

African Feminist Ethics of Co-Creation: Researching Women's Peacemaking in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Marie-Rose Tshite

Abstract

As a Congolese peace scholar-activist, I draw on interviews with 36 women involved in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue peace process to reflect on the ethical as well as epistemological challenges of researching women's peacemaking in the Democratic Republic of Congo. During my interactions with the interviewees, they questioned me about my life as they assessed whether to share their hidden narratives, long invisibilised in academic and governmental archives. My positionality granted me access to these women, but it also precipitated expectations to convey their stories responsibly. Hence, I faced these issues through the constant awareness of power relationality. This article advances Makana's "ebb and flow of fieldwork" approach (2018) by introducing an "African feminist ethics of co-creation," a situated framework that focuses on shared authorship and ethical reciprocity as tools for structural redress against colonial and heteropatriarchal silencing.

Keywords: co-creation, the women of Sun City, women peacebuilders, African feminist ethics, oral history, epistemic justice, structural redress

Introduction

What do you do when archives are silent? I was a fresh-out-of-graduate-classes student in 2021 who went into fieldwork to conduct research in the National Archives in Kinshasa, the capital city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). I had all my established plans, which looked perfect on paper but not

in reality. As part of my MA project, I received IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval to conduct my field research. I had printed my questionnaire along with the consent forms, ready to be given to my research participants. However, when I began searching for archival records about Congolese women who participated in the 2002–2003 Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD) peace process, I found silence.

This experience was in accord with what I had learnt in my MA feminist classes, in which scholars such as Amina Mama (1996) and Sylvia Tamale (2020) criticised the silencing of women's contributions throughout history, not as accidental but rather as the outcome of multiple systems of oppression. They characterised these silences as anomalies inherited from the colonial and patriarchal erasure of African women's agency and intellectual contribution that disregarded women's knowledge production. Sadly, this is the same form of silence I observed and experienced in Kinshasa.

This situation forced me to change my initial plan. I had to shift my research, not simply in terms of logistical adaptation. I was also forced to rethink what doing research meant ethically in my context. I then found myself in a situation where my personal experience echoed Filomena Steady's (2005) vision of African feminism as a socially grounded and community-based ethics that esteems interconnectedness and collective accountability.

Hence, when I shifted my focus to studying Congolese women's narratives of peacemaking, after not finding any relevant information in the archives, I decided to interview these women. I interviewed 36 women who were involved in the peace negotiations, and although my position as a former staff member of an international organisation gave me access to certain women, it also precipitated expectations from these women that I had to carry their voices with care and responsibility.

My regular visits to the archives and my encounters with the absence of these women's narratives made me realise that a deeper epistemological question needed to be raised: what does it mean to research women's peacemaking in a context where both history and archives are structured by erasure? This question became central to my thinking and prompted me to reflect constantly on how research in the context of absence could be conducted ethically in post-conflict Africa. It further pushed me to reflect on

the shift from relational engagement to what I conceptualise as an African feminist ethics of co-creation. Co-creation differs from participatory or relational approaches in research methods. While these approaches emphasise values such as mutuality during research encounters, co-creation is a situated approach that expands these genealogies by positioning collaboration and the redistribution of authorship and visibility as forms of epistemic justice. I differentiate the process of co-creation from Makana's ebb and flow approach (2018) in three ways. Firstly, co-creation allows a process of structural redress to take place rather than just rhythm. Secondly, it points out shared authorship, and lastly, it requires concrete results such as archives, exhibitions, or memorials. This turns research into a practice of repair.

To illustrate the shift that guided my fieldwork, I briefly outline several moments that influenced the process of co-creation in concrete ways. At first, when I arrived in Kinshasa for fieldwork, I leaned on Selina Makana's idea of an ebb and flow approach, as taught in my feminist class, which is an African feminist ethnographic method built on moving between reflective withdrawal (ebb) and active engagement (flow). However, the reality on the ground made it so that this approach did not fully address the structural silence and authorship inequalities that shaped post-conflict knowledge production. It is from that realisation that I conceptualised what I now call an African feminist ethics of co-creation, a situated framework that transforms relational ethics into structural redress.

I engaged in reflexivity as trust deepened between me as a researcher and the women participants. They invited me to their homes and offices to view documents and records related to their peacemaking efforts that they had kept for years. Later, those numerous interactions deepened my comprehension of their peacemaking activism in relation to the power relations of the time. As our collaboration grew, these exchanges gradually shifted from sharing memories to deciding together how to preserve them. It evolved into collaborative acts to reconstruct memory through digital archives and even the design of a memorial stele, which is now housed at the National Museum of the DRC in Kinshasa.

