of support from national government: I'm not aware of any program at national level that is supporting youth advocacy at community or district level. If there is any, they should have let us know because I'm also part of vibrant youth groups in the district'.

'Leh We Talk' [Let Us Talk]': Ambiguities of Gender in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone

"The boys always feel that they are more intelligent than the girls in this community and within the district. They boys used to say that the girls are not experienced and

therefore they should not be voted in as president of the nation or be appointed as minister.[iv]

For some young activists we spoke to, gender was the main focus of their work. The young people we met working for the Youth Advocacy Network (YACAN) for example discussed how they had been involved in the Girl Power project as well as running a weekly radio discussion show for young people, with a special emphasis on issues affecting young women's lives:

> The culture of our people is one of the barriers to female education in the region. What we are now doing is to involve parents from different communities to a meeting and we will use the female youth to discuss the role of women towards the development of the nation or the family. The reason for this is to ensure that those parents who are very stubborn in educating their girl child start doing so. I think if we continue with kind of sensitization, the mentality of our people on girl child education and the issue of earlier marriage will reduce in the district

(Male Youth, 17, Koinadogu)

> Well so many things have come together to see how best they can be able to make a change. Some people are mistaking the process of change to be that automatic not knowing that, it is a process that is coming step by step. Sometime ago, we used to have some high rate of discrimination of girls and the disable people of any form and more especially girls. For us, we use to have a group called ''Girls Making Media Project.'' What we were trying to do is that, we were trying to mitigate the discrimination against girls.

M: How were you doing your work?

R: We were doing it in different ways and we had different areas we used to operate. We were doing it in such a way that we made sure those who were concerned actually know the main issues and understand them as well. Like when we got to a particular

community, we made sure we targeted the chief and made sure he/she understands the issues and after getting their consent, we now made sure we go ahead and do our sensitization in the community. We also used to tell them the impact of some of these issues and why they should not discriminate the girls.

We used to act dramas explaining how it is important for girls to be included in the sharing of family properties even when it comes to decision making, they also need to be included. We were giving them these kind of education that will move the family forward as well as the community forward and we tried so much in that. In Makeni today, you will not hear about discrimination like it used to happen before now, in fact in most of the arrangement here now, you will hear then saying one boy one girl or two boys' two girls as the case may be. In fact they're now encouraging more girls than boys that is why even in the job advertisements now, you will see that, it is been stated clearly that ''women are encouraged to apply.'' That is to tell you that women are more been encouraged and to also tell them that, women as well can do the job and not just the men. We also do a lot of other things like advocacy in raising the awareness of the girl child.

(Male youth, 20, Makeni)

However, despite these very positive gains, some of our informants relayed how difficult it was for women to access both positions of power more widely and even to participate in spaces designed for the purpose of participation. In Port Loko we spoke to two prominent female activists who advocated for the rights of local women and girls in cases ranging from FGM to domestic violence. They told us that despite significant changes and steadily increasing gender equality, girls and women still faced multiple forms of exclusion:

Obviously women are been marginalized. For instance, here in Port Loko, how many women do we have here? ...Even in the area of councillors, out of 34 wards, we only have 2 women as councillors, so we're really been marginalized. (Kii Women's Community Advocate, Port Loko)

We're trying, before this time, we as women don't even have confidence in our very selves due to our tradition. Even to participate in forums, it was very difficult for women to involve in those. Even to go to school, it is only the boys or the men. Women are not allowed to go to school but bit by bit we are getting there coupled with your own help. Before this time, we as women don't have trust in ourselves. When it comes to forums, even a woman is been pointed at to talk, they'll tend to discourage her and say, ''let the men continue.' (Kii Women's Community Advocate, Port Loko)

This reflected the experience of a number of younger girls we interviewed, who often wanted to participate in political spaces and debates but faced stigmatisation for doing so, primarily from young men. For example Amy, 24, told us how her education was initially disrupted at the age of 13 when she fell pregnant (got 'hard belly'). Encouraged to drop out of school by her Mandingo Muslim family, who valued a good marriage over her education, for the next few years she struggled to survive with the intermittent support of her now husband, having a second child when she was 15. When the father left her alone with two children she tried to make ends meet by selling vegetables on the street, something she still does today. Her life really changed when she started attending a Christian church, where she got support outside her family and a place to call home. Today, she sells vegetables to eke out a living, but she is also active in the church community, encouraging young women to use contraception, work with NGOs and continue their education. Ebola made things even harder for her and other young women in her community, and she tells us how some of her friends have taken up sex work to make ends meet and how she is trying to stop the same happening to younger girls, as well as stopping them ending up like her with a 'bad, bad, belly hard'. She is also trying to go back to school and finish her diploma, as she wants to 'for be somebody' in the future but, in her words, 'life is straining' meaning everyday is still a struggle to survive.

Others reported how their families urged them to give up their commitment to activism and take up 'real jobs'. As Theresa from Passion4Humanity, a community based organisation told us, local programmes to address women's lack of participation were proving highly popular.

