

FIELDWORK ‘HEADACHES’. COMPARING FEMINIST PEACE AND CONFLICT RESEARCH IN KOSOVO AND THE DRC

“DILEMAS” EN TERRENO. UNA COMPARACIÓN DE INVESTIGACIONES FEMINISTAS SOBRE PAZ Y CONFLICTOS EN KOSOVO Y RDC

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Abstract

This paper aims to reflect upon the principal difficulties, challenges or ‘headaches’ that doing feminist research in conflict and post-conflict contexts can involve. Each of the authors has conducted a very different study. One, on the role of local women’s organizations and activists in peacebuilding; the other, on the disarmament and reintegration of combatants and the impact of this process on the reproduction of violence. While one of us is a woman, the other is a man. While one studies feminist activism, the other focuses mainly on masculinities in the military. While one has researched in Kosovo, the other has done so in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Based on these two research processes, we reflect on debates over epistemological and practical issues such as reflexivity, positionality of the researcher, access, secrecy and silence in the research process, power relations in the field and ethical dilemmas.

Resumen

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo reflexionar sobre las principales dificultades, desafíos y “quebraderos de cabeza” que puede implicar la investigación feminista en contextos de conflicto y posconflicto. Comparamos aquí nuestros respectivos trabajos de campo. Una, sobre el papel de las organizaciones locales de mujeres y las activistas en la consolidación de la paz; el otro, sobre el impacto del proceso de desarme, desmovilización y reintegración de combatientes en la reproducción de la violencia. Una es mujer, y el otro es hombre. Una estudia el activismo feminista, y el otro las masculinidades en el ejército. Una ha investigado en Kosovo, y el otro en la República Democrática del Congo. A partir de procesos de investigación tan dispares, debatimos sobre cuestiones epistemológicas y metodológicas como la reflexividad, la posicionalidad de quien investiga, el acceso, el secreto y el silencio en la investigación, las relaciones de poder en terreno y los dilemas éticos.

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Introduction

What are some of the challenges and difficulties of doing research in conflict and post-conflict spaces? Moreover, what does doing feminist research entail in conflict and post-conflict settings? How can those challenges and difficulties affect feminist research processes? How do we, as researchers, deal with general constraints, challenges and difficulties, while trying to move through and within feminist research spaces? These questions might seem very basic to some, yet they are still questions that any researcher working in post-conflict contexts should ask.

Every post-conflict environment is unique and particular, and in the same way, every research process is also an individual one. Even so, over the next few pages we wish to share not only the research processes both of us have experienced, but also the similarities and differences we have encountered while doing feminist research in two quite different post-conflict environments. By means of this critical exercise, we want to identify and reflect upon the principal difficulties, challenges or 'headaches' that doing feminist research in conflict and post-conflict contexts has involved for us. Although feminist peace researchers have reflected on the impacts, problems, resistances and opportunities that researching through feminist lenses and methods in conflict or post-conflict contexts can entail – in relation to both the research process and outcomes, and its effects at personal levels –, methodological inquiry is still under-reflected. Moreover, even if it was not under-reflected, according to feminist epistemologies, there is still a need to continuing reflecting about it.

In this paper, our aim is to reflect on the experiences of our research processes in two distant post-conflict countries. Each of us has conducted a very different study. One, on the role of local women's organizations and activists in nonviolent civil resistance and peacebuilding; the other, on the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of combatants of non-state armed groups (most of them men) and the impact of this process on the reproduction of violence in post-conflict settings. While one studies feminist activism, the other focuses mainly on masculinities in military and post-conflict societies. While both of us are white West Europeans, one of us is a woman, and the other is a man. While one has researched in Kosovo, the other has done so in North and South Kivu, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Nevertheless, and in spite of all the differences, similarities are also identifiable, as we rely on feminist research methodologies, epistemologies and ontologies, which bring us to the field of feminist peace research.

At different moments, both of us started reflecting on researching in post-conflict settings and sharing our insights with other local or international researchers in the field or at our university. We realised that we shared similar concerns, but we navigated through these concerns and difficulties differently. This paper is another step for sharing these reflective concerns, difficulties and ways of navigating through research complications. In a way, this text is a 'confessional tale' (Connolly & Reilly, 2007) and perhaps also a therapeutic exercise. We are not in any way claiming to be a path to follow. Instead, we are sharing our doubts and weaknesses, in a research exercise that we consider necessary, and that might even be helpful for other researchers. In fact, we are exposing our work, and ourselves, here. We provide an account, a reflection and an experience of doing fieldwork in a post-conflict setting, while trying to navi-

gate within and through the feminist peace research tradition in International Relations, as well as feminist perspectives and contributions to women's activism in non-violence, conflict, post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding. We reflect on the challenges and questions we encountered as white and West European researchers, male and female, in our respective fieldwork, and on our own reflexive process throughout the data collection and writing phases.