Over time, I realised that this entire process went beyond the ebb and flow approach to incorporate many central features that made us the co-creators of knowledge, whereby knowledge was built *with* participants, not

about them (Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg 2021). We worked as collaborators, each guiding the direction of the research. This meant recognising that this process also required a constant awareness of power relationality as fluid and negotiated between myself and the women.

At the same time, co-creation was defined by everyday social markers that structured our interactions, including gender, age, language, socioeconomic status, and political context, which could be observed during fieldwork. These important elements took on new meaning for me as they promoted a collaborative, iterative, and ethical process anchored in local epistemologies, in which participants are not simply sources of data (Zulu et al. 2025) – they are co-authors of meaning, although I have to say that such co-authors were already present in Makana’s approach.

This understanding of participants’ roles in research aligns with Sylvia Tamale’s claim that African feminist knowledge should reflect local epistemologies and relational ethics and not be imported into research (Tamale 2020). In this regard, co-creation becomes a way of practising ethics by creating knowledge *with* participants rather than *about* them. The women became active agents who shaped the research questions, helped verify findings, and collectively imagined possible outcomes. This was a process that materialised repeatedly during my fieldwork. It was not only an abstract process.

Instances of co-creation also occurred during the multiple focus groups I organised with the participants, during which timelines of their activism in the Sun City (South Africa) peace negotiations were developed. The women actively co-designed the Peace Stele, reclaiming shared authorship as they recovered their neglected stories. All the sessions I organised with them were far from simple consultations; they served as moments of co-creation that yielded tangible results. Such an ethic, I argue, is different from both African ethics and Western feminist research ethics because it is rooted in decolonial and anti-heteropatriarchal principles. It recognises that heteropatriarchy in the African context existed long before colonialism arrived on the continent and instead emphasises how colonial and postcolonial state structures reshaped, institutionalised, and intensified those gendered hierarchies by producing the

existing configurations of heteropatriarchy that the African feminist ethics of co-creation seeks to unsettle.

At the same time, the women's own trajectories revealed the depth and diversity of their political engagement. The Congolese women of Sun City were organisers, negotiators, and community leaders who kept their communities together. I was told by many women, "If you only look at the prominent Sun City peace negotiation of 2002, you will miss important aspects of our activism journey, which started long before," and I listened to them to allow co-creation to happen in those times where women helped me understand and contributed to building the focus of my interviews.

When I heard their testimonies and realised how much of their labour remained invisible in public and academic spaces, I realised that I could not keep using the same approach I was taught. I needed an African feminist ethics of co-creation, one that advances women's voices and confronts the colonial and heteropatriarchal systems that kept those voices out in the first place. As noted by African scholars, this pattern still shapes how knowledge about Africa is produced (Zeleza 1997).

By bringing their voices and viewpoints forward, I wanted my research to interrupt that silence and offer a more complete, grounded story of women's peacemaking in the DRC. The African feminist ethics of co-creation that I propose is far more than a method. It is also a political and ethical stance that seeks to honour women's agency and make sure that African research does not prolong extractive practices. As warned by many African feminist scholars, African research can reproduce the same extractive logic it seeks to critique if it fails to transform the relationship between researcher and community (Mama 1996; Pereira and Tsikata 2021). Hence, the conceptualisation of the African feminist ethics of co-creation not only takes this warning seriously but additionally ensures to reproduce reciprocity, shared visibility, and the redistribution of authorship.

In this article, I revisit the conceptual foundations that guided this research, drawing initially on the ebb and flow approach, African decolonial thought, and relational ethics. I then turn to my field experiences with Congolese women peacebuilders to show how these co-creation approaches manifested themselves in our multiple interactions, together with everyday

factors such as language, age, education, and social position, which also shaped our encounters and the practice of co-creation.

Beyond the Ebb and Flow of Fieldwork: Grounding African Feminist Ethics of Co-Creation

Selina Makana's (2018) ebb and flow of fieldwork approach, conceptualised as a cyclical rhythm of reflective withdrawal and active engagement, enables researchers to be responsive to changing field realities. While I initially built on her foundational rhythm, I argue that Makana's conceptualisation is limited when structural redress and shared authorship are at stake. My conceptualisation of the African feminist ethics of co-creation took shape precisely to respond to that gap in shifting rhythm into redress.