At just twenty-seven years of age herself, she is well aware of the multiple problems facing young women in Sierra Leone and passionate about helping women to help themselves:

> *That is more so while we are involving women in this LEH WE TALK [Let Us Talk] Program which is a sub set of our broader program. In our settings, when your husband is talking, you are not supposed to talk but to listen and say yes to whatever he came up with at the end as he is the head of the house hold. There is a saying that a man should talk above his voice but a woman should not talk about her voice but should do in a very tongue. There are certain gatherings where women are often discriminated against. For instance in KAMANYADOR which is in Kono district, when they have chiefdom meetings, women are not allowed because they belief that women are not part of development and should stay in the kitchen. This is what we are advocating for as we want women to be part of key decision making processes in this country.[v]*

However, it is important to emphasise that as well as a growing cadre of young female advocates and activists, young men are also changing their attitudes. As this informant told us, this non-participation can be multi-layered:

> *We organised youth in the district into two groups and we registered twenty male and twenty female youth. But when there is a meeting or program, you will realise that all male youth will attend and only few female youth. But what we realised was that; most of the female youth in the community are involved in a lot of domestic work which will limit their association with the male youth. The other reason we find out for their non-participation in youth activities is the advice they get from their parents as parents will refer to youth advocacy as idleness.[vi]*

This comment also reflects the support expressed by a number of young male informants that attitudes and behaviours were changing with a growing awareness of the widespread issues faced by girls reflecting a broader generational shift. Many of the male only FGDs and KIIs

actually placed social problems traditionally seen as issues affecting women (teen pregnancy, early marriage) at the top of their list of fragility indicators and many were passionately advocating the protection of women as well as in some cases, getting involved directly in campaigns to prevent the exploitation of their female peers. One caveat to add is that. Despite persistent gender inequality in Sierra Leone some young men discussed how they were tired of the continued and concerted focus on women's issues asking 'what about us boys'[vii], reflecting a widespread belief that some groups of young men had been marginalised or 'left behind' by the current global and national development agenda.

Conclusion

My analysis has shown that the non-violence literature needs to more fully embrace the complexity of young people's lives on the ground working through conflict and post-conflict social issues. Young people in Sierra Leone experienced multiple layers of vulnerability in their everyday lives, experiencing the recent Ebola outbreak in the context of an ongoing economic crisis as both an emotional and personal assault on their freedom, security and wellbeing and also as a closing down of many of their life options. However, as I have demonstrated, they are not simply standing still, they are 'doing' development themselves, helping their communities and each other to find work, get an education or simply mobilise around a specific issues or cause. The outbreak of Ebola both exposed these vulnerabilities but also revealed the exceptional courage and willingness of young people to actively get involved in helping their communities and the national effort against the spread of Ebola and navigate through crisis to an ideal of stability and economic prosperity.

In this context, non-violence can become both a mode of self-becoming for young people and a way of engaging with complex political realities at both the local and national levels. In Sierra Leone, these recent mobilisations must be situated in relation to an ongoing dialogue over the role of peace and violence and the legacy of conflict. Even for young people of school-going age, the civil war cast a long shadow over their present existence and shapes the way they relate to ideas of peace and prospective tension. As the data shows, many young people have a history of activism and are following activist patterns and pathways in the same way their parents would have followed livelihood pathways. These new histories of activism and

community mobilisation *for* peace, stability and community relations deserve further attention and situating with regard to the current literature which preserves binaries between peace and violence and neglects the young people who navigate between both, in both spatial and temporal terms.

Furthermore, the analysis presented here has exposed the ambiguous engagement with state actors by young people seeking to engage in community mobilisation. This in part due to the fragmentation of state services and state provision, but also on the informal, interpersonal networks through which mobilisations can gather momentum. This reflects Thieme's (2013) observation on the important role of brokering organisations in building and sustaining community mobilisation and engagement in non-violent action in the shadow of overbearing, ineffective or dangerous state actors. Many of our informants were inspired, informed or galvanised by involvement with community NGOs, Foday offering a good example of how activism can become part of everyday life for some young people. As our understanding of non-violent action moves forward we must understand more completely the role of non-state actors as catalysts for change which may also provoke ambiguous or even fraught interactions with the state.

Finally, the existing non-violence literature also has a tendency to be gender-blind or overly focussed on young men, creating binary oppositions which obscure the complex negotiations of everyday gendered realities in conflict and emergent post-conflict arenas (see Pruitt 2014). This chapter has shown how these negotiations remain deeply relational, implicated in a wide array of social networks and intergenerational tensions. In terms of youth more broadly, even as increasing numbers of young men are displaying heightened levels of gender awareness, young women are experiencing problematic levels of sexual exploitation and discrimination, with the recent economic, political and Ebola crises[viii] disproportionately impacting young women and rescinding gains in gender equality. At the same time, gender activism is clearly reshaping broader attitudes towards gender, especially amongst younger Sierra Leoneans and offers a blueprint for integrating gender-responsive strategies into all peacebuilding efforts (Krause 2019). This analysis has shown that only through an inclusive understanding of youth engagement in non-violent action can conflict-affected settings build towards more stable forms of post-conflict stability and security leading to genuine social transformation.

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[i] in Mitton 2018
[ii] FGD Under-18 Mothers Bombali
[iii] Ki Boy 14-18 Port Loko
[iv] FGD Girls 19-25 Kuinadogu
[v] Kii Youth Actor, Bombali
[vi] KI Boy 14-18 Kuinadogu.
[vii] FGD Boys 14-18 Kuinadogu
[viii] The Covid-19 pandemic has further heightened these issues