Although our research processes are quite specific, we firmly believe that most of the ideas, dilemmas and reflections presented here are common ground for most feminist research in other areas, especially in the Social Sciences. Our aim is not to offer recipes or clear assessments about what to do – or not to do – while researching, but to share our doubts and thoughts during the process. In that respect, we set out more questions than answers in the following pages. To do this, in some parts of the text we have opted to differentiate between our experiences, ways of navigating the research questions and words, in order to open the floor to a more personal and reflective space, and bring our voices into dialogue with each other.

The second section of the text examines what doing research in Kosovo and the DRC has meant for us, the initial contexts we have perceived, as well as what it has meant for us to 'do' feminist research. The third section of the paper highlights the principal challenges and difficulties we have encountered, and how we have navigated through them, locating ourselves within the feminist peace research field. Finally, we offer some brief concluding thoughts.

Researching in Kosovo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Beyond manichean dichotomies about victims and protection

The meta-narratives regarding Kosovo have principally focused on the war that broke out between 1997 and 1999 between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and Serb/Yugoslav military and paramilitary forces, the subsequent United States-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) humanitarian intervention in 1999, as well as the post-conflict and peacebuilding processes since then. However, the nonviolent civil resistance movement prior to the war, by which the Albanian population organized to confront and offer means of survival for the population under the increasing violence coming from the Serb State and paramilitary forces, has hardly been researched.

In the DRC, the outbreak of the internal armed conflict in 1996 opened a scenario of war that brought to the surface internal and regional tensions existing in that context from long before. Later, the regional war (1998-2003) provoked a process of growing militarization in the country and the region, the main cause of the reproduction of violence up to the present day. The different peace agreements and the presence since 1999 of the most expensive and numerous Peacekeeping Operations in the history of the United Nations (first MONUC, and later MONUSCO) have not solved the problems of the constant presence of armed groups, violence and insecurity in the east of the country, principally the Provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri.

In both contexts, despite the existence of some gender and feminist analysis¹, mainstream research focusing on women was often rather stereotypical and essentialist. Research into Kosovo mainly presented, on the one hand, a traditional vision of women and girls as victims, covered with scarves and needing the protection of men (Stetz, 2000). In the DRC it focused primarily² on sexual violence against women, while men were – and still are – commonly presented as either criminals or protectors, “beasts” or “heroes” (Higate, 2018, pp. 74-75). These binary categories and others such as “womenandchildren” (Butler, 2010; Enloe, 1989) or “women-victims” are social constructions, and, what is more, ones that act to naturalise forms of power and domination. As different authors argue (Barrow, 2010, p. 233; Sjoberg, 2013, p. 144), war is an institution that depends for its reproduction on gendered images of both men (combatants-protectors) and women (civil-victims). Thus, these dichotomous and essentialist differences are not neutral but have a particular origin and usefulness, a legitimizing function of the gender *status quo* (zirion landaluze, 2018b).

Going beyond those excessively simplifying, stereotyped and essentialist beliefs about the roles of women and men, the fact is that their experiences in armed conflicts are very heterogeneous. On the one hand, the experiences of men and women are very different, since both experience conflict and post-conflict in different ways (Cockburn, 2010, p. 108). They shape and are shaped by violence in these periods in very distinct ways, while at the same time the patterns of men’s sexist domination and oppression

¹ In Kosovo, some exceptions are the analyses that, in the early post-war years, offered a clear view of the patriarchal politics of both local and international power structures. See, for example: Chris Corrin (2000, 2003), Human Rights Watch (2000), Julie A. Mertus (2000), Kvinna till Kvinna (2001), Nita Luci (2002), Lesley Abdela (2004), Lynn Alice (2009) and Amnesty International (2004). And, for the DRC, almost every work by Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern (including 2009, 2012, 2016), and, also, Paul Higate (2003, 2007, 2018); Desiree Lwambo (2013), and Ingunn Bjørkhag and Morten Bøås (2014).

² As Charlotte Mertens (2019) argues, “There is something deeply disturbing about the ways in which the sexual violence in DRC has been employed and represented within global discourses” (p. 664).

of women are maintained (or increased). On the other hand, there is also a heterogeneity of experiences in and among women, just as there is in and among men.