African feminist research ethics are diverse, situated, and the uniqueness of each of their contexts is influenced by daily lived experiences, political histories, and epistemologies across the continent (Tripp and Hughes 2018; Idahosa 2021). Hence, African feminists researching across different African countries do not use the same research methods and ethics, which gives rise to multiple expressions of African feminism (Idahosa 2021; Yacob-Haliso and Falola 2021; Knowles 2024; Tamale 2024). Whereas Tripp and Hughes (2018) and Idahosa (2021) emphasise the plurality of each context, Tamale (2024) encourages further epistemic sovereignty, a move that corresponds with my insistence on structural redress through co-creation.

Taking into account that feminist ethics need to be adaptable, question Western generalisations, and incorporate diverse African contexts, it is important for African feminist ethics, without dismissing the Western feminist values of reciprocity, care, and relational power (Tickner 2014), to place greater attention on community accountability, relationality, and resistance to colonial and patriarchal frameworks (Mama 2011; Omotoso 2018).

African feminist ethics also draws on *Ubuntu* as an indigenous philosophy, which emphasises connections among people and reciprocal responsibility. However, *Ubuntu* has been criticised for reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies (Gouws and van Zyl 2015). Hence, building on calls for African scholars to reclaim epistemic authority (Mama 2007), I argue that feminist

ethics must shift from criticism to reconstruction to create our own frameworks for knowing as Africans. In that regard, the co-creation approach embodies this reconstructive ethos by transforming collaboration into a politics of redress. In line with Nnaemeka's (2004) nego-feminism, co-creation insists that negotiation must result in shared authorship rather than simply mutual understanding.

In practice, African feminist ethics researchers have been involved in decolonial knowledge production. They have done so by rejecting extractive practices and recognising interlocutors not as passive subjects but as active co-creators of knowledge (Dieng 2018; Pereira and Tsikata 2021). This co-creation of knowledge also requires reflective engagement with time, language, and space. In the research, time was not the same for everyone. Time was influenced by how the women's diverse personal, political, and cultural experiences shaped the research and by how they wanted to share their journeys. Hence, recognising and adjusting my time to these realities helped to encourage trust with the Congolese women of Sun City.

My idea of an African feminist ethics of co-creation is built on the spirit of ebb and flow but moves beyond it by centring shared authorship, ethical reciprocity, and structural redress. It emphasises the roles and agency of African women and how they have produced knowledge in this case of women's peacemaking in the DRC.

This approach also echoes those of feminist and decolonial critiques of knowledge production. Scholars such as Sandoval (2000), Smith (2021), and DeRocher (2018) have emphasised the need to resist (neo)colonial power relations in research and to empower Southern and Indigenous researchers to lead inquiries within their own communities. Hence, my approach was firmly inspired by African feminist epistemologies that precede and exceed global frameworks, echoing Parry (2020), Gqola (2002), and Mama's (1996) call for feminist research methods that are collaborative, participatory, and emancipatory, and that theorise outwards from the African continent and not from the West inwards.

In practical terms, co-creation embodies successive actions that we carried out collectively to make meaning of the women's peacemaking journeys. It was a process that helped verify narratives together, co-develop public

archives from their personal ones, and collectively determine how memory is preserved. Co-creation is a framework that honours the realities of African contexts, challenges power imbalances, and promotes research that ethically benefits all involved. In this case, co-creation was formed by the views and experiences of the women who participated in this research.

African Feminist Ethics in the Study of Peace and Security

African feminist ethics takes intersectionality into account when addressing gender issues alongside issues of race, class, and ethnicity (Parry 2020; Omotoso 2018; Wilén 2022; Kezie-Nwoha 2020). In peace and security studies, feminist scholars also pay attention to intersectionality to show how colonial and patriarchal norms determine who is allowed to speak, negotiate, and be remembered. Similarly, power structures have an inherent silencing effect on marginalised groups, or the subaltern, and colonised women experience injustices in relation to dominant Western discourse (Spivak 1988; Crenshaw 1991). In the DRC, these points of intersection shaped which women gained access to the peace tables and whose input was written out of the national record. From this perspective, intersectionality meant analysing how power operates within and across women's movements, and how those interactions shape what becomes apparent or forgotten in the history of peace studies.

African feminist research ethics intersect with peacebuilding by advancing women's participation, resisting stereotypes, and advancing the inclusivity of gendered approaches to peace. But participation on its own, from the perspective of co-creation, is not enough. We had to ensure ethical involvement that goes beyond mere gender representation to pursue shared authorship, inviting the women to co-author a reconstructed institutional memory of peace narratives.

