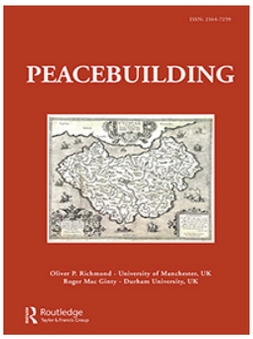

Peacebuilding

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rpcb20

Good ones and bad ones: gendered distortions and aspirations in research with conflict-affected youth in Liberia

Jaremey R. McMullin, Deimah Kpar-Kyne McCrownsey & James Suah Shilue

To cite this article: Jaremey R. McMullin, Deimah Kpar-Kyne McCrownsey & James Suah Shilue (04 Aug 2024): Good ones and bad ones: gendered distortions and aspirations in research with conflict-affected youth in Liberia, Peacebuilding, DOI: 10.1080/21647259.2024.2385210

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2024.2385210

Published online: 04 Aug 2024.

PEACEBUILDING
https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2024.2385210

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Good ones and bad ones: gendered distortions and aspirations in research with conflict-affected youth in Liberia

Jaremey R. McMullin[a], Deimah Kpar-Kyne McCrownsey[b] and James Suah Shilue[b]

[a]School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK; [b]Platform for Dialogue and Peace, Liberia

ABSTRACT

Gendered discourses of motorcycle taxi drivers in Liberia construct cyclists as bad men, presumed to possess excessive masculinity: too much speed, aggression, and hustle. These discourses contrast with cyclists' self-perceptions, where motorcycling is one of few pathways available to them to become good men through the economic and social possibilities of the sector. Moreover, they maintain that cycling positions them not just as labourers but as peacebuilders. Liberian motorcyclists therefore narrate a quest for societal recognition against a backdrop of misrecognition. We analyse these gendered distortions and aspirations to show how masculinity positions young men outside of peacebuilding processes. We explore our positionality as researchers alongside efforts to discuss, analyse, and operationalise masculinities in research encounters and peacebuilding work with conflict-affected youth. We argue that aspirations for gender inclusion and gender analysis are not simple or straightforward tasks but require frequent translation, collaborative problem-solving, and participatory action methodologies.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 May 2024
Accepted 24 July 2024

KEYWORDS
Masculinities; Liberia; conflict-affected youth; peacebuilding; motorcycle taxi drivers

To persist, patriarchy and its building blocks (hegemonic gender norms and assumptions) depend upon ideas about 'good' and 'bad' men.[1] To retain its societal saturation and diffusion, patriarchy does not simply seek to put men on top and keep them there. Instead, patriarchy protects its alleged protectors by disseminating ideas about which kinds of men are *recognised*: which men gain recognition as men (as manly men, good men, powerful men, successful men, etc.), and why and how do they attain such

CONTACT Jaremey R. McMullin jrm21@st-andrews.ac.uk

[1]R. W. Connell, 'Live Fast and Die Young: The Construction of Masculinity among Young Working-Class Men on the Margin of the Labour Market', *Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 2 (1991): 141–71; Donna Pankhurst, '"What Is Wrong with Men?" Revisiting Violence against Women in Conflict and Peacebuilding', *Peacebuilding* 4, no. 2 (2016): 180–93; David Duriesmith, 'Engaging or Changing Men? Understandings of Masculinity and Change in the New "Men, Peace and Security" Agenda', *Peacebuilding* 8, no. 4 (2019): 426–7; Adam Baird, Matthew Louis Bishop, and Dylan Kerrigan, '"Breaking Bad"? Gangs, Masculinities, and Murder in Thailand', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 24, no. 4 (2021): 632–57.

recognition-as-valorisation.[2] Concurrently, poverty and youth discourses associate marginalised young men with violence and menace, so that they get recognised as bad and dangerous men.[3] Mamadou Diouf, writing about young Africans in 2003, observed, '[T]he dramatic irruption of young people in the public and domestic spheres seems to have resulted in the construction of African youth as a threat'.[4] And yet, marginalised young men caught up in processes of living gender – and narrating it to researchers – frequently emphasise that to be recognised as bad men is to be *mis*recognised. Since good and bad men populate narratives of masculinity, identifying and analysing gender as it relates to masculinities research is necessarily also an act of (mis)recognition.

We have been working with young men (and a small number of young women) in Liberia who work as motorcycle taxi drivers (colloquially and hereafter, 'cyclists') since 2018.[5] They, too, centre narratives of recognition against a societal backdrop of misrecognition. They see themselves as peace-builders and contributors to society in the wake of the Liberian civil wars (1990–2003) and since the sector emerged as a result of those wars, but they are largely constructed by Liberian society as trouble-makers.[6] In this article, we contribute to peacebuilding research by identifying a principal challenge: gender-responsive peace work (research included), in seeking to effect and support conflict transformation, risks constructing (and mis-recognising) conflict-affected young men as 'bad men' and therefore men who do not deserve peacebuilding support or recognition as peacebuilding actors. We argue that *gendered misrecognition*[7] drives this challenge, particularly in the ways in which Liberians and outside actors construct cyclists as possessing *excess masculinity* – as men with too much speed, too much aggression, and too much hustle. These discourses evidence how peacebuilding theory and practice can fail to account for and recognise youth peacebuilding work, which also manifests as exclusion of youth from externally- and state-supported peacebuilding efforts.

[2]Cynthia Enloe tells Carol Cohn that 'it is not men-on-top that makes something patriarchal. It's men who are *recognised* and claim a certain form of masculinity, for the sake of being more valued, more "serious", and "the protectors of/and controllers of those people who are less masculine" that makes any organisation, any community, any society patriarchal'. Carol Cohn and Cynthia Enloe, 'A Conversation with Cynthia Enloe: Feminists Look at Masculinity and the Men Who Wage War', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 4 (2003): 1192, emphasis added.

[3]We use 'marginalised young men' to mean young men living in conditions of poverty and from backgrounds that place them in positions of marginality vis-à-vis other youth and other people more broadly. We also emphasise how race, ethnicity, and coloniality impact on *which* youth get perceived as threatening, and discuss this impact in more detail below. For critical discussion of associations between young men and violent menace, see: Lesley Pruitt, 'Rethinking Youth Bulge Theory in Policy and Scholarship: Incorporating Critical Gender Analysis', *International Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2020): 711–28; Marc Sommers, 'Governance, Security and Culture: Assessing Africa's Youth Bulge', *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 5, no. 2 (2011): 294–6; Anne Menzel, 'Between Ex-Combatization and Opportunities for Peace: The Double-Edged Qualities of Motorcycle-Taxi Driving in Urban Postwar Sierra Leone', *Africa Today* 58, no. 2 (2011): 99–100; Jacqui Cho, 'A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy? Constructions of Youth-as-Troublemakers in UN DDR Processes', *Security Dialogue* 55, no. 3 (2024): 274–92; and Graeme Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (New York: United Nations Population Fund and Peacebuilding Support Office, 2018), 17.

[4]Mamadou Diouf, 'Engaging Postcolonial Cultures: African Youth and Public Space', *African Studies Review* 46, no. 2 (2003): 3.

[5]The underlying research with human subjects for this project, which includes all interviews, focus groups, and participant observation completed for this article, received ethical approval from two independent approval bodies: the School of International Relations Ethics Committee, University of St Andrews (#12377 and #14868); and, the Office of the Institution Review Board, University of Liberia (#29-07-226).

[6]Jaremey R. McMullin, 'Hustling, Cycling, Peacebuilding: Narrating Reintegration through Livelihood in Liberia', *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 1 (2022): 67–90.

[7]'Gendered misrecognition' is our term for capturing the tensions between narratives about 'good men' and 'bad men'; namely, how cyclists are constructed as bad, reckless, and threatening young men in opposition to their perception that cycling offers ways to be and become good men.

The perception used to be that motorcyclists were bad men because they were predominantly ex-combatant men. Ex-combatants, being some of the few citizens with liquid assets in the form of disarmament payments, bought early generation motorcycles, originated the sector, and helped it to thrive. When peacebuilding recognition was extended to these young men, it was because they were securitised as dangerous without peacebuilding support. Security actors worried about the sector as a site that would replicate ex-combatant networks and reproduce and concretise ex-combatant identity. Correspondingly, cyclists became feared and fixed as ex-combatant men even if they did not come from a background of having fought with or supported armed groups.[8] Whilst ex-combatants initially dominated the motorcycle taxi sector in Liberia, now they are in the minority. Most cyclists are now 'conflict-affected youth', those young men who lost out on economic and educational opportunities because of the war, and who lost family members who would normally have helped them to enter economic life, meaning that cycling is one of few livelihood paths available to them. Regardless of cyclists' backgrounds, ordinary Liberians assert that the habits they typically ascribe to ex-combatants (violence, recklessness, aggression, and impoliteness) attach indiscriminately and inevitably to ex-combatant and non-combatant cyclists alike. Motorcycling consequently has become a site associated with bad men because of the legacy and after-effects of war. These discourses continue to impact on the social standing and life chances of young men in the sector.

But a curious thing has since happened on the way to the securitised narration of youth and peace. Where threat assessments used to emphasise the ability of ex-combatants to return the Liberian state to war or foment violence in communities *because of their knowledge of war*,[9] now political elites worry that young people pose the biggest threat to peace *because of their lack of knowledge of war*. In his 2023 State of the Nation Address, Liberian President George Weah warned,

> I have observed that it is mostly young people who are the ones that are used to agitate. These young people have had little or no experience of war. We have now enjoyed 20 years of unbroken peace, and it can readily be seen that young people, who are coming of voting age for the first time since turning 18 years old, have had no experience of war. They are quickly and easily manipulated to do harm and instil violence. We need to guide our young people and inspire them to reject violence and conflict as a means to express their grievances and dissatisfactions.[10]

The use of the passive voice, 'the ones that are used to agitate', is telling, and revealingly frequent in assumptions about youth and security.[11] In his address, although Weah acknowledges that youth are 'used to agitate', the focus is on the young people agitating and not on the institutions and actors that make instrumental use of young people's

[8]In this, the popular historical understandings of the sector, as well as its social relationality, are strikingly similar to the *ex-combatisation* dynamics that Menzel ascribes to motorcycling in Sierra Leone.