Thus, in both contexts, women are not only passive victims. In Kosovo, women's organizations were active in the pre-war nonviolent civil resistance movement (Mujika Chao, 2020) and throughout the war, as well as increasingly in the post-war reconstruction and peacebuilding spheres (Mujika Chao, 2017a; 2017b), although they have been sidelined in formal spaces. This is also the case in the east of the DRC, where women's organizations have been very active, first during the regional conflict, and later supporting United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325, as well as working against impunity. In the DRC, without denying the intensity and scale of sexual violence, the stereotypical representation of women as victims is often employed in different – but always interested – ways by different actors whether they are institutions, researchers or journalists (Mertens, 2019 p. 666). Besides, men are not only criminals or protectors. However, the role of men as either victims or as promoters of peace, fostering a responsible masculinity and preventing violence against women is far less known, despite the paradigmatic case of Doctor Denis Mukwege, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 – along with Iraqi Yazidi activist Nadia Murad – for his work in this area. Thus, the realities of both women and men are complex and heterogeneous everywhere.

As researchers, both of us locate within International Relations (IR) and within the feminist perspectives developed in the discipline since the 1980s. For us, positivist approaches to the study of international politics, and more specifically the study of conflicts and peace, did not represent our perspectives, while postpositivist approaches, although closer to the critical visions on international politics that we were ascribing to, mainly failed to identify and apply a gender and feminist perspective on conflicts and peacebuilding. Indeed, most postpositivist approaches, which deal with power relations, social transformation and emancipation in other spheres, have been gender-blind. In our case, and paraphrasing Ann J. Tickner (2006), we both wanted to see “the linkages between the everyday lived experiences of women and the constitution and exercise of political and economic power” (p. 40) within peace and conflict scenarios. Further, we did not only want to focus on women, but on the existing gender-based power relations.

A twenty-something woman in Kosovo, a thirty-something white man in the DRC

IMC. In my research on Kosovar women's organizations I wanted to explore and problematize the role of women. While women activists were identified with those who

were active in the post-war era, many *herstories* were erased from the nonviolent civil resistance movement prior to the war, given that independence from Serbia was the imperative objective. At the same time, most *herstories* that were shared and widely known were almost exclusively Albanian, which offered only a partial version of the conflict. I was also trying to look at how local and international gender power structures shaped and featured women's organizations in contexts of conflict and peace. In Kosovo, for example, while women's organizations were trying to respond to and fit women's needs, donors did not necessarily offer the means for their projects. The mushrooming of women's organizations after the war led to the creation of hundreds of these organizations that eventually functioned, but which closed down after most international funding stopped. However, there were women's organizations that did not stop their work even if they did not have funding.

izl. In my analysis, the mushrooming of Congolese women's organizations and their exclusion from formal peacebuilding activities was also present. As I wanted to analyse the impact of militarized masculinities on the reproduction of everyday violence, I met with combatants and with representatives of national and international organizations (such as MONUSCO), but especially with representatives of local women's and human rights organizations. Being a man, my feminist reflections led me to question men's behaviours and masculinities. As Sandra Harding (1987) argues, women-related questions are not the only questions to answer in feminist research. It sometimes happens that questions that are interesting for women are about men: Why do male combatants behave so violently and especially against women? Alternatively, would the transformation of the militarised masculinities of former male combatants involved in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes help to reduce violence in post-conflict contexts?

IMC. I arrived in Kosovo for the first time in 2011. It was made clear to me on that same trip that I would not be able to 'play' or 'experiment' with methods. "Interviews are more than enough", a researcher who also worked there advised me. "As long as I do not do any harm, it will have to be enough", I told myself. Long-term ethnographic work was not an option for me. Like many other researchers working in post-conflict spaces, I had to opt for regular, short-term visits to what is called 'the field'. However, I soon learned that such brief visits also had their benefits for my research. As Annika Björkdahl and Joanna Mannergren Selimovic state (2018), these made it possible "to alternate between field research and desk research (...) to notice caveats or puzzles in collected narratives and to go back into the field context to search for answers" (p. 46). With barely any further inner debate and afraid of doing any harm, in-depth interviews were selected as the primary research method. It proved to be a method that al-

lowed me access to people's ideas, memories, reflections and thoughts, and provided the participants with their own voices and words (Jacoby, 2006). They were able to share their personal experiences within a collective project – principally that of the nonviolent civil resistance movement prior to the war. I could see how in some cases memories and discourses changed when the interviews moved from public spaces to private ones, which both I as a researcher and activists as interviewees created, once they were identified as safe spaces by them. It allowed not only the creation of safe spaces for both of us, but also a context for opening up the door of my own life outside the official realm of the research, as well as a space to mutually share and exchange life-stories, experiences and everyday-life narratives, which in turn resulted in trust-building.