Although African feminist peace scholars do not always explicitly reference the ebb and flow approach, their work does embody most of the principles of non-linearity and contextual adaptation (Makana 2018; Parry 2020). These principles correspond closely with the ethics of co-creation. One scholar, who is also in conversation with Makana's approach to embracing

rhythm as a form of engagement, is Bianca Parry, who emphasises the notion of adaptability in research. But co-creation goes further by translating rhythm into redress and by considering ethical reflection as an act of repair. In the case of the DRC, this was done by creating a collective archive and redistributing authorship.

Analysing women's peace activism through feminist lenses has long revealed categories that cast women as victims, moral guardians, or representatives of the "peaceful feminine" (Wilén 2022; Kezie-Nwoha 2020). African feminist ethics challenges these limiting categories, which restrict the ability of African women peace activists to act as political agents. Instead, it advances an approach that pays close attention to how historical, social, and institutional conditions shape their strategies. This illustrates how these categories have been transformed and how they have allowed the women to define their own positions as strategists, historians, and knowledge-makers, reclaiming the authorship of their past peacemaking work.

In this context, relationality becomes an important element to consider in African feminist peace ethics because it exposes how hegemonic masculinities (Ratele 2014; Adomako Ampofo and Boateng 2007) and hierarchical knowledge systems hinder true collaboration, while proposing alternative forms of relational ethics grounded in care, empathy, and mutual accountability. This relational dimension also informs African feminist understandings of peacebuilding as soft power and ethical practice (Isike 2017).

In post-conflict DRC, this soft power materialised in acts of co-creation, when women collectively reconstructed their archival history, verified each other's testimonies, and designed the Peace Stele. My argument is that these actions we collectively took were not symbolic actions, but intentional ones to repair and reposition these Congolese women's peace stories and legacy in continuity with the documented work done by Mpoumou (2004), Whitman (2006), and Tshite (2024).

African feminist research ethics involves a process of co-creating knowledge grounded in reflection and action. Rather than depending solely on an ethics of care, it advances an ethics of resistance, resisting colonial and heteropatriarchal research practices that have for a long time silenced African

women's intellectual labour. Co-creation incorporates these principles by allowing interlocutors to shape the very architecture of inquiry, making certain that ethical reflection translates into shared ownership of knowledge.

The women I interviewed wanted to be identified in their testimonies. They insisted on being named as a form of epistemic justice. In many of my conversations with them, they refused anonymity, claiming that their names had long been erased and that they wanted it to change.

My position as a Congolese woman with both insider and outsider markers, language, education, and previous professional experiences, required continuous negotiation of trust. I came to realise that each interview became a site of ethical reciprocity where narratives were not extracted but collectively curated. A woman might forget a detail, but because I had already interviewed another woman on the same topic, I would easily make the connection to the current conversation with the new interviewer in front of me. In this sense, co-creation turned oral history into a living archive of resistance and remembrance.

Identity and Positionality in the African Context

In Africa, like elsewhere, positionality is influenced by ethnicity, religion, class, seniority, and social norms, all of which shape how knowledge is produced and received (Ademolu 2023, 347). During my fieldwork, I became aware that my age, accent, and educational background, especially as a Congolese woman studying in the United States (US) on a Fulbright scholarship, affected how I was perceived.

This is because colonial education privileged certain linguistic markers; therefore, my formal French accent led some participants to expect a foreign, even white, researcher. Several women noted that topics related to women's peace activism were rarely studied locally because Congolese historical stories still privilege male, colonial, and nationalist heroes over women's contributions to peacemaking. This view reinforces why it is important to recognise how voice, language, and education mediate inside and outside the dynamics of research in African settings. This experience corresponds with Beoku-Betts' (1994) view that insider status is not always based on racial identity.

At the beginning of one interview, a Congolese woman of Sun City, who is currently a parliamentarian and has held numerous ministerial positions, told me, “I was expecting a white scholar; when we booked this appointment over the phone, your accent sounded white and also many young Congolese women do not come to us with this kind of research.” It was the second time I had heard phrases such as, “when we talked over the phone, I thought I was talking to a young white lady.” These assumptions were based on how formal my French accent is. Such conversations with the women really reflected how language, class, and expectations intersect in postcolonial research spaces.