[9]UN Security Council, 'Fifth Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia' (17 December 2004), S/2004/972: para.70; UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), 'RRR & JMAC Hotspot Assessment: Ex-Combatants and Chains of Command in Liberia' (August 2008): 1–2.

[10]President George Weah, 'Full Speech: President Weah's 6th State of the Nation Address', reprinted in Liberian Observer, https://www.liberianobserver.com/full-speech-president-weahs-6th-state-nation-address, (30 January 2023) emphasis added.

[11]For a critical discussion, see Mayssoun Sukarieh and, Stuart Tannock, 'The Global Securitsation of Youth', *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 5 (2017): 854–70; and Simpson, *The Missing Peace*, 17–23.

agitation, and consequently benefit from it. Also left under-explored are the reasons actors use young people to agitate, and the discourses that perpetually spotlight youth, especially young men, as agitators.

An important political, social, and economic subset of Liberian youth, motorcyclist youth have long been at the forefront of Liberia's security fears.[12] Even though ex-combatants no longer dominate motorcycling, the perception persists that it is a bad, dangerous, and unproductive sector populated by bad, dangerous, and unproductive men.[13] Motorcyclists are the perennial bad guys of successive election cycles and are therefore the frequent targets of 'violence prevention' outreach and projects.[14] These efforts presume to transform young men into peaceful citizens without doing much to improve their lives, without concomitant engagement with the violent electoral practices of more powerful men (such as political elites and the police who 'use them to agitate'), without engaging how youth perform peaceful functions a priori to interventions designed for them, and without asking how cyclists see their livelihood work as peace work.

Whilst our work with cyclists is about many themes, in this article we engage the gendered contradictions of societal misrecognition of cyclists, and how gendered misrecognition takes on binary forms: good ones *or* bad ones, those who contribute to society *or* those who threaten it, those who build peace *or* those who bring violence. We argue that these binary formulations drive misrecognition, distancing cyclists from peacebuilding despite their own efforts to foreground their peacebuilding work and contributions.[15] Misrecognition, moreover, is a function of the excess masculinity ascribed to cyclists. Hyper-masculine ascription serves various political functions during peacebuilding processes. It reproduces patriarchal structures and attitudes that marginalise young women and men, distancing youth actors from peacebuilding identities and projects. It constructs agency in dualistic terms, such that masculinity is operable only as excess or deficit and not, as important research on masculinity has shown, as multiple and contingent. And, it emphasises hyper-masculine threats to peacebuilding only if those threats come from marginalised youth actors, ignoring how hyper-masculine displays from elite, adult state actors, such as the police or political elites, extend violence and yet pass as delivering stability and security. In contrast to misrecognition, the recognition of cyclists as peacebuilding actors re-casts peacebuilding sites as more than the absence of insecurity[16] and re-'works' the concept of peacebuilding to position the

[12]UN security assessments from the 2000s list motorcycle transport unions and youth associations alongside violent natural resource extraction as '[o]rganizations of greatest potential threat to public order'. UNMIL, 'RRR & JMAC Hotspot Update' (May 2009): 4.

[13]Open Liberia, Inc., 'A Decade without Higher Education: How the Years Have Passed for Liberia's 40,000 Commercial Motorcyclists', (Monrovia: Open Liberia, Inc., 2018).

[14]Henry Karmo, 'Liberia: YMCA Launches "Ride for Peace" Campaign, Engaging Motorcyclists on the Importance of Peaceful Elections', *Front Page Africa Online*, September 22, 2023, https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-ymca-launches-ride-for-peace-campaign-engaging-motorcyclists-on-the-importance-of-peaceful-elections/.

[15]Regarding this misrecognition dynamic, we are struck by the similarities between motorcyclists and the martial and ritual arts groups that Myrttinen analyses in Timor-Leste in this special issue, who see their participation in martial and ritual arts groups as a pathway to achieving societal expectations of successful manhood, while East Timorese society sees the groups as populated by mal-adjusted men. Henri Myrttinen, 'Violence and Hegemonic Masculinities in Timor-Leste: On the Challenges of Using Theoretical Frameworks in Conflict-Affected Societies', *Peacebuilding* 12 (2024).

[16]In this special issue, Baines identifies a similar need to situate fatherhood as a way to exceed conceptualisations of peacebuilding as merely the absence of insecurity. Erin Baines, 'Unspeakable: Reflections on Relational Approaches to Research in Post-Conflict Settings', *Peacebuilding* 12 (2024).

livelihood of young men as labour with peacebuilding potential (i.e. additional to and separate from the insecurity scripted for young men via hyper-masculine ascription).

In keeping with this special issue's focus on both empirical and methodological engagement with masculinity and peacebuilding, we use the second half of the article to reflect on how we, researchers, are co-involved in processes of gendered recognition and misrecognition. We ground our analysis of encounter and co-involvement in participatory research norms and methods. Researchers are inevitably implicated in processes of (mis)recognition because cyclist participants are aware of, and ask about, the benefits and risks of participating in research about them.[17] Consequently, they do not want to simply talk to us about their lives; they want to know why we are seeking certain information about them and what we will do with it. In our methodological reflection, we share our experiences with incorporating other tools to acknowledge the complex ways in which gender courses through research with conflict-affected youth. We focus on movement away from damage-centred research, taking a broad approach to which participants we locate and how, asking men and women to reflect on their status as men and women (and to contemplate the status of each other), and working with cyclists to implement their own ideas, including about countering stigma.

Approach

Deeply embedded contradictions demarcate outsider perspectives (that motorcycling is a sector where bad men end up) and cyclists' perspectives (that motorcycling is an economic and social activity that helps them become good men). We are interested in how these contradictions – societal misrecognition of cyclists as bad men, and cyclists' desire for recognition as good men – impact on how peacebuilding is conceptualised and practiced.

We conceptualise misrecognition as gendered distortion. In research encounters across diverse contexts, young men articulate their suspicions and fears that efforts to discuss gender are designed to disadvantage or stigmatise them. 'Gendered distortion' also describes how collective self-perceptions about cycling (as something that facilitates a process of becoming good men, including through cyclists' narratives that motorcycling is a peacebuilding modality) clash with broader perceptions that cycling manifests and reproduces bad manhood. Distortion likewise signals friction about what masculinity means to diverse audiences, and about how to achieve and embody its good and/or bad variants, as well as friction between which actors are constructed as good and peaceful and which as bad and threatening. Tsing proposes that the metaphor of friction captures the 'diverse and unequal global – local encounters between actors, ideas and practices that produce new power dynamics'.[18] To construct conflict-affected young men as bad men risks reinscribing actor-generated subjectivities (importantly, the subjectivities most salient to those actors, i.e. to gain recognition as peacebuilders), returning actors to

[17] Jaremey R. McMullin '"What Is the Benefit of This Project?" Representation and Participation in Research on Conflict-Affected Youth', *Conflict, Security & Development* 22, no. 5 (2022): 517–41.

[18] Annika Björkdahl, and Kristine Höglund, 'Precarious Peacebuilding: Friction in Global – Local Encounters', *Peacebuilding* 1 (3): 292, citing Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005). Although not writing in the specific context of masculinity, Björkdahl and Höglund argue that the power dynamics which frame 'the local' produce 'precarious peacebuilding' through the rubbing of various modes of (non-) interaction 'at sites of peacebuilding'.

similar conditions of marginality that produced conflict in the first place.[19] As a result, we see understanding and engaging gendered misrecognition in and through peace research as critically important to conflict transformation strategies and aspirations (as opposed to conflict 'management' ones).[20]

Our methodological approach to identifying and analysing gendered misrecognition of young men in the motorcycling sector is through focused engagement with the life histories of nine key informants, constructed through interviews and participant observation. We interviewed these nine participants – seven young men and two young women – several times from 2018 through 2023, building detailed accounts of their life in the cycling sector and views about it, their reasons for entering it and aspirations for exiting it. We recognise that we cannot transcribe and narrate these life histories in depth in this short article. Consequently, we collate salient responses from interviewees around three themes: first, the economic, social, and political opportunities and challenges within the sector; second, cyclists' perceptions of themselves as peacebuilders and society's under-estimation and stigmatisation of them; and third, cyclists' observations about gender, masculinity, and motorcycling.[21] Question sets for the first two themes were wide-ranging and semi-structured. For the third theme, we opted for structured questions on gender and masculinity to provoke deliberate and focused discussion because these themes often pass unnoticed and un-remarked on. These structured questions were:

1) What does being a man mean to you?
2) What about being a good man? What does that mean to you?
3) How would you say cycling has affected your notion of being a good man?
4) What challenges do you think you might face on the motorcycling field if you were doing this as a woman?
5) Why are most cyclists men?
6) What are the obstacles that prevent more women from becoming cyclists?[22]

We supplement these detailed life histories with knowledge acquired about the sector through over 200 additional one-on-one interviews with motorcyclists across the country. We analyse these three themes in this article through engagement with distortion (discourses about cycling as a site of bad men who possess excess masculinity) but also aspiration, recognising that cyclists see the sector as an aspirational site: for economic advancement, social mobility, and gendered becoming. Because this article centres

[19]On how peacebuilding and reintegration efforts re-marginalise, see Jaremey R. McMullin, *Ex-Combatants and the Post-Conflict State: Challenges of Reintegration* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 249–50; and Mats Utas, 'Building a Future? The Reintegration and Remarginalisation of Youth in Liberia', in *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts* eds. Paul Richards (James Currey, 2005), 150.