izl. I have been to the DRC twice. In 2008, I spent six months in Butembo (North Kivu) working at an international Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). Later, in 2014, I went back there while I was already working on my PhD. Due to my responsibilities at the university (with 'only' one month's holiday) short-term visits were also the best option for me, although, in my case, they did not have continuity. I was urged to finish my PhD and I had to concentrate all my field research in a month and a half during summer 2014. During the process, it was tough for me to realise that I was not establishing relations of trust or accompanying people I was working with in an appropriate way. In-depth interviews were also my research method. I always tried to be very respectful and look after the process and the people involved – preparing the interview and myself, being empathetic, listening carefully, sharing thoughts, ideas and contacts that could be useful for them, etcetera. However, the sensation of being an "extractive researcher" (Pearce, 2011, p. 291), just another "digger" searching for "gold" (Marchais et al., 2020) – a western researcher eager for data –, has been one of the saddest feelings for me.

Challenges, difficulties and 'headaches'

Our perceptions as researchers on our own specific research journey – within the particularities of a doctoral dissertation –, brought us both to different dilemmas which we eventually started to define as 'headaches'. Indeed, in our interactions throughout this process, we started realizing that many of those concerns were common to other feminist researchers in Peace and Conflict Studies. These 'headaches' were some of the difficulties and challenges we encountered as researchers trying to look at gender power structures in post-conflict and peacebuilding settings. We have summarised them in this text as three principal features: first, locating our work within feminist peace research; second, our positionality as researchers in relation to, among others,

feelings of extractivism and fatigue; and, third, our own reflexive process in relation to the fieldwork encounters.

Location, domination, and identifying ourselves as feminist peace researchers

IMC. I was researching women and women's activism in a conflict setting, which meant I was also looking at violence against women in war and peace, the development of their own agency within these interlinked temporal and physical spaces, as well as their strategies of survival and resistance. I was focusing on what IR traditionally ignored until the very end of the 1980s (Tickner, 1992; Sylvester, 1994). However, was this enough to make the research feminist? How does research become feminist?

I thought I was somehow locating within feminist ontologies and epistemologies, even trying to use feminist methodologies and methods, as I was looking "well outside the normal boundaries of the IR discipline" (Tickner, 2006, p. 30) and into areas that had been "traditionally overlooked by IR" (D'Costa, 2006, p. 129). I was trying to do so by looking at and analysing the influence of global politics in everyday dynamics, especially in relation to everyday gender power relations and women's everyday lives (Ackerly et al., 2006, p. 1), as well as women's activism. I was reclaiming the presence of women as subjects, bearing in mind signified bodies, linking integrally the material and the subjective, power and agency, in order to analyse gender, gender power relations and their evolution and consequences (Castañeda, 2012, p. 237) in the specific case of Kosovo.

It was later that I realised I might also be carrying out feminist research because of the gender(ed) oppressions and injustices I was trying to focus on, as well as the truths that I wanted to bring to light, and how the holders of these truths engaged with my research. I was trying to be coherent with feminist postulates, constantly rethinking specificities of research, its contexts, its objectives and its – and my own – positionality, claiming women as objects and subjects of study, and trying to develop my research through non-discriminatory and non-heteropatriarchal logics for the interpretation of reality (Biglia, 2015, p. 10). Soon enough, however, further methodological questions emerged. Was I using a theoretically feminist-informed methodology? Semi-structured interviews were not feminist *per se*, but the focus, the context and the *modus operandi* were somehow moving my research into the feminist realm, I wanted to believe.

izl: I should add another concern to the previous ones. What does it mean to be a man researching from a feminist viewpoint? As Harding said (1987, p. 10), the male

contribution to feminist epistemology and women's emancipation, although different from the one women themselves could make, is also important. On the one hand, because the self-questioning research that men can do starts from a different place, which makes it possible to compare perspectives; on the other hand, because in certain contexts or on specific issues — for example, very masculinised ones —, research can be more difficult for women. To what extent could my contribution be interesting for feminism if it specifically focuses on a critical analysis of the experiences and interests of former combatants, mainly men, rather than responding to the experiences and interests of women? New doubts arise from this question: Would it be “to formulate qualitatively different questions” from those important for men, as Norma Blázquez (2008, p. 98) proposes feminism should do on Social Sciences? Doing such research, was I still placed in favour of women? Could it be feminist research if performed by a man and focused on the experience of other — combatant — men?