I realised that some women had assumed my position as a white person, as they were not envisioning young Congolese women showing an interest in their past peace activism or speaking formally in the colonial language still used throughout the DRC. As a Black African woman who speaks multiple local languages, I have witnessed power relations based on language use and accents. Hence, to avoid creating barriers for my interlocutors, I asked the women I interviewed which language they felt comfortable conversing in. This simple gesture carried an ethical act that directly influenced the trust between us and restored agency to the women in our numerous conversations.

As a young researcher, I was also forced to navigate how hierarchies of age, seniority, and political experience play out in Congolese society. My access to political elites was sometimes facilitated by assumptions about my US educational background and international experience, but I was aware that it could also create distance with women in local movements. In such settings, doing research ethically also meant accepting these tensions and imbalances in a respectful way without assuming that shared national identity or gender automatically produces solidarity (Vlavonou 2023).

This does not mean that local researchers have easy access to political elites for interviews because of a language advantage. As I realised, the women of Sun City came from various backgrounds, ranging from grassroots personnel to privileged elites. Therefore, I had to be reflexive about my positionality, since my Congolese background alone did not guarantee access to my interlocutors.

My previous professional career as a programme officer for an international organisation dedicated to promoting democracy and training

women, or as a consultant working with them, provided familiarity and the opportunity to build relationships with women peacebuilders, but also demanded humility. Consequently, I worked with the interviewees while actively paying close attention to the power relations of that time, reading a lot on the context of the ICD peace process in 2002, and collaborating with them in both conventional and informal ways when I could not find information. But I was also aware that prior connections could have influenced expectations for advocacy or more representation of their past peacebuilding journey.

The feminist ethics of co-creation I experienced on the ground demanded continual reflection on transparency, power relations, and the distinction between collaboration and appropriation. This was in line with Makana's (2018) warning that African feminist scholars must remain aware of how positionality shapes research relationships and refrain from reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to undermine. The women I worked with built a community of pioneer women who have championed peace for over three decades. I followed the warning of Makana to avoid assuming that my "Africanness" would open most doors and make me feel at home, despite being Congolese.

The above issue of shared identity has been raised by Bouka (2015) and Dieng (2018), who have pointed out that having the same race or nationality does not automatically make you an insider or open doors. Instead, it is a process of consistent engagement, humility, and ethical responsiveness that enables the researcher to gain the trust of the research participants and, in the long term, opens doors for the research. As a result, my positionality functioned as a space for negotiation rather than a site of certainty (Nnaemeka 2004). It became a process of learning how proximity and distance exist together in feminist fieldwork.

These relationships became particularly visible when questions of ethnicity and regional identity emerged. I'm from the Kasai, an area historically associated with political opposition. Therefore, I had to be careful not to be categorised as an insider or an outsider in certain situations, as this does not capture the complex and multiple experiences of my own Congolese background. I was aware that my interlocutors could read my presence through those political lines. The Sun City women asked me about my marital status.

They asked about my husband's family name and why I was not carrying his name. They asked about my religion or ethnicity. These questions, while personal, reflected the social codes of Congolese relationality and were part of the ethical exchange that made co-creation possible. I was open about my personal life to build a relationship with my interviewees. However, some questions were asked very directly. One woman asked, "From which tribe is your husband, because a Luba man will not allow his wife to study abroad for so long while leaving her children?" Although questions like this were difficult to answer or seemed harsh, I responded with openness, humour, and care to preserve trust and honour the relational ethics central to African feminist research.

These experiences of being an insider or outsider in a familiar fieldwork setting have been widely investigated (Ademolu 2023; Dieng 2018; Wamai 2014). Ademolu (2023), Dieng (2018), and Wamai (2014) have noted that a researcher may find themselves as an insider in a foreign land or an outsider in their own land (Ergun and Erdemir 2010, 34). These authors elaborate in various ways on how the positions of a researcher's insider/outsider status change depending on their relationship with the person being interviewed. For example, Rama Dieng, while conducting research in Senegal, became aware of "the 'double consciousness' and the 'outsider in me' due to her multiple positionalities" (Dieng 2018, 32), a view different from the claim made by Njoki Wamai, a Kenyan researcher, who felt that she was considered an authentic insider or "one of us," which helped her gain access to information from leaders and individuals at local levels (Wamai 2014, 217).