[20]On this distinction, see A. B. Fetherston, 'Peacekeeping, Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding: A Reconsideration of Theoretical Frameworks', in *Peacekeeping and Conflict Resolution* eds. Tom Woodhouse and Oliver Ramsbotham (Frank Cass, 2000), 190–218.

[21]To view and engage with a fuller assemblage of key informants' narratives about these themes, see *Community Perceptions of Commercial Motorcyclists in Liberia*. Directed by Jaremey R. McMullin. 2019. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uthc1cwz-x8.

[22]Thanks to Roxani Krystalli for advice in developing this set of questions. McMullin, in Hustling, 87–89, uses this same question set to explore how gendered under-estimation of cyclists impacts on their peacebuilding identities. See also Theidon, who advocates structuring enquiry about ex-combatanthood into not just 'what it means to be a man, but also what it means to be good at being a man'. Kimberly Theidon, 'Reconstructing Masculinities: The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration of Former Combatants in Colombia', *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2009): 5 (emphasis original).

contradictions between cyclist self-perceptions and aspirations on one hand and societal perceptions about them on the other, we also draw from interviews conducted with dozens of non-cyclists, focusing especially on a set of interviews conducted in 2018 with 11 marketeers in Tubmanburg, Western Liberia (nine women and two men).

Theoretically, we anchor our analysis of the young cyclists' life histories to Connell's conceptualisation of masculinities as a 'configuration of practice[s] within a system of gender relations', which allows researchers to 'emphasiz[e] the relational aspects of gendered identities and their malleability', while 'also draw[ing] attention to the unequal fields of power in which all genders are forged'.[23] Since gendered contradictions are given voice and meaning relationally and dialogically – and not in separate cyclist and non-cyclist silos – we conducted eight focus groups comprising cyclists and passengers in four different counties in 2020 and 2021. These focus group discussions (FGDs) brought cyclists and non-cyclists into generative conversation with each other about the meanings and impacts of the three themes identified above. FGDs centred the relationality of gendered discourse by embedding motorcycling within post-war social relations and allowed for dialogic understanding of motorcycling's importance as a post-war site of peacebuilding and reintegration in part because of the impassioned points of view about it. FGDs also evidenced how cyclists narrate the social impacts of recognition and misrecognition not just to us as researchers (i.e. where social facts are treated as salient and discernible only when outside researchers swoop in to ask about or collect them) and do not just rehearse peacebuilding narratives to themselves in isolation from wider society but have been perpetually engaged in narrating them to their fellow citizens, not just in semi-structured FGDs but persistently and outside of the research process, including through organised counter-stigma efforts such as radio broadcasts and the use of bumper stickers.

Additionally, FGD encounters with non-cyclists were part of a concerted effort throughout the project to locate and enquire into women's experiences of motorcycling, given that the sector is dominated by young men as riders. In this article, although we focus predominantly on the impacts of gendered misrecognition on young men, we acknowledge and agree that peacebuilding processes also misrecognise and exclude marginalised young women and note excellent research contributions on these distinct forms of misrecognition and exclusion.[24] In a patriarchal society like Liberia, we are equally aware that masculinity is associated with power, domination, and control over women. We therefore recognise that motorcycling is a complex site. It is a site where conversations happen about a range of issues, and not just ones that centre the peacebuilding aspirations of cyclists or their complaints about societal misrecognition of the same. It is a transactional site, one where money is made and lost. And, it is a site that upholds patriarchal structures and gendered divisions of labour.

In a sector comprising 100,000 to 200,000 young people, all but a small handful are young men. Young women wishing to enter the sector face significant and various entry barriers, including assumptions about their ability to learn how to manoeuvre a motorcycle and whether they can earn as much as men and therefore warrant

[23]Theidon, Reconstructing Masculinities, 5.
[24]In particular, Silke Oldenburg, 'The Politics of Love and Intimacy in Goma, Eastern DR Congo: Perspectives on the Market of Intervention as Contact Zone', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 9, no. 3 (2015): 316–33.

investment from bike owners. Young women in the sector confirm that it is harder for women to earn as much as men. The two young women riders we interviewed told us they prefer to curtail their working hours because they do not want to drive passengers after dark. But the sector does not just reflect gendered division of labour; it also challenges and transforms that division. Many young men have sought out gender parity in their leadership structures, appointing 'chair ladies' who advise and consult on core cycling operations. Women are also active (if overlooked) actors in the sector in a variety of other roles: as union advisers and consultants, as bike washers and petrol sellers, as passengers, and as partners of cyclists. We interviewed women across these roles, all of whom told us that they have a vested interest and voice in how the sector operates and that they advise the sector about how to navigate its several challenges (e.g. roadside accidents, police violence and exploitation, and business downturns). Hundreds of thousands of women in Liberia rely on cyclists to transport them and their goods safely and efficiently. Liberian women also alternatingly celebrate and stigmatise cyclists, desire and spurn them.

Relatedly, and further illustrating this article's arguments, assumptions about gender vis-à-vis the sector, including those expressed in a failed 2014 gender mainstreaming effort to support a small number of women riders,[25] have tended to focus on how regular riders are presumed to exclude women from riding. Yet, the riders we interviewed always voiced support for women's entry into the sector. A focus on riders as the reason for gender imbalance ascribes exclusion of women to marginalised rather than more privileged actors. It fails to contend with how bike owners, who do not tend to drive passengers themselves but rather make money from leasing bikes to regular riders, are the ones with power to decide who to entrust with the machinery and training required to enter the sector.

In exploring discourses about good and bad men, we are not endorsing the classification of research participants, or cyclists generally, as either good or bad men; indeed, we instead highlight the contradictions that make discursive classification inherently unstable, inaccurate, and stigmatising. Nor do we suggest that cyclists could gain the recognition they so desire if they just worked harder as individuals to shed traits associated with their presumed performance of bad masculinity. Rather, we suggest that centring (mis)recognition underscores how contradictory assumptions of good and bad masculinity are baked into peacebuilding perceptions and thereby obscure the peacebuilding work and value of a significant post-conflict demographic (youth) and economic sector (cycling). Centring (mis)recognition also foregrounds the value of asking questions about how institutions and structures reify notions of good and bad men, and how those notions impact on the identity, life chances, and actions of conflict-affected young people.

Recognition in peace studies has tended to focus on the need to foster mutual regard and understanding between erstwhile adversaries, or to acknowledge and codify the territoriality and status of states. Such treatment reflects how formal and professional peacebuilding has supplanted the work and activities that people do to support peace.[26]

[25]See *Pink Panther*. Directed by Jaremey R. McMullin. 2019. Available at https://cpcs.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/research/liberia-legacies-of-peace/pink-panther/.

[26]Catherine Goetze, *The Distinction of Peace: A Social Analysis of Peacebuilding* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

We suggest instead the need for peace studies and peace practice to recognise everyday actors' peacebuilding contributions and labours.[27] Such recognition, importantly, itself tends to be stigmatised and unrecognised within theories and practices of peacebuilding by virtue of everyday contributions being placed in opposition to 'standard', 'formal' peacebuilding.[28] Alternatives have tended to focus on the professional or temporal habitus of peace rather than on recognition of its everyday actors and their activities.[29] Important exceptions exist, clearly orientated towards grassroots actors' own persistence and own conceptions of what and when is peace, and of peace as experiential, embodied, and lived.[30] Peacebuilding work on young ex-combatants might acknowledge that they require 'alternative avenues for [...] social recognition' without conceptualising what such recognition might entail, or without investing in activities that produce social recognition with the status of core peacebuilding tasks.[31] Whose peacebuilding labours get recognised, and whose threats escape view?

In the sections that follow, we first situate our work on motorcycling in Liberia within broader literature that we admire about masculinity and peacebuilding. Then, an empirical section on gendered distortions collates interview data to identify the principal masculinity narratives and frames that attach to the motorcycle taxi sector, and analyses how these narratives and frames reproduce misrecognition. From there, we analyse the aspirations that cyclists invest in motorcycling as a site of gendered becoming. We do so, in part, by reflecting on our own practices of engagement – largely, if surely also imperfectly, through adoption of participatory action research practices. In this methodological reflection, we share our experiences with incorporating various tools to acknowledge the complex ways in which gender courses through research with conflict-affected youth, with a focus on movement away from damage-centred research, taking a broad approach to which participants we locate and how, asking men and women to reflect on their status as men and women (and to contemplate the status of each other), and working with cyclists to implement their own ideas.

Motorcycling as a site of gendered (mis)recognition: literature and Liberian context

'If you have the [audio recorder on], please cut it off', he asked.[32] The young man, a former child soldier being interviewed about his experiences of post-war transition and of trying to

[27] See also McMullin, Benefit, 519–21.

[28] Pol Barguès-Pedreny and Xavier Mathieu, 'Beyond Silence, Obstacle and Stigma: Revisiting the "Problem" of Difference in Peacebuilding', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 12, no. 3 (2018): 289.

[29] One such example might be the notion of 'perpetual peacebuilding'. See Thania Paffenholz, 'Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 3 (2021): 367–85.

[30] Angela J. Lederach, *Feel the Grass Grow: Ecologies of Slow Peace in Colombia* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023); and Philippa Williams, *Everyday Peace? Politics, Citizenship and Muslim Lives in India* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015). In this special issue, Asmawati and others focus on how misrecognition of violent masculinities crowds out acknowledgement and understanding ('recognition') of peaceful and/or violence-resistant masculinities. See in this special issue Asmawati Asmawati, David Duriesmith, Noor Huda Ismail, and Sultan Fariz Syah, 'Locating Masculinities in Conflict: Researching Conflict-Related Masculinities beyond the Colonial Gaze', *Peacebuilding* 12 (2024).

[31] Quoted text is from Michael Barnett and others, 'Peacebuilding: What Is in a Name?' *Global Governance* 13, no. 1 (2007): 49.