IMC. Two factors constantly influenced my research, as well as my work as a researcher. First, how would I manage my work, trying to avoid an “only getting without giving” process (Connolly & Reilly, 2007, p. 536)? Second, would I be able to research without contributing to the harm that, I perceived, had previously been done? Would I be able to “do no harm”? (Basini, 2016; Ress, 2018). In that sense, taking care of research participants and myself — both in terms of physical security and mental stability — during the whole research process was another way to connect with feminist epistemologies. A key factor for me was not to push participants towards my research. If any possible participant that I had previously approached did not respond or responded negatively, I thanked her, but I did not insist further. “Just push”, colleagues and/or other researchers told me, but it was crucial for me not to do so. I later linked such responses to fatigue, and automatically thought of the harm I could be doing when pushing participants to be interviewed (Mujika Chao et al., 2019). Interviews brought some participants to periods of time that they did want to remember, revisit and re-analyse, but this was not the case for all of them. Some of them avoided or refused to talk about certain periods of time, which I also meticulously respected. This also meant I did not reach certain key figures and voices on the socio-political scene of Kosovo during the 1990s and 2000s, which I now identify as gaps in my doctoral research. Still, I gave more value to the comfort of the participants within interviews than to a perfect doctoral dissertation.

izl: I completely agree. An idea that worried me a lot was the feelings I had and the feelings I provoked during the research process — and especially during the interviews, in which I was in front of one or several people. As Madeleine Rees (2018) proposes, “our interventions must first and foremost ensure we do not harm” (p. 127).

Looking after the people involved — including myself — has been part of the learning process. It was not only the concern regarding physical security — not putting the interviewees or myself in danger —, but the reflections and emotions that came up, which were often hard to cope with. I tried to be completely respectful in terms of the process, the questions I asked³ and the answers they gave me, but sometimes different ghosts escaped from the opened box. Once that happened, nothing was more important than to manage it the best way I could. Fortunately, it did not happen often. Besides, as time passed, I realised the impact on my own mood of what I experienced, read or heard during my research, and so I have had to confront a process of sadness and pessimism.

Another painful feeling has been the sensation of abandoning the research participants. The first time I was in the DRC, at a time when I had already been there for several months, there came a moment when I thought I was part of the context. A European NGO worker opened my eyes: “You are here with a passport, and you can go whenever you want. If things go wrong, you can buy a one-way ticket home or even your government could come here for you. You can leave but they stay. You are not from here, you are not them”. That ‘paratrooper feeling’ can also be hard to cope with in any research process. In the end, it has been an idea I have had to embrace in order to protect myself. I am not them, and they are not me. Our experiences and possibilities are quite different. For me, it has been important to be honest with them — and with myself — about that. It has been a step on the path of being aware of the position of domination I am placed in.

Extractivism, research fatigue, and its consequences

IMC. The very context and evolution of the conflict in Kosovo, as well as its consequences, influenced much of my research. The international dimension and consequences of the war and the NATO intervention brought high levels of attention to the territory, exemplified by the work carried out by hundreds of humanitarian and/or intergovernmental and international organizations, thousands of journalists, international researchers, local and international NGOs and other bodies and organizations working there. However, I believe that both the high number of researchers and the potential harm they have caused have brought, to an extent, a context that is rather closed off to current researchers.

³ For example, it was a clear rule I imposed on myself from the very beginning that I would not ask anybody about the violence they had experienced (especially sexual violence) or about the violence they had committed (particularly in the case of combatants). Although I tried to create those boundaries, I was told several stories about violence, and in those moments, I always tried to be as calm and empathetic as I could.