My experience, much like Dieng's, illustrates that even though I share the same nationality, race, and gender with the women I interviewed, our differences were still significant. They were anchored in ethnic heritage, experiences of violence, levels of activism, and educational backgrounds. I experienced my positionality as fluid and relational. The context and perception of these women continually changed my positionality. Women often asked me about my family, my personal life, my political views, and the reasons behind my research. Although these questions were sometimes difficult, the interactions strengthened our collaboration, and from those shared values of openness and honesty emerged. Our collaboration produced beneficial results, including recognition of their stories by the Ministry of Arts and Culture, as

evidenced by the exhibition of the “Stele of Peace” at the National Museum of the DRC. Similar observations are made by Ademolu (2023), who points out that positionality boundaries are frequently “blurred and vague,” and that “insider” status is never fixed (Fayard et al. 2016, 11).

Looking back on these experiences, I came to see my positionality as always in flux, moving between closeness and distance. The women’s expectations that I “do something” with their stories demonstrated the political weight of representation and their willingness to document their stories. I kept going back to these women for more information and for clarification. I shared progress with them or simply called them for a collective review of materials. This intentional and ongoing process turned our relationship from one of researchers and participants into one of collaborators, reconstructing a “silenced” history. Over three years of fieldwork, trust grew from these continuous exchanges, and the co-creation process manifested itself in reciprocal engagement. Additionally, I was not only returning regularly to the DRC to maintain the ties I had built with the women over the years, I was doing so in order to reject the extractive logic that privileges one-time data collection, and instead, cultivate sustained relationships that loosen the boundaries between researcher and participants.

In sum, African feminist researchers examine positionality as an ethical practice rooted in relationality and redress that goes beyond mere reflexive exercise. Consequently, positionality requires ongoing negotiation of differences and accountability for those whose stories are represented. Within the African feminist ethics of co-creation, positionality is conceived as an evolving dialogue, like a dynamic process of learning, listening, and transforming relationships into shared acts of knowledge production.

Snowball Sampling, Identity, and Positionality

Often, when I met a Congolese woman of Sun City who agreed to participate in my study, we developed a relationship that led to several other meetings. These women frequently assisted me in accessing their personal archives and introduced me to others for interviews. In some instances, women reached out to me because they knew someone I had previously interviewed. This chain of

relationships illustrates the snowball sampling process I went through during my fieldwork research.

I kept in mind that my interactions with new interlocutors resulted from the trust I had already earned with others, who recommended me to fellow women because they trusted me and my work. My connections did not come from institutional access. They came through these women's networks of solidarity. This relational process took over three years and was central in the practice of an ethics of co-creation, in which research evolved through reciprocal involvement rather than detached observation. In this context, once trust was established, it shaped every subsequent encounter with my interviewees. The confidence participants placed in me by recommending each other and by sharing their personal archives was a form of endorsement that carried ethical responsibility.

I recognise that the term "co-creator" needs critical examination. Although I could easily gain recognition through academic publications, no awards had been given by the government to recognise the contributions of these Congolese women of Sun City at their true value. This reality made me question myself on the meaning of "co-creators," especially if the benefits of this work were unevenly shared. How can shared authorship be practised ethically within systems that continue to privilege researchers over narrators? These questions guided my decisions about acknowledgement, authorship, and visibility.

The epistemological orientation of this research promoted a dialectical interaction between reflexivity and the intersections of religion, gender, class, ethnicity, and nation. From a feminist reflective intersectional standpoint, making sense of these classifications means building equitable "fields" of activity (Bourdieu cited by Wibben et al. 2018). Feminist peace researchers seek to refrain from reproducing hierarchies and power relations in their work. I conducted interviews in Kinshasa and arranged meetings with those in other provinces to catch up with them once they arrived in the capital for various reasons. I asked questions about the strategies they used to enter the peace process. I explored their peacebuilding activities, strategies, experiences of exclusion, and reflections on recognition and legacy. I then analysed the data we co-created using thematic analysis grounded in African feminist views on

ethics. We co-created data through field notes, audio recordings, as well as the personal archival materials shared by the women.

Feminist reflexive and intersectional perspectives shaped my research, helping me to be more cautious about how normative assumptions in research can marginalise “other women,” particularly those lacking institutional privilege. Hence, deciding to emphasise their situated voices and differences allowed me to resist the subtle colonising effects that emerge when researchers project their own assumptions or biases as universal truths (Wibben and Donahoe 2019). In this research, my positionality was therefore both epistemological and political. This made me realise that my access to information and my public profile came with an obligation to make sure these women could regain the ownership of their contribution to peace in the DRC. Their insistence that I cite or mention their names and contributions in my research results reinforced the view that ethical research is not merely about avoiding harm but also about actively seeking to achieve justice.