[32] Interview with motorcyclist, spring 2019. In spite of this direct request, the young man in question gave permission to use this post-interview exchange in the resulting research, on the condition of anonymous attribution.

> build a life as a cyclist, had just finished sharing some fascinating insights about masculinity. For an hour or so, he had contributed his ideas about masculine identity, equal gender access to post-conflict opportunities, and the gendered obstacles that preclude women's entry to the motorcycle sector. But now he was worried, precisely because the interview with him was ending with a series of questions about gender and masculinity as they relate to peace. All these questions about gender that 'you were just asking', he inquired, 'is it that you people want to help women over men? [. . .] Tell me the truth!'

The young man's concern that attention to conflict-affected young men is really an attempt to de-prioritise them, inverts a dilemma about masculinity studies more broadly, which Connell highlighted in the second edition to *Masculinities*, namely, that 'a focus on men will result in resources being diverted from women – from particularly disadvantaged women at that'.[33] In a similar vein, multiple variants and expressions of African feminism have cautioned against zero-sum assumptions about the inclusion of men (and masculinities) in projects of post-war reconstruction, and are instead 'underpinned by an ideology of gender inclusion, collaboration and accommodation to ensure that both women and men contribute (even if not equally) to improving the material conditions of women'.[34] Exclusionary projects, they argue, distract from broader, global power imbalances driven by racialised processes of material and historical inequality that result in the marginalisation of Black African youth through iterative peacebuilding assumptions and interventions.[35] Such projects also risk essentialising women as victims and locating them outside of social relations, and solidarist or decolonial projects, with men.[36] Additionally, they argue that the inclusivity of men in feminist African projects is not only tactical (because most decision-makers are men) but reparative in the light of the contextual impacts of colonialism (i.e. they recognise that men and women in African contexts suffer marginalisation).[37] In this case, the young Liberian interviewee was concerned that a focus on gender and on men-as-men was a smokescreen to assist women at his expense, expressing in part what Connell described as backlash politics familiar to patriarchal cultures. But the gendered contradictions and dilemmas reflected in his concern reveal new terrain for understanding young men's post-war trajectories and identities.

That new terrain has centred motorcycling beyond Liberia across contexts in Africa, in large part because of how motorcycling emerged after civil war contexts and became associated with ex-combatant riders. Motorcycling is at the forefront

[33] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005 [1995]), xvii. For explication of the critique that bringing in men risks further marginalisation of women, see Sara White, '"Did the Earth Move?" The Hazards of Bringing Men and Masculinities into Gender and Development', *IDS Bulletin* 31, no. 2 (2000): 33–41.

[34] Naomi Nkealah, '(West) African Feminisms and Their Challenges', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 32, no. 2 (2016): 63. Nkealah notes that various African feminisms *also* engage in projects of 'overt and subtle' exclusion, such as exclusion of sexual minorities and diasporic Africans.

[35] Ibrahim notes that 'any attempt at naming/renaming [feminism] is inclusive of some and exclusive of other experiences'. Huma Ibrahim, 'Ontological Victimhood: "Other" Bodies in Madness and Exile – Toward a Third World Feminist Epistemology', in *The Politics of (M)othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, eds. Obioma Nnaemeka (Routledge, 1997), 147.

[36] Carrie Reiling, 'Pragmatic Scepticism in Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda', *Global Affairs* 3, nos.4–5 (2017): 469–81.

[37] Mary Modupe Kolawole, 'Transcending Incongruities: Rethinking Feminism and the Dynamics of Identity in Africa', *Agenda* 17, no. 54 (2002): 92–8.

of moral panics about young men in diverse African contexts, from Sierra Leone[38] to Uganda,[39] Kenya[40] to the Democratic Republic of Congo.[41] Some research about motorcyclists has reproduced and re-circulated societal tropes about them, as dangerous young men 'on the make'[42] who threaten road safety, engage in criminality, and threaten the moral order by corrupting young women with sex and spreading sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.[43] Other research has interrogated how popular portrayals reinforce stigma, including how peacebuilding discourses reproduce stigmatisation of youth as reckless and threatening.[44] Menzel shows how bike riding in Sierra Leone 'confirms and adds to the aura of ex-combatantness already surrounding male adolescents'.[45] These latter research interrogations, alongside which we situate our own efforts, see motorcycling as 'an important means by which marginalised male youth [...] earn a living' and 'become respectable',[46] and analyse how cyclist youth are constrained to navigate the space between recognition and misrecognition, economic opportunity and precarity.[47] Coincidentally, studies of masculinity have a longer history of focus on motorcycling as a site of excess masculinity, but in a distinct Western context, where membership in biker clubs and gangs by war veterans and economically disadvantaged young men is seen as being characterised by 'protest' masculinity, whereby forms of social and economic exclusion lead young men to adopt a 'stressed version of hegemonic masculinity'.[48]

Liberian cyclists are not motorcycle enthusiasts or hobbyists, for whom 'the motorcycle is an important but minor part of their lives, used essentially for recreational purposes'.[49] Nor are they identical to the motorcycle outlaws fetishised in popular journalism and films from the 1950s onward, for whom 'the motorcycle is the focal point in his life, the central purpose of his being'.[50] Rather, as taxi drivers, and as hundreds of interviewees have told us over the years, they 'ride to survive' (see

[38]Menzel, Ex-Combatization, 99–100; and Michael Büürge, 'Riding the Narrow Tracks of Moral Life: Commercial Motorbike Riders in Makeni, Sierra Leone', *Africa Today* 58, no. 2 (2011): 59–95.
[39]Stella Nyanzi, Barbara Nyanzi-Wakholi, and Bessie Kalina, 'Male Promiscuity: The Negotiation of Masculinities by Motorbike Taxi-Riders in Masaka, Uganda', *Men and Masculinities* 12, no. 1 (2009): 73–89.
[40]Joyce Nyairo, 'The *Boda Boda* (R)age: Economies of Affection in the Motorbike Taxis of Kenya', *English Studies in Africa* 66, no. 1 (2023): 109–23; and George Paul Meiu, '"Male Power": Virility, Vitality, and Phallic Rescue', in *Queer Objects to the Rescue: Intimacy and Citizenship in Kenya* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), 58–86.
[41]Tatiana Carayannis and Aaron Pangburn, 'Home Is Where the Heart Is: Identity, Return and the Toleka Bicycle Taxi Union in Congo's Equateur', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 33, no. 4 (2020): 706–26; and Silke Oldenburg, 'Dead End? Young Mototaxi Drivers Between Being Stuck, Bridging Potholes and Building a Future in Goma, Eastern Congo', *Cadernos de Estudos Africanos* 37 (2019): 63–87.
[42]Nyairo, Boda Boda (R)age, 120.
[43]Rosemarie N. Mwaipopo, 'The Construction of Masculinities: Bodaboda Operators and Secondary Schoolgirls' Pregnancies in Vwawa, Mbozi District', *Journal of Education, Humanities & Sciences* 10, no. 5 (2021).
[44]Jacob Doherty, 'Motorcycle Taxis, Personhood, and the Moral Landscape of Mobility', *Geoforum* 136 (2022): 242–50.
[45]Menzel, Ex-Combatization, 99–100.
[46]Caroline Wamala-Larsson, '"If Only They Would See Us as Honest Workers": Motorcycle Taxi Drivers Rights to Livelihood in Kampala', in *Power and Informality in Urban Africa: Ethnographic Perspectives*, eds. Laura Stark and Annika Teppo (London: Zed Books, 2022), 121.
[47]Büürge, Narrow Tracks, 66–68; and Andie Buccitelli, and Myriam Denov, 'Youth Reintegration, Power, and Okada Riding in Post-war Sierra Leone', in *Conflict, Violence and Peace*, eds. Christopher Harker, Kathrin Hörschelmann, and Tracey Skelton (London: Springer, 2017): 129–48.
[48]Connell, Live Fast, 141-71.
[49]Columbus B. Hopper and Johnny Moore, 'Hell on Wheels: The Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs', *Journal of American Culture* 6, no. 2 (1983): 58.
[50]Ibid.

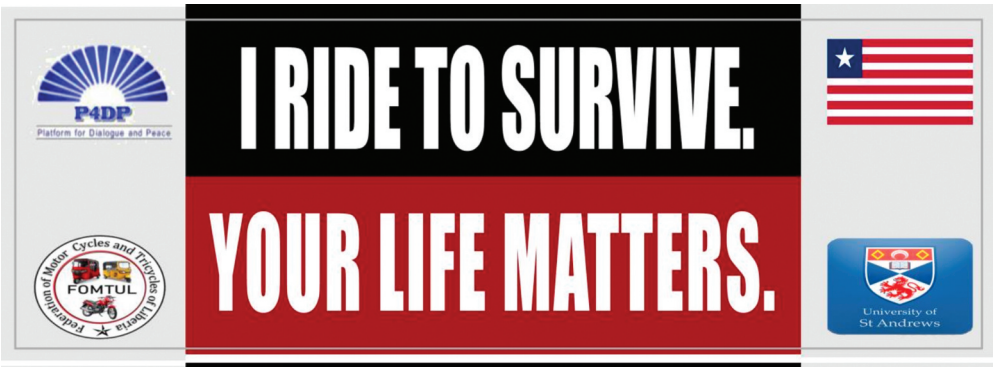

Figure 1. An image of a bumper sticker designed and written by a cyclist research participant, one of 29 stickers distributed to 6000 riders as part of a cyclist-designed counter-stigma campaign to change passengers' and other Liberians' perspectives of motorcyclists and to highlight cyclists' own perceptions about their peace-building identity and contributions. In this example, the cyclist juxtaposes the common economic refrain underpinning cyclists' motivations to enter the sector ('to survive') with a safety message (the cyclist does not just ride to make money to survive, but rides safely to continue living); in so doing, this sticker also challenges outsiders' perspectives about the sector as one populated by dangerous men with little care for passengers' or cyclists' own safety.