Most women activists, when asked about my research subject, admitted they felt “tired” of interacting with international researchers – whether journalists, MA or PhD students, researchers from international NGOs, etcetera. I identified two principal obstacles for international researchers in this context: the difficulty of meeting with or interviewing activists, on the one hand, and their automatic responses, or the repetition of tales, stories and discourses, on the other hand. First, many activists have refused to meet with international researchers, based on the previous experiences they might have had. Being, myself, identified as an international researcher caused several potential participants not to meet with me. The overall image of the ‘international researcher’ was rather negative, and I was conscious of that from the very early stages of fieldwork (Bøås, 2021). Second, after having somehow crossed that initial barrier, I started to notice that I was listening to very similar stories, narrated in a very similar tone. Many of the activists who decided to meet with me repeated their own narratives as if they had learned them by heart. I soon realised it was a consequence of repeating them in each interview they had participated in.

izl. My experience in the DRC was rather different and depended especially on the role of the people I interviewed. On the one hand, although there were some exceptions, in general, women’s organizations were ready to talk to me; they gave me other colleagues’ contacts, called them during the interview or even accompanied me across the city to meet them. I perceived a sort of political work in talking to me about the reality they are living, the lobbying work they are doing or the difficulties they are facing. United Nations’ MONUSCO personnel, on the other hand, were rather closed and distant. I met some of them but others refused to talk to me once they knew I was an academic. In the meantime, former combatants did not refuse to talk to me, probably because I was normally introduced by a local NGO or local people working with them. However, their reactions were not very open, neither. Most of them were reluctant to give explanations, seemed to feel embarrassed or guilty, and behaved apathetically. Talking to them was not in general a good experience, either for me or – I would say – for them.

IMC. I later identified that I was encountering research fatigue. Although it is a concept that receives hardly any critical discussion and relatively little attention, it is still a constant for many researchers (Clark, 2008, p. 955). I did not identify this until very late in my research. This was, after all, the general state of the people participating in the research: although most of them initially refused to participate, some later changed their minds and when I met them, they were visibly tired. As a participant once explained, some women have participated in many interviews and answered many shameful questions, and still do not know what has been done with what they

shared. "Did I ever contribute to something? I don't know". After all, most of them are tired of spending time sharing information, knowledge and their experiences, and not hearing back from researchers and what they have done.

izl. As happened to IMC in Kosovo, in the DRC most of the actors involved have spoken several times with many different foreign actors (NGOs, MONUSCO personnel, researchers and donors). Sometimes the discourse seemed like common ground, especially among women's organizations. To some extent, I find this logical taking into account that in general those organizations have a close relationship and often work together, as a network at local and regional levels. Besides, some – very few – of them also complained about the lack of feedback from previous research. "Many people come here to ask but we do not know what happens next. We have no more news from them", I was once told by the head of a women's organization in Bukavu (the capital of South Kivu Province). It was very important for me to explain to them from the very beginning the limited character of my work (a doctoral dissertation), what I was doing there and why, since I did not want to make false promises or create unfulfilled expectations. I did not want to disappoint anybody.

The dominant Western epistemology often promotes "extractive research" (Pearce, 2011, p. 291), which considers the lives and experiences of people, and the ideas and knowledge that have emerged in other parts of the world as raw material for research and the building of academic careers at Western universities (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 367). Although I do not like most of them, I am aware of the mainstream rules in academia, and of my own circumstances and possibilities as well. Even though I wanted to take care of the process, the people and the context, I was conscious of my academic, epistemic and methodological limitations and my time and money constraints. As I wrote then (zirion landaluze, 2018a):

As a Western researcher flying 8,000 kilometers to do fieldwork for a few months, it is difficult not to be extractive. I am an outside actor, eager for knowledge, who is in the area for a limited time and often in a hurry to get to the next interview. (pp. 20-21)

In those circumstances, it is quite difficult to generate shared knowledge or establish deep-rooted relationships. I preferred to keep at the forefront of my mind an intention to be honest with other people and myself and to avoid feelings of guilt.

IMC. In my case, the feeling of participants' tiredness explained above was mixed with a lack of trust towards researchers, and more specifically, international researchers. Many of them had been 'parachute researchers' (Ybarra, 2014). The gender dimensions of the conflict led many of them to analyse women's activism, and many

activist women have been repeatedly interviewed since the end of the war. This has provoked a feeling of tiredness among activists, and today, many activists refuse to be interviewed, which makes the work of later researchers, including myself, more difficult. Curiously, while research fatigue is usually identified as a barrier between first engagement and sustaining engagement over time (Way, 2013, p. 4), in my case, it was the opposite; research fatigue was palpable during initial engagements, but gradually dissolved once the initial engagement was extended. Paradoxically, in-depth interviews proved to be a way to avoid the growth of the research fatigue of participants. Trust-building, engagement with the research and finding areas of equality between researcher and participants – I would learn later –, proved crucial to this aspect, and it would be the planning and encounters around in-depth interviews that would enable these areas.