Decentring Research Goals: Implementing Co-creation in the Field

When I began this research, I expected to find participant lists and extensive records of women’s peace actions during the ICD (1998–2003), including documentation of 8 March 2002, the day when the women in Sun City took the stage in the negotiation room and performed a theatre protest that revived stalled talks. Unfortunately, records of those scenes could not be found in institutional archives. After two weeks of searching libraries, archives, and foreign ministry repositories, the only documents I found were some newspaper clippings that described the political negotiations of the time. Besides, those newspapers that gave a general understanding of the peace process, these women’s specific interventions were omitted. The absence of these archives reflected the larger erasure of women’s political agency from the national memory. It became clear that the ebb and flow of fieldwork approach, which had directed my initial reflexivity, was no longer sufficient. I needed to rely on a much larger approach that aimed at repairing what had been historically silenced. I needed to move towards an ethics of co-creation that

could enable me to address these structural absences and to engage the women themselves as keepers and restorers of their own histories.

In other words, engaging in this process of repair through co-creation involved intentional approaches and practices, from which three intertwined contributions emerged. My first observation is that the focus shifted from the rhythm to the structure. This means the research methodology moved from the observation phase to the participation phase. Instead of sticking to a strict plan, I also paid close attention to the questions the participants asked. While listening to the women's stories, they pointed out historical and political issues that limited their ability to contribute to peacemaking in the DRC. This shift in the evolving ethical process reflects our collective effort and desire to design the research and gather the necessary data. Thus, co-creation evolved from a methodological metaphor into a framework for structural reform, in which knowledge production itself became a form of activism. This first element of redistributing authorship and visibility through archival reform transformed women from objects of documentation into co-authors of their collective memory.

I was at first shocked by how little was publicly known about Congolese women's activism before the Sun City negotiations. Most analyses I found, especially in external governmental archives, began directly with the 2002 talks, overlooking the organising and resistance that had begun years earlier. A narrow view of their peace activism journey was perpetuated, prolonging the very silencing my research attempted to challenge. I therefore decentred my initial focus on Sun City to trace the continuum of activism from 1998 onwards, when women mobilised under the *Campagne Nationale pour la Paix* (*National campaign for peace*), and some were even arrested for demanding the return of peace. In this sense, co-construction involves giving women the opportunity to position themselves as the authentic narrators of their own life stories and, through dialogue and collaborative revision, to assert their right to authorship, rather than allowing others to speak on their behalf.

The second element I observed in the co-creation process demonstrates how a collaborative process leads to concrete results, such as the construction of public archival exhibitions, like the memorial of peace with the women's names on it. Consequently, this collaborative process facilitated the

organisation of three focus groups in May, June, and July 2023. It was in those “safe spaces” that the women collectively reconstructed the memory of their peace activism journey. The first focus group took place at the Congolese National Archives. It was an opportunity for the women to bring their personal documents, photographs, and reports to have them digitised onsite while they retained ownership of the originals. While they were there, all together, we reconstructed timelines, debated on important dates, and corrected any contradictions in their stories.

The second focus group was held at the United Nations (UN) Women’s Office in Kinshasa, where the women participants reunited after two decades to co-produce a chronology of their activism and reconnect with those they had not seen for years. The third one, organised at the MONUSCO office (the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC), produced a verified list of 144 women who were involved in the peace negotiations from 1998–2003 (Salama Women’s Institute 2022). This list inspired the creation of the Peace Stele, which has been exhibited at the National Museum of the DRC since 30 July 2022. Together with the Congolese Sun City women, we moved the research from mere interpretation of historical fact to the repair and reconstitution of their personal archives into national archives, thereby restoring their presence and authorship in the historical record.

During that public exhibition, other shared results were presented to government representatives and international partners, including over 200 documents from the women’s personal collections. These tangible results illustrate the ethical dimension of joint creation. They materialise reciprocity by returning knowledge to the communities that generated it. In these spaces, co-creation is therefore linked to research ethics and political restitution. These acts of restitution turned co-creation from data generation into a feminist practice of material, ethical, and intellectual repair for the harm of past erasure.

The third characteristic observed in the co-creative process was a deep sense of responsibility and reciprocity. Many women requested, “Do something with our stories.” To fulfil this request, it was necessary to rethink ethical principles beyond the basic principle of “do no harm” in order to achieve justice. I met with the participants several times to verify data accuracy, exchange drafts, and inform them of the latest developments in archival work.