Figure 1), would rather be doing something else, and see motorcycling as something that can help them get to 'the next step' in life. They are motorcycle taxi drivers, carrying passengers and goods, and not outlaws or gang members, but they end up constructed as such anyway. One key informant, an ex-combatant, long-time rider, and cyclist leader from Ganta, said,

> Sometimes, crimes take place, people say we are the ones. There are criminals in this country who can't afford to even buy a car and it is motorcycle that they can buy. Some use their own money, they buy motorcycle, they go to work, and commit crimes. When those crimes have been traced by CID to know who committed them, if community people heard that it was a motorcycle sound that night when the crime was being committed, so [they say] 'That's the cyclists'.[51]

The peacebuilding potential of cycling is imperfect, and always under-realised. However, even its most imperfect (i.e. violent) manifestations evidence gendered distortions that attach cyclists to masculinist violence by focusing on a familiar litany of scenarios, that the motorcycle can be used to commit crimes, that the cyclists are ignorant to the rules of the road, and that their lack of regard for self and others results in fatal accidents.

In opposition to these and other narratives that iterate cyclists as bad men, cyclists themselves narrate and emphasise their contributions to society through cycling, and articulate cycling as a peacebuilding modality. Interviewees asserted that motorcycling's main contribution to peace is providing young men with a source of livelihood without which rates of criminal violence and armed activity would increase. Lawrence S. Kromah,

[51]Interview with Emmanuel A. A. Sarty (cyclist union leader), Ganta, 19 January 2019. All names and 'riding names' are used with consent and by request, with many cyclists asserting that naming in research is a form of recognition. Provision of any background information, including disclosure of ex-combatant status, is also with express consent of interviewees. These protocols, and the methodological approach articulated throughout the article, received ethical approval from both the University of St Andrews and University of Liberia processes.

known as Kabila, is a former police officer who lost his job due to the political transition after the war, becoming a cyclist to support himself. He vividly sketched the contribution of motorcycling to peace, saying,

> If Liberia is set free today from war under United Nations [interventions] into Liberia it's only because of motorbike. It's only because of motorbike! If it was not for motorbike, I swear to God in heaven, while we are still discussing you couldn't stand here with me. You would be in the midst of fire and bullet sound.[52]

Cyclists also explain that motorcycling, even if it is not their preferred livelihood activity, is 'better than just sitting down' and can even afford economic, social, and political opportunities beyond mere economic survival, such as developing entrepreneurial and leadership skills or allowing for earning and savings rates higher than other subsistence-level activities (see Figure 1). Cyclists situate motorcycling as peacebuilding work and reintegration work for other reasons, too. Motorcycling connects communities otherwise cut off because of roads destroyed by conflict and successive rainy seasons. It is a youth employment opportunity for tens of thousands. Cyclists were also at the forefront of disseminating disease prevention messages during the 2014–2016 Ebola crisis and taking sick patients to treatment centres. Through motorcycling, they mobilise politically to resist their own social marginalisation. All key informants asserted that motorcycling is intrinsically linked to being or becoming good men. Kabila explained, 'Cycling has made people to be good men. It changed a lot of ex-combatants to be good men. Many of them have built houses [thanks to cycling], have wives and children thanks to it [. . .] We have a lot of good men riding motorcycle'.[53]

While motorcycling is predominantly an economic activity, it is also a means to social connectivity and political participation for young men who lack opportunities and networks for social and political inclusion otherwise. In this, cyclists share an adjacent sense of economic and social exclusion that characterises members of biker gangs in the US, the UK, Australia, and other contexts. They ride because there is 'no other means'. They also share a distrust of authority and have been frequent victims of police brutality and exploitation; consequently, they believe in forms of self-protection that frequently produce acts of vigilante justice-seeking and reprisal violence. Because they are perceived as unconcerned with road safety and as complicit or directly involved in the transport of criminals and illicit goods (perceptions they refute), they are the frequent targets of police intervention, including violent police intervention. Rather than issue tickets or levy fines for minor traffic violations, the police instead tend to seize cyclists' bikes, usually permanently, and place cyclists in jail without charge. Police have beaten cyclists to death, including in a well-publicised case in Ganta, northern Liberia, in March 2020. Cyclists also complain that they are not criminals but are themselves the frequent targets of criminals, murdered and robbed by them. They accuse the police of failing to investigate the murder and disappearance of dozens of cyclists over the last decade. These accusations have frequently spiralled into large community-wide riots and vigilante killings. Cyclists are also stigmatised as dangerous and sub-human. People refer to them using several derogatory epithets: 'suicide bombers' (for their perceived lack of regard for their own safety on the road), 'zogos' (a local slang word for drug-addicted

[52]Interview with Lawrence S. Kromah (former police officer and cyclist), Monrovia, 15 January 2018.
[53]Interview with Kromah, Monrovia, 23–26 March 2019.

youth considered to be on the lowest rung of society's ladder), and 'non-living things' (for the perception that their lives do not matter because of their low social status). A young woman marketeer in Tubmanburg, when we asked what names people use to talk about the cyclists, explained,

> Yeah, 'rough riders'. They call them 'city current'. The bad riders are more than the good riders . . . My experience about them? They run too much. They can be on excessive speed. Sometimes, they will run into the children. And sometimes, they can see you on the sidewalk and they come close to you. When you talk to them, they will either curse you or talk to you rough.[54]

These traits and performances contrast cyclists' perceptions that their efforts to earn and to claim space and recognition in Liberia are what make them (good) men, with how the same efforts end up reproducing outsider perceptions and discourses of 'bad manhood'. Even when cyclists use violence to defend themselves or to take revenge in the aftermath of roadside accidents or police investigative failures, they describe their actions in terms of gendered becoming – that they gain status and social standing as good men when they protect themselves and their fellows, demand and claim recognition, and resist (violent) exploitation from the police, passengers, and broader society. These same actions, meanwhile, are precisely the ones that the wider public points to as evidence that cycling is a site where bad men become worse.

'Suffering that only men can withstand': gendered distortions

Attitudes about cyclists reveal societal expectations about men in the wake of war, and especially the expectations that fall on men perceived to be somehow responsible for war and its symbolic continuities, either through direct involvement as combatants or through involvement in motorcycling as an economic activity presumed to be associated with the war and its aftermath because it is tainted by the war's protagonists. In all eight of the focus groups with passengers and cyclists, gender and masculinities came to the fore, but surprisingly, in FGD discussions, passengers did not conform to the usual script that cycling is dirty work because it is men's work (i.e. something attracting men because it is criminal, loutish, or reckless). Referencing tropes about men related to strength, violence, and protection, they instead asserted that cycling is men's work because it is dirty work. A young woman during a focus group discussion in Pleebo, a town in eastern Liberia that had recently experienced violence between police and motorcyclists, explained,

> Most cyclists are men because of the difficulties they face in the field, for instance the harsh attitude with some passengers which sometimes leads to fights between the motorcyclists and the passengers. A female can't withstand this situation if she [were] a motorcyclist.[55]

But the usual, stigmatising discourses lurk behind this assertion, too. To explain why cycling is man's work, interviewees emphasised not just the risks and dangers inherent to it (police brutality, passenger fare dodging and violence, and roadside accidents) but also the set of moral indicators that stigmatise the sector as inappropriate for women because it is perceived as criminal, loose, wanton, and associated with ex-combatants.

[54]Interview with marketeer, Tubmanburg, 25 January 2018.
[55]Community youth leader, focus group discussion, Pleebo, 7 October 2021.

The discussion also problematised the framing of cyclists as solely responsible for these perceptions, showing how non-cyclists are engaged in reproducing but also challenging constructions of cyclists as bad men. Passengers acknowledged how they sometimes cheat cyclists out of fares, how accidents injure cyclists and not just passengers, how the police beat and target and sometimes murder them, and how cyclists are easy targets for criminal exploitation and murder (targeted for their motorcycles and for cash they might be carrying, and perceived as bodies that will not be missed if they are targeted for violence). An older woman, a representative from a community organisation active in youth engagement, linked these various difficulties to gendered role division with ancient roots, saying, 'The reason why most cyclists are men is from the Biblical perspective where God said men will suffer. Motorcycling is full of suffering that only men can withstand'.[56] The younger woman concurred, saying, 'God made men able to withstand suffering so that is why men are cyclists'. In a separate interview encounter, a long-time cyclist asserted, 'Men riders are rough, so they can stand everything on the road'.[57]

Perceptions about gender roles in the motorcycling sector mirror those in broader Liberian society and beyond, where bread-winning norms are strong across multiple countries and cultures.[58] For instance, the main assumptions of a 2020 study we produced called 'Mobile4Women' found that post-war, patriarchal values are mediated through social, cultural and traditional norms. Together, these practices and norms place women and girls in vulnerable position as the 'weak' and 'servants' that need protection from the 'kings' (men and boys) who are seen as the 'defenders' of not just household but society.[59] Liberian law even codifies men's responsibility to support families unless they are incapacitated. One of the country's few women riders, in explaining why so many young men end up in the sector, said, 'Men need to cater to their responsibilities but [there are no] jobs, so they have to find a way to make some fast money to feed their family'.[60] Although women have played pivotal roles in Liberia as peacebuilders,[61] mediators,[62] activists,[63] mothers,[64] and combatants,[65] Liberia continues to be a highly patriarchal society, where masculinity is associated with power, domination, and control over women. Concepts of masculinity are deeply embedded in normative behavioural expectations of each gender. Those concepts are also hierarchically ordered based on differential socio-economic status and notions of political belonging that, in Liberia, are