The “research encounter” was, to an extent, “actively negotiated, managed, and experienced” by participants and their own perceptions of engagement (Clark, 2008, p. 955). As I was expanding my interviews and interviewing more women, sometimes repeating interviews with women, who always kindly accepted, I realised that I was listening not only to the same ideas again and again, but to the same composition of words, pauses and breaths in the pronunciation of these ideas. It was later when I linked this with research fatigue, and as a navigating strategy to cope with the high quantity and intensity of interviews these activists had given over the years.

izl. Although I was not able to establish this kind of engaging relationship, the importance of the power relations I exercised as a researcher was also crucial for me. Nevertheless, those power relations depended on other variables too. As I wrote then, “as a male, white, European, adult, in a comfortable position, highly educated and heterosexual, I am in a paradigmatic position of power that undoubtedly affects the process and results of my research” (zirion landaluze, 2014, p. 330). In that sense, I was aware of the need to constantly reinterpret my objectivity and of being aware that the point of view from which I was looking was not neutral (Harding, 1987; Blázquez, 2008) but contaminated by my privileged situation (Spivak, 1988). During my stays in the DRC, I have been aware of the distortions created by my male gender, my white skin, my academic position, my age and even my marital status. In that respect, I consider it important to problematise the power that I exercise as a researcher both in my relational practices – especially, but not only, when conducting research, in what Edward Said (1989) called a “postcolonial field” (p. 209) – and in my analysis. This is crucial in order to avoid playing, once again, a dominant, androcentric, (neo)colonial role in the “gendered structures” (Smith, 1998, p. 68) in which I participate, among them, academia.

Critically reflecting on our fieldwork encounters

IMC. While the “fieldwork encounter” (Jacoby, 2006, p. 171) was “the basis for creating knowledge”, it depended to a large extent on how that knowledge was accumulated, employed and authored for research purposes. It was also related to how ‘we’ as researchers position ourselves in our research, and how research participants themselves see our position both in the field and in the research. Coming from academia and being a PhD researcher, most research participants positioned me within the international-local dichotomy. The ritual of the interviews would usually begin in a similar manner: we would meet at a café, ordering two *macchiatos* and finding a spot in the least busy part of the terrace. Participants themselves would usually initiate the interview process: “So, tell me about you, what do you do here? What do you want to know?” I would explain to them the background of my research carefully and in detail, after which, they would usually respond: “Which university did you say?” To which I would respond: “University of the Basque Country, in Spain”. They would usually say, laughing: “So! You are part of the fault of our situation here!” I would have to go through an explanation of the political background and situation in Spain, and after several long minutes, I would arrive at the edges of the Basque conflict. After a more or less long conversation, I would, most of the times, receive the same verdict: “you are not that international”, or, “you are not like all the other internationals”, referring to possible shared experiences in conflict contexts.

In that regard, the international-local binary would indicate a rather different dichotomy in methodological terms in my research: international was not always a foreigner or a person coming from abroad, but a vision embodied in foreigners in relation to the development of the conflict in Kosovo. I, thus, was a foreigner, but not necessarily an international. You do know what we have been through here, several participants would conclude. Coming from the Basque Country in Spain, most participants assumed I had knowledge about the principal features of common violent dynamics in conflict zones: certain details of detention processes or prison experiences, for instance, which facilitated their participation in my research. Here, understanding the positionality of women and the use of women in nationalist discourses offered them the opportunity to locate both of us in the initial phases of the socio-political developments that I was looking at. They assumed they did not need to explain what usually happened under those dynamics, since I knew ‘the basics’. As a research participant once explained to me, this offered “another degree of confidence” when talking about those subjects and/or processes.

izl. In the DRC, my positioning regarding the conflict or the actors involved was not so important. On the contrary, two other obvious variables were more decisive:

the colour of my skin and my male gender. First, as a white person, I was very visible and clearly ‘international’ – in addition to being a foreigner – which often had an impact in the way people behaved with me. A Tanzanian black man working for an international NGO – who besides speaks Swahili, a vehicular language in the eastern part of the DRC – or a Senegalese civil black man working for the MONUSCO were far less visible and closer to the local population. At the same time, the fact of being a white European academic man researching in and about the DRC brought me into confrontation with how race operates in contemporary Western academic research on Africa, especially taking into account the specific – and negative – representation the DRC often has in Western discourse, both in popular and academic narratives (Marchais et al., 2020).