This ongoing commitment and dedication on the part of the researcher confirmed what most feminist researchers advocate for, which values the research process, reciprocity in the long *durée*, and ethical accountability by remaining present long after fieldwork formally ends. These engagements embodied accountability and reciprocity central to co-creation.

Decentering my early assumptions also meant relinquishing the idea that the “success” of Sun City should be the central narrative. For the women peacebuilders, activism was a continuum defined by persistence rather than a single event. They referred to their collective effort as *l'esprit de Sun City* (the spirit of Sun City), which transcended political divisions. Listening to them required me to unlearn previous assumptions of the linearity of Congolese peace processes and to recognise their larger strategies of solidarity. Therefore, through co-creation, these women became both participants and historical theorists of peace on their own terms.

In each interview and focus group, I uncovered fragments of a neglected archive, including reports, declarations, attendance lists, and photographs stored in the homes and offices of these women rather than in public repositories. When I cross-checked these documents with press archives and local libraries, collectively, we decided to rebuild a historical timeline that institutional records had obscured. This led me to extend my research timeframe from 1998–2003, not only looking at 2002–2003, to allow the women to share the narratives they have lived and experienced, thereby framing the history of the ICD through their lens. This evolution from data information to collaborative reconstruction embodies the African feminist ethics of co-creation as a living practice that transforms research into a mutual act of remembering and redress.

Ultimately, the various elements discussed are not separate themes but rather conceptual scaffolding that draws attention to the problematisation of the “co” in the co-creation process, intending to transform research into a practice of repair. Altogether, these points demonstrate that it is possible to approach research in a new light by questioning the meaning of the prefix “co” in “co-creation.” This required a significant shift, from objectivity to subjectivity, to redefine the very essence of this concept of collaboration. These

changes and transitions necessitated continuous questioning of who benefits, who has a voice, and how recognition was distributed.

Additionally, other factors such as education, political connections, and other relevant aspects highlight the need for sensitivity and adaptability. Some women were hesitant to speak in the presence of their seniors, while others contested my interpretations of certain phases of their activism before 2003. These tensions were not hindrances, but rather essential components of co-creation as an ethical practice. They show that the work of co-creation flourishes on the principles of transparency, humility, and responsiveness, not of control.

Conclusion

This study rethought the ethical, methodological, and epistemological challenges of researching Congolese women's peace activism narratives amid the striking silence of their contributions in national archives and institutions. What began as a search through empty archives at various national institutions evolved into a co-creation of memory with the Congolese women themselves through numerous interviews and focus groups, which facilitated the research process and transformed my fieldwork into a collective historical reconstruction site. This research also highlighted the limitations of existing research ethics, thereby emphasising the necessity of moving beyond rhythm and relationality towards structural redress.

The African feminist ethics of co-creation that emerged from this process expands on Selina Makana's ebb and flow of fieldwork approach (2018) and goes one step further in seeking epistemic justice, continuing the tradition of African feminist scholarship represented by Amina Mama (2011), Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), Sylvia Tamale (2020; 2024), and Filomena Steady (2005), who urged feminist researchers to resist exploitative practices and to position accountability, reciprocity, and respect for local epistemologies at the heart of their research.

Therefore, this engagement, carried out through the research on Congolese women's peace narratives, allowed the co-creation process to emerge through sustained, iterative dialogue with participants. All this was

made possible by the discovery of archival documents from women's personal archives, the shared authorship that resulted from the reconstruction of their narrative of peacemaking activism, and the production of a peace memorial as a tangible result of the co-creation process. These were not symbolic actions. They were actions that carried political meaning, with a deep sense of repair aimed at restoring women's contributions, which had been invisibilised. The outcomes of this co-creation process demonstrate that ethical feminist research in post-conflict contexts must shift beyond mere representation to seeking transformation and epistemic justice across all stages of the research process.

An African feminist ethics of co-creation reframes the researcher's role from that of an observer to a collaborator, from that of a simple interpreter to that of a co-author of memory. It is both a methodology and a political stance, one that recognises African women not as subjects of research but as producers of knowledge.

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Notes

1. Although I was aware of the political silencing of women's work and stories in official archives, as long critiqued by many feminist scholars (see Mama 2011; Smith 2021), I had hoped that the prominence of the ICD peace process and the visibility of some of its female participants in public life would have led to at least some availability of partial documentation. Unfortunately, that was not the case. My academic-related optimism and early-career naivety led me to realise that I had not yet fully grasped the extent to which institutional memory in post-conflict African states frequently excludes women's important political contributions.

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