[56]Civil society representative, focus group discussion, Pleebo, 7 October 2021.
[57]Interview with Kromah, Monrovia, 23–26 March 2019.
[58]Pilar Gonalons-Pons and Markus Gangle, 'Marriage and Masculinity: Male-Breadwinner Culture, Unemployment, and Separation Risk in 29 Countries', *American Sociological Review* 86, no. 3 (2021): 465–502.
[59]Platform for Dialogue and Peace, 'Research Report on Women Experiencing Marginalization and Gender Based Violence in Grand Bassa and Montserrado Counties in Liberia', Mobile for the Promotion of Justice for Women and Girls Rights Project, December 2020. See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gep07mnOrs0&t=5s.
[60]Interview with Kadiatu Bah (cyclist and nursing student), Monrovia, 20 April 2019.
[61]Theodora-Ismene Gizelis, 'A Country of Their Own: Women and Peacebuilding', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28, no. 5 (2011): 522–42.
[62]Lydia Mawuenya Amedzrator, 'Breaking the Inertia: Women's Role in Mediation and Peace Processes in West Africa', KAIPTC Occasional Paper No. 38 (Accra: Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre, October 2014), 1–25.
[63]Janel B. Galvanek and James Suah Shilue, *Working Tirelessly for Peace and Equality: Civil Resistance and Peacebuilding* (Monrovia: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict Press, 2021).
[64]Wonchul Shin, 'Mama, Keep Walking for Peace and Justice: Gender Violence and Liberian Mothers' Interreligious Peace Movement', *Religions* 11, no. 7 (2020): 323.
[65]International Labour Organization, 'Girl Combatants: Women Warriors Fight Their Way Back into Liberian Society', *World of Work Magazine*, August 2005, 54.

additionally shaped by language groups, ethnicity, educational attainment, and conflict backgrounds.

'Bad men' narratives about cyclists rely on assertions of hyper- and excess masculinity, investing cyclists with recklessness and excess sex drive. Hyper-masculine ascription fulfils three important, observable political functions during peacebuilding processes. First, it constructs agency in dualistic terms, which flattens understanding of youth capital and contributions during peace processes. George Paul Meiu found similar dualism stalking discourses about motorcyclists in Kenya, arguing that excessive masculinity is constructed as bad masculinity and therefore gets de-valued, policed, and stigmatised. He writes, 'Elites devalue [motorcyclist] men as excessive and unable to hold on to their vitality, wealth, and well-being', squandering their money on drink and drugs and wasting their vitality through premature injury and death from accidents.[66] Discourses of excess vitality devalue 'boda-boda masculinities' because 'to be converted into lasting forms of value, [masculinity] must be divorced from speed, excess' or hustle.[67] 'Bad men' narratives also suggest premature masculinity. Young cyclist men are assumed to be in too much of a hurry to become men – to earn 'fast cash', to flirt, to network, to rise above their station, which signals how masculinity narratives perform a political function of keeping young men in check. Together, these discourses combine to fix young men as youth, unable to become men. Conversely, young men who are 'just sitting down' are also constructed as bad men because they are unproductive and weak.[68]

Cyclists themselves often see each other through a dualistic prism of 'good ones and bad ones', too. One cyclist, formerly a child soldier and someone who saw motorcycling not just as a livelihood but as a route to socio-political reintegration and even post-war redemption, explained about his peers,

> Some cyclists are doing [motorcycling] just to survive, but some are doing it to secure a better future. All of us are not the same. Some men, they're doing the motorcycling to do a lot of things. Some men, they're doing it there to maintain their future. Some of them, they are only getting there to get to eat in their stomach. But some are there, not to eat in the stomach, but it's to think for the future of tomorrow. As for me, I think of my future for tomorrow. I don't ride motorcycling just for the name. The way that some of my friends, then, some of them can jerk [steal] people's phones, some of them go in a car, see the car slowing down, they jerk your phone, they jerk your waist bag. As for me, I don't participate in this because I know what the motorcycle is doing for me is very good. So, I got nothing to do with some of these things.[69]

Kabila contrasted good and bad men in terms of conflict and peace,

> Backward never, forward ever. Good man works for peace, works to develop, obeys the law, is law-abiding. All in all he works to promote peace. Bad man is against the law, a planner of war, steals government money, divides people, picks and chooses [practices cronyism and nepotism], and is a liar.[70]

[66]George Paul Meiu, '"Male Power": Virility, Vitality, and Phallic Rescue', in *Queer Objects to the Rescue: Intimacy and Citizenship in Kenya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 76.
[67]Ibid.
[68]Ibid., 77.
[69]Interview with Edwin Nyankoon (cyclist), Monrovia, 11 January 2018.
[70]Interview with Kromah, Monrovia, 23–26 March 2019.

Here is where the gendered expectations that attach to cycling get distorted: cyclists enter the sector to become good men, to fulfil expected gender roles about providing and contributing. All interview participants described being a good man in terms of an ability to provide for one's family and contribute economically to society. 'Pay your children's school fees'. 'Don't abandon your wife and children'. 'Be independent'. 'Don't bend down to anyone'. 'Have authority in the home and respect in your [economic] sector'. 'Help your community'. But masculinity in a context of poverty and social marginalisation establishes expectations for becoming that are difficult to achieve, often deferred, and frequently out of reach.[71] That recognition for cyclists as good men stays out of reach is a reminder that, although there are in theory 'several ways of being a man', those ways are frequently 'hierarchically ordered',[72] not quite within the grasp of all young men. Prince D. Sembollah, known as Dynamic to his peers, linked good manhood to the struggle of a youth politics of attainment: 'What is being a man to me? In my sense [. . .] having my own house, business, and wife, and catering to my home and sending my children to school. Doing things where my parents will no longer [have to] support me. Then I am a man'.[73]

Yet, despite cyclists' plural ambitions or reasons for being cyclists, outside perceptions of the sector remain fairly static as one where bad men go or where good men turn bad. Participants' observations about masculinity, peacebuilding, and motorcycling were ones that always circled back to misperceptions, misrecognition, and stigma. Kabila said, 'When you want to ride bike, people say you're coming to join the bad people or a bad group. Yes, cyclists have both good men and bad men'. Dynamic observed, 'The problem is, everywhere you go people will talk about you. There are good cyclists and bad cyclists. Talking to passengers can change you. Make people to carry your bad name. So, for cyclists, it is hard to find good man. All over people think of cyclists as bad people. So cyclists have stigma. As soon as you join cycle riding be ready for people to call you as bad person. People have the wrong thinking about we that ride cycle'. Lassana Theal, a young rider known as 717 on the motorbike field, said,

> Some say the cyclists, 'They are smokers, they are drunkards, you know? They say a lot of things about the cyclists of Tubmanburg, but still they will still come to us for help. And we don't mind that. Human beings say a lot of things out our fellow humans. So we don't take that one into consideration. We will still help them. They are our parents and our sisters.[74]

One year later, he returned to the topic of stigma and outside perceptions of the sector, saying,

> Ah, when you're good, you're good, when you're bad, you're bad. I know as soon as you come to the cycle riding field, people classed you as bad. But that idea is changing. Because we have lot of nice people riding bike. That's some people thinking, they see cycle riding as for bad people. So that's their belief, but me, I know we have good people as cyclists. You know how many people riding bike! Not all riders are ex-combatants. So that's wrong thinking about cycle riding.[75]

[71] Alcinda Honwana, '"Waithood": Youth Transitions and Social Change', in *Development and Equity: An Interdisciplinary Exploration by Ten Scholars from Africa, Asia and Latin America* Dick Foeken and others, ed. (Brill, 2014), 28–40.
[72] Iver B. Neumann, *At Home with the Diplomats: Inside a European Foreign Ministry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 135.
[73] Interview with Prince D. Sembollah (cyclist), Tubmanburg, 30 March 30–4 April 2019.
[74] Interview with Lassana Theal (cyclist), Tubmanburg, 25 January 2018.
[75] Interview with Theal, Gbarma, 6–8 April 2019.

A second function of hyper-masculinist devaluation is how it further marginalises both young men and women, distancing youth actors from peacebuilding identities and projects.[76] Emmanuel A. A. Sarty, the first motorcyclist known to have received his undergraduate degree from the University of Liberia, in sociology, said,

> You know, in social science, they have what is called labelling theory—the name of cycling has affected the notion of 'good man'. People label motorcycle riders as bad people. That general notion has spread all over until we are fighting to redeem ourselves. You know cycling is tempting, if you don't want to do something, as a cyclist you will do it. The sector can change people's behaviour. The sooner people start calling you names like suicide bomber, you will start behaving like that if you are not strong. Again, the perception of the people and the general attitude toward cyclists is bad. I hear, 'Sometimes I have to be rough to cope with the system'.[77]

Stigma combines with contradictions embedded within ideas about masculinity to distort the status of motorcycling vis-à-vis peacebuilding, and in ways that make masculinity quests for young men elusive. To attain good manhood through the only means available to conflict-affected men is to attach themselves to a sector perceived as populated by bad men. The pursuit of good, peaceful masculinity in contrast to its bad, conflictual variety is therefore a masculinity quest destined to result in misrecognition.