Second, another important variable that positioned me, and my research, in the view of others was the fact of being a man. On the one hand, in general, women from local organizations were rather surprised and interested in talking to me and knowing why I was concerned about masculinities and violence against women or women’s human rights. I never felt they were suspicious about me. They were clear and open, very accessible and enjoyable to be with. Laughing on both sides was quite usual. On the other hand, talking to former combatants – most of them men – was clearly sex-biased. In general, the men combatants behaved more openly than the women combatants did. As Sandra Harding has said (1987) “there are some areas of male behaviour and thinking that are more accessible and easy to grasp for men researchers than for women researchers” (p. 10). She was talking about spaces located in the minds of men, perhaps easier to access from male – or *macho* – complicity, such as their bravado and their ‘feats’ or, at the same time and paradoxically, their fears, weaknesses, etcetera. Moreover, there are also other ‘physical’ spaces such as – in my fieldwork – military barracks, centres of cantonment for ex-combatants, certain bars, men’s hairdressing parlours or community decision-making sites that are more accessible to male researchers. Conversely, former female combatants were particularly evasive with me. Power relations were particularly obvious in the atmosphere. Although I tried to be particularly respectful with my attitude and questions, I felt the discomfort of some of the interviewees, who did not even look at me. We could argue – continuing with Harding’s assessment – that, in the opposite direction, there are some areas of female behaviour and thought that are less visible and accessible for male researchers.

Finally, I soon realised that other characteristics were important to some people as well. During both stays in the DRC, on the very first day of arrival different people (men) asked me the same two questions: “Are you married?”, “Are you a believer?” I

knew in advance that being a white European man working in – or researching about – conflict in the DRC would have power implications. Nevertheless, I did not expect that not fulfilling the marital or religious men-standards in that context would also be important or even disempowering in front of some people. Those anecdotes helped me to understand the complexity of the processes at stake. Intersectionality was all around, not only in the participants' reality, but also in the researcher's one.

Concluding ideas

Every research process in and on conflict settings has its own particularities. There is no single, common experience. The characteristics of each conflict area, the features of each study, and people involved within it – researcher(s) and participants – create a heterogeneity and complexity that makes it impossible to identify a common ground.

Nevertheless, we firmly believe that there are similarities, especially in relation to the challenges and doubts involved in feminist research processes in and on conflict settings. In this article, we have tried to discuss some of them through our own experience. The challenges, dilemmas or 'headaches', as we have defined them, have been particularly important during our different research processes. In the text, we have identified some features that have shaped our research, and which, we believe, may influence or characterize similar research projects as well. Amongst them we have highlighted: 1) the concern regarding what it means exactly to engage with feminist research; 2) confronting and dealing with the power relations that appear through the fieldwork and the research process; 3) the research fatigue of participants; 4) the extractive character of our academic work; 5) the importance of creating and building relationships of trust with participants; and 6) the concern regarding taking care of ourselves and research participants throughout the process.

As we have both always located our work within feminist perspectives in International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies, it has been a natural step to move towards feminist epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies, and therefore try to identify ourselves and our work, as well as our research projects and processes, as feminist. However, what exactly defines a project and a process as feminist? As we have reflected on the text, this is still an open question for both of us, although we have tried to employ different ways to move closer to this definition. Here, dealing with power relations – between researcher and participants, among others – has also been a key question. Conscious of the position of power we had in the fieldwork encounters, trying to locate ourselves and the participants within relationships of equality, trust and respect – especially from us to them – was crucial. Here, for example,

we have respected participants' wishes, reaching the point of not interviewing people who had doubts, or not asking about subjects that participants did not want to go into, although they were central for our research.

Research fatigue and the extractive character of our work are also interlinked factors within our research projects, as the extractive character that the research work and job can take is usually a principal cause of a participant's fatigue, exacerbated by the quantity of researchers focusing on a single geographical area or subject. As an antidote, we found that building relationships of trust and taking care of research participants may be central to the dissolution of that fatigue and the feeling of extraction.

We are aware that all of the dilemmas and challenges referred to are too profound and complex to be solved in this paper. However, we wanted to open up a space for sharing our research processes, or better said, our 'headaches' within our research processes. In this regard, we still have more questions than answers, as we consider that the research process in itself is a constant learning process where the researchers are continuously learning how to do research, or how to become a better researcher. In this regard, we continue doing feminist research in Peace and Conflict Studies, and we are happy that our process — of research, improvement and self-knowledge — continues. It is still a broad and uncertain path; and a beautiful and suggestive one, as well.

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