This finding – about the disconnect between work that young men perceive as peacebuilding but that society perceives as peacebuilding's opposite – is related to insights about conflict masculinities that also centre (mis)recognition and emphasise men's protection and provision roles. Theidon remarked that because marginalised young men lack access to 'civilian symbols of masculine prestige [. . .] their bodily capital may be their only marketable asset'.[78] During conflict, that bodily capital takes the form of physical strength, knowledge about how to use weapons, and access to the networks and structures of war-making. After war, combatants' bodies 'betray them'; as ex-combatants, they 'embody their violent pasts in enduring, albeit often unconscious ways'.[79] Associated with the destruction of war, ex-combatants are stigmatised as possessing *excess* conflict capital (proximity to the weapons and comrades of war) and deficit peacebuilding capital ('marketable' peacetime skills). Excessive embodiment is less about young men's actual behaviour after war and more about 'how specific social worlds invest, shape, and deploy' their bodies in peace.[80] After war, DDR programmes assume that ex-combatants, because they embody war, 'continue to speak in *a voice of war*', regardless of whether they are violent or peaceful, entrepreneurial or idle, meaning that DDR efforts paradoxically rarely sketch *reintegration* but instead imagine 'its opposite: perpetual violence and return-to-war'.[81]

A third function of the hyper-masculine peace-negation ascribed to cyclists is how it reinscribes the violent excess masculinity of other actors – the police, the politicians who

[76]Studies of masculinities confirm how societal failures to reckon with the continuities of conflict masculinities during peacebuilding transitions will impact negatively and disproportionately on women. See Naomi Cahn and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, 'Hirsch Lecture: Gender, Masculinities, and Transition in Conflicted Societies', *New England Law Review* 44, no. 1 (2009): 1–23.
[77]Interview with Sarty, Ganta, 28–30 March 2019.
[78]Theidon, Reconstructing Masculinities, 5.
[79]Ibid., 23..
[80]Ibid. See also Jaremey R. McMullin, 'Integration or Separation: The Stigmatisation of Ex-Combatants after War', *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 394–402.
[81]McMullin, Hustling, 76, emphasis original.

mobilise young cyclists for electoral agitation, etc. – as peace-promoting, so that the violence of these more powerful actors then passes as normal and necessary. Stereotypical attachments embody cyclists as the source of violence whilst the violence of others fails to stick in the same way, receding from view: the passengers who rob them, beat them, or cheat them; the police who brutalise or extort them; the vehicle drivers who might cause the accidents attributed to them. There is no derogatory shorthand commensurate with suicide bombers and non-living things that names the masculinist violence of passengers, vehicle drivers, the police, or even tuk-tuk drivers (known as kehkeh in Liberia) whose occupation is adjacent to the cyclists.

Recognition as investment, aspiration, and attachment

Even though cyclists know that cycling will result in their being labelled bad men in a bad sector, they nevertheless remain invested in becoming good men through cycling. They aspire to change perceptions about the field, they resist stigmatising discourses about it, and they persist in hoping that it will be the 'stepping stone' to something else. Kabila summarised the hopes and possibilities young men invest in the sector:

> We, the cyclists, help people get to work on time because of the huge population growth. We get students to school, carry market women to buy market and sell to people. We are contributing so much. If it was not for the cycle riding in this country, things were going to be more difficult than it is. No job. We motorcyclists created jobs for ourselves and people, people are riding bike to send children to school, pay their house rent. I that is here, motorcycle riding has done so much for me. My little boy is riding bike and helping with the family. If motorcycle was not in this country, no peace was going to be here.[82]

Yet, as another cyclist remarked, 'Ah, cyclists are important but the people in Liberia don't really know'.[83] Cyclists remain attached to motorcycling as a vehicle to becoming good men regardless of outside perceptions. There is a beguiling futurity, additionally, in cyclists' investment in motorcycling as a peacebuilding modality regardless of whether others recognise it as such. Peacebuilding, too, is not work that inevitably succeeds but a work of hopeful futurity that persists despite whether the hope invested in it is recognised or realised in full. Cycling thus persists as a site of both recognised and misrecognised peacebuilding.

If Liberian and broader international society misrecognise and miscode cyclists' aspirations for status as peacebuilders, and researchers form part of broader society, then it is likely that we also misrecognise and miscode. Antecedent work evidences how ex-combatant and conflict-affected youth construct non-violent masculinities in ways that frequently evade the notice of researchers, policymakers, and activists.[84] Consequently, we are interested in two distinct sites of misrecognition: one operable within Liberian social relations (and broader international commentary about, or misrecognition of, cyclists), and the other – explored in this section – at the level of research about these relations. The latter site does not exist to innocently communicate and disseminate knowledge about the first. At least from the moment when one of our

[82]Interview with Kromah, Monrovia, 23–26 March 2019.
[83]Interview with Nyankoon, Cotton Tree, 1 June 2019.
[84]David Duriesmith and Noor Huda Ismail, 'Embodied Militarism and the Process of Disengagement from Foreign Fighter Networks', *Critical Military Studies* 8, no. 1 (2019): 26–7.

participants asked us to stop the recording, to pause and reflect on our own instrumental use of young men vis-à-vis masculinity, we started to understand that various tensions in research encounters with young men are not ones that can be 'overcome'. Rather, we approach these tensions as inevitable and generative.

Which possibilities do they generate? They can decouple 'masculinities' from narratives about 'bad men'. They create space for recognising how conflict-affected youth contribute to peacebuilding. And, they underscore the centrality of participatory research strategies to gender-informed and feminist peace methodologies: if '[f]eminism is a political project about what *could* be',[85] then research encounters are also always and inevitably political encounters that risk foreclosing political possibility *and* that create space to imagine alternative futures and narrate pasts and presents reparatively. Here, we outline the steps we have taken that, we hope, allow us to align ourselves more with the latter objective. These steps are slightly different and additional to observations about our *approach* (to interviews, to focus group discussions, to participant observation), methods, and project outputs (which include articles, documentary short films, a song, bumper stickers, and diverse impact generation activities).[86] They are simply, and hopefully, a brief reflection on the set of practices that have made gender and masculinity generative for us and for cyclist participants.

First, we aim to invest the same hope in motorcycling-as-peacebuilding that our cyclist participants do.[87] Focus on and belief in cyclists' peace-building identity represents a move away from damage-centred research, a way to take the aspirations of participants seriously, including the gendered aspirations and attachments of riding to be/become good men. Damage-centred research 'documents the negative aspects of people's lives and occludes their agency, desires, and choices'.[88] It 'operates with a flawed theory of change', 'reinforc[ing] and reinscrib[ing] a one-dimensional notion of [marginalised communities] as depleted, ruined, and hopeless'.[89] We do not discount the deep impacts of stigmatisation on cyclists, and we are committed to use research to enquire into those impacts. But we opt instead to centre, and support, their counter-stigma efforts, and to invest in cyclists' own hope that stigma can be bypassed. Tuck, interestingly, contrasts damage-centred research with a desire-based framework concerned with documenting the 'wisdom and hope' of interlocutors and 'understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives',[90] which is why we opt to invest in respondents' gendered quests for recognition in a sector nevertheless perceived as damaged and

[85]Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 1, emphasis original.
[86]For a discussion of diverse outputs, see 'Motorcycling as Peacebuilding in Liberia' at https://cpcs.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/research/motorcycling-as-peacebuilding-in-liberia/, and 'Liberia: Legacies of Peace' at https://cpcs.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/research/liberia-legacies-of-peace/.
[87]We see this effort (hopeful engagement with cyclist participants) as aligned with how various contributors to this special issue invest similar hope in their research participants, correspondingly centring their experiences to shift knowledge about how masculinities operate during peace processes. We agree with them that hopeful engagement entails hearing discordant views (Westendorf), being moved by interlocutors (Myrttinen) and seeing research encounter as meaningful to knowledge production (Abels and others). See, in this special issue: Jasmine Westendorf, 'Troubling Masculinities: A Feminist, Relational Approach to Researching Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by Peacekeepers', *Peacebuilding* 12, (2024); Myrttinen, Violence and Hegemonic Masculinities; and, Gabriele Abels, Andreas Hasenclever, Maximilian Kiefer, Maike Messerschmidt, and Hendrik Quest, 'Interviews on Masculinities in Post-Conflict Contexts as a Process of Three Translations', *Peacebuilding* 12 (2024).
[88]Erin Baines, *Buried in the Heart: Women, Complex Victimhood and the War in Northern Uganda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), xv – xvi.
[89]Eve Tuck, 'Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities', *Harvard Educational Review* 7, no. 3 (2009): 409.
[90]Ibid., 416.

damaging. Desire is also why in the previous section we centre understandings of masculinity and peacebuilding in terms of contradiction and distortion.

Second, and related to the above desires, we work with participants to understand how findings might be of benefit to them. We do so by partnering directly with cyclists to implement their own ideas about how to improve life in the sector, increase recognition for their peacebuilding work within it, and support their ambitions for eventually exiting it. Through first collecting and collating their ideas and then fund-raising to implement them, we have jointly produced multiple radio programmes, called FOMTUL Hour, to discuss stigma and counter-stigma, centre cyclists' peace-building work related to their disease prevention efforts during Ebola and COVID, educate cyclists and passengers about road safety and how to resist police brutality and exploitation, and give cyclists call-in opportunities to share what is on their minds. We sponsored an effort for them to design and distribute 6,000 bumper stickers that centre their identity as peace-builders and educate the public about their peacebuilding work (with Figure 1, above, an example). We used a research grant from Folke Bernadotte Academy in Sweden to test their assertions about collective educational attainment by awarding 10 cyclists one-year educational scholarships to university degree programmes and vocational schools, and developed a business skills curriculum for their use. With funded support from the University of St Andrews, the Scottish Funding Council, and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, we have convened dozens of mediated police-cyclist dialogues in communities that had experienced police-cyclist-community violence and which cyclists and police subsequently have credited with preventing police brutality and exploitation.

Third, we have worked with young men in the sector to locate young women in and around the sector and have interviewed the only three active women riders we know about (two of whom received scholarships under the FBA grant, to pursue nursing and business at university). But we conceptualise the location of women in the sector expansively, to incorporate the full political economy and sociology of motorcycling and its broader, gendered habitus by interviewing not just the women who ride in the sector but who are behind it and rooting for it: women who serve as chairpersons of cyclists' local parking stations (taxi ranks) and unions, the market women and border traders who rely on cyclists, and cyclists' spouses and girlfriends. We convene homogeneous (cyclists only) and heterogeneous (cyclists with community members, passengers, police, politicians, and civil society actors) FGDs to situate cyclists not as lone men winning bread but as men-in-relation with their communities. Thousands of women also have attachments to and aspirations for the sector: that their husbands or sons will do well within it, or exit safely from it without injury or harassment, or that they can work symbiotically with cyclists to travel safely to work and home.

Finally, we have constructed questions and encounters structured around making masculinity and gender generative by asking men and women participants about masculinity and femininity. We ask women and men who cycle to imagine themselves on the motorbikes of the other: 'what challenges do you think you might face on the motorcycling field if you were doing this as a woman/man?' The men imagined the risks of physical and sexual abuse, and the women imagined the psycho-social pressures of having to hustle. One of the women cyclists laughed when we asked her what being a woman means, responding, 'Ha! This one means a lot of responsibilities. Not small

responsibility'. She also framed being a good woman in terms of cycling (taking advantage of the sector to provide for her son, and honing customer service skills in the sector because a 'good woman talks to people with respect') and peacebuilding (a good woman avoids 'noise, confusion, abusing'). We do not want to romanticise these encounters. Both men and women reinforced gender stereotypes in feeling and talking their way through the set of questions about gender. One of the men said he could not imagine being a woman in the field, because women are 'weak-minded', 'quick to make confusion', 'can't bear the endurance men face in the field', and that jealousy among them in the sector 'will be too much'. One of the women riders agreed with the perception that motorcycling turns men bad, that men started in the sector as 'good guys, but since they joined the bike field, their whole life is bad, smoking, drinking, and gambling'. Quests for recognition are always both internal and external, implicating the self, the cycling collective, and the broader public.

Recognition-centred quests in research are fraught, too. When we wrote in the introduction about our impact generation aspirations as co-involvement, we have to also accept that to cyclists' ears our answers to their questions about research benefit might have sounded dissonant and incomplete. They had to patiently wait while we awkwardly felt and talked our way through their questions about extractive data collection. And impatience marks their wait, and ours, for more research that would produce material benefits for them and actually deliver on promises to 'impact policy' or 'change perceptions'.

Conclusion

As Connell did with the life histories she developed in *Masculinities*, our engagements with cyclists show how they are (mostly) young men 'caught up in processes of change'.[91] These young men and women are also alert to the hazards they perceive when their 'gender practices and consciousness' are under evaluation. Life history methodologies uniquely 'illuminate politics' – and, we would add, peacebuilding – because they 'help to show what are the historical possibilities implicit in a given situation, how structures of relationship might be changed by feasible collective practices'.[92]

Liberian motorcyclists narrate a quest for societal recognition against a backdrop of misrecognition. We have shown that gendered misrecognition of cyclists – the way in which they are constructed as bad, reckless and threatening young men in opposition to their perception that cycling offers ways to be and become good men – is a function of the excess masculinity ascribed to them. We have demonstrated how hyper-masculine ascription functions politically during peacebuilding processes. It constructs agency in dualistic terms, which flattens understanding of youth capital and contributions during peace processes. It reproduces patriarchal structures and attitudes that further marginalise both young women and men, distancing youth actors from peacebuilding identities and projects. And, in foregrounding presumed threats to society and security that moral panics assert about motorcyclists, 'bad men' narratives gloss over the violent hyper-

[91]Connell, *Masculinities*, xi.
[92]Connell, Live Fast, 168.

masculine performances of other, elite political and security actors, rationalising violence against young men by older men as necessary for security.

In reflecting on how research encounters and outputs also (mis)recognise youth peacebuilding narratives and labour, including how gendered distortions and aspirations impact on (mis)recognition, we have argued that aspirations for gender inclusion and gender analysis are not simple or straightforward tasks but require frequent translation and collaborative problem-solving during research encounters and in the movement from project conception to implementation. Masculinity is a difficult topic to discuss and operationalise in research with young men because questioning its assumptions and manifestations can feel like a challenge to participants' sense of stability, culture, and way of life. We shared our experiences with incorporating various tools to acknowledge the complex ways in which gender courses through research with conflict-affected youth: movement away from damage-centred research, taking a broad approach to which participants we locate and how, asking men and women to reflect on their status as men and women (and to contemplate the status of each other), and working with cyclists to implement their own ideas, especially about recognition and counter-stigma.

Finally, we have argued that gendered quests for recognition within the motorcycling sector reveal the centrality of youth, and discourses about them, to peacebuilding theory and practice. Narratives about 'good ones and bad ones', like narratives about post-conflict reintegration, are constructed through perceptions about damaged, deficient, excessive, or rehabilitated manhood, meaning that motorcycling is a consequential and critical peacebuilding site, where young men communicate 'desire for recognition and a presence'.[93] If peacebuilding is to be inclusive, representative, and responsive, then we suggest that it needs to be alert to how it excludes youth generally, and marginalised young cyclists specifically. If peacebuilding is to engage and enlist local participation, then it needs to recognise and not dismiss the labour that young people engage in and perceive as critical peacebuilding work. As we argued above, youth-focused violence prevention efforts have presumed to transform young men into peaceful citizens without doing much to improve their lives, without concomitant engagement with the violent electoral practices of more powerful men (such as political elites and the police who violently exploit them), without engaging how youth perform peaceful functions a priori to interventions designed for them, and without asking how cyclists see their livelihood work as peace work.

Gendered contradictions and distortions suggest that the aspirational process of becoming a good man is more rigged game than bumpy road. At the same time, the persistence and attachment of Liberia's young men to the idea that motorcycling can deliver on a rigged aspirational promise might be the real sweat equity of peacebuilding work.

Acknowledgments

For this project, we would like to acknowledge funding from the Scottish Funding Council, Folke Bernadotte Academy and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, and additional support to Platform for Dialgoue and Peace from the United Nations Women's Peace &

[93]Diouf, Engaging, 5; and McMullin, Hustling, 88.

Humanitarian Fund, the Spotlight Initiative, UN Women and the Liberian Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection. Kadiatu Bah, Alexander T. Devine, Moses Fahnbulleh, Trokon G. Gray, Rita Kpayseh, Lawrence S. Kromah, Edwin Nyankoon, Prince D. Sembollah, Emmanuel A. Sarty and Lassana Theal have generously shared their perspectives, experiences and words over several years of the project, as have hundreds of other cyclists and their family members and passengers. Kennedy K. Berrian provided invaluable research support and management throughout all project years. Charleston Karmue provided additional interview support, and Matthew Hyndman, Florian Reichelt and Eli Harris-Trent supplied research assistance. We are grateful for the engagement and inputs from the University of Liberia Office of the Institution Review Board. Within Platform for Dialogue and Peace, we additionally want to thank Alfreda Garswah, Bendu K. Davis, Vlandy G. Freeman, Prince Glaygbo, T. Wilson Gaye and Jackson Speare. Finally, we thank David Duriesmith, who carefully edited this manuscript, as well as the anonymous reviewers and the editors and team at *Peacebuilding*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Scottish Funding Council [#SFC/AN/12/2017, #SFC/AN/02/2018], the Folke Bernadotte Academy (Sweden's government agency for peace, security and development) [#20-00280], and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

Notes on contributors

Jaremey R. McMullin is a Senior Lecturer in the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. He received his DPhil in International Relations from the University of Oxford and has published research on ex-combatant reintegration, postwar veterans' transition, and youth peacebuilding in *International Peacekeeping*; *Review of International Studies*; *Third World Quarterly*; *Civil Wars*; *Conflict, Security & Development*; and the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. His 2013 monograph, *Ex-Combatants and the Post-Conflict State: Challenges of Reintegration*, was published in Palgrave Macmillan's 'Rethinking Political Violence' series. He directed and produced a documentary short film series on everyday peace, *Liberia: Legacies of Peace* (2019). He has worked with Liberian motorcyclists and partners at Platform for Dialogue and Peace to implement cyclists' own ideas to improve life in the sector, including through police-cyclist dialogues, business skills training, educational scholarships, and counter-stigma activities using radio and bumper stickers.

Deimah Kpar-Kyne McCrownsey is Project Officer and Gender Social Inclusion Manager at Platform for Dialogue and Peace, a Liberian research and peacebuilding organization with a vision of transforming Liberia into a society characterised by equality, social cohesion, and respect for all (men and women). She received her BA in Sociology from the University of Liberia and holds several international training certificates in peacebuilding, women and land rights, and women, peace, and security. She has worked in all 15 Liberian counties to bring together state and non-state actors, particularly those with different perspectives on issues of women's and girls' human rights, gender, social inclusion, and masculinities. She has managed several P4DP projects, including the 'Platform for Women Empowerment and Next Level' with funding from the Women, Peace, and Humanitarian Fund through UN Women, and 'Mobile4Women', which collated research on women's social marginalisation and experiences of SGBV, with funding from Spotlight Initiatives and UN Women.

James Suah Shilue is an adjunct instructor at the College of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Liberia, and the Executive Director of Platform for Dialogue and Peace. He has an MA in Development Studies from the International Institute of Social Studies at The Hague and an MA in Social and Community Studies from De Montfort University, Leicester, UK. He has been using participatory action activities in his peacebuilding work for more than 18 years to resolve conflict, build the capacities of state and non-state actors, and continuously tackle gender inequalities to improve the socio-economic and political participation of marginalized women and girls in decision-making. He published reports for the Brookings Institution on links between peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and durable solutions for conflict displacement, and for the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict on civil resistance and peacebuilding. He has also published in the *Journal of Religion, Conflict and Peace* on ethnic identity in Liberia.

ORCID

Jaremey R. McMullin http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0444-3146
James Suah Shilue http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0787-4398

Ethical approval

The underlying research with human subjects for this project, which includes all interviews, focus groups, and participant observation completed for this article, received ethical approval from two independent approval bodies: the School of International Relations Ethics Committee, University of St Andrews (#12377 and #14868); and, the Office of the Institution Review Board, University of Liberia (#29-07-226).