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Citation:

Julian, R and Bliesemann de Guevara, B and Redhead, R (2019) From Expert to Experiential Knowledge: Exploring the Inclusion of Local Experiences in Understanding Violence in Conflict. *Peacebuilding*, 7 (2). pp. 210-225. ISSN 2164-7259 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2019.1594572>

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# **From Expert to Experiential Knowledge: Exploring the Inclusion of Local Experiences in Understanding Violence in Conflict**

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**Word count:** 8040 article words all incl refs. Excluding 270 words in appendix and excluding 472 words of author contact and bios and abstract.

# **From Expert to Experiential Knowledge: Exploring the Inclusion of Local Experiences in Understanding Violence in Conflict**

## **Abstract**

Critical peace and conflict scholars argue that to understand fully conflict dynamics and possibilities for peace research should incorporate ‘the local’. Yet this important conceptual shift is bound by western concepts, while empirical explorations of ‘the local’ privilege outside experts over mechanisms for inclusion. This article explores how an epistemology drawing on feminist approaches to conflict analysis can help to redirect the focus from expert to experiential knowledge, thereby also demonstrating the limits of expert knowledge production on ‘the local’. In order to illustrate our arguments and suggest concrete methods of putting them into research practice, we draw on experiences of the ‘Raising Silent Voices’ project in Myanmar, which relied on feminist and arts-based methods to explore the experiential knowledge of ordinary people living amidst violent conflict in Rakhine and Kachin states.

**Keywords:** violent conflict, feminism, local knowledge, experiential knowledge, conflict analysis, arts-based methods

## **Introduction**

Knowledge production about conflict, violence and peace matters. Accepted or shared knowledge creates reality by shaping the norms that define what we think of as conflict and by framing what we look for or expect to see in conflict analyses. Critical peace and conflict studies have drawn attention to this construction of ‘truths’ and have shown how different frames and interpretations may lead to competing problematisations of violent conflict, which

differ with regard to questions about its origins, its root causes, who the perpetrators and victims of violence are, and what potential conflict solutions arise from these problematisations.<sup>1</sup> In the last two decades, different strands of research have highlighted the importance of ‘the local’<sup>2</sup> in knowledge production about conflict. In the midst of all violent conflicts there are people who carry experiential conflict knowledge as a result of their lived experience of violence. Yet while many organisations, which intervene with projects designed to address the needs of people experiencing direct and indirect violence, acknowledge the centrality of ‘the local’ for protection and conflict transformation work,<sup>3</sup> the everyday experiences of those living amidst violent conflict are not always part of the conflict analysis processes that guide these projects. Often the scale and urgency to end violence and resolve conflict favour more traditional outsider-expert analyses that quickly identify overarching

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse and Hugh Miall, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Peter Wallensteen, *Understanding Conflict Resolution*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2007); Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Roland Kostić, *Knowledge and Expertise in International Interventions: The Politics of Facts, Truth and Authenticity* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Thania Paffenholz, ‘Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: a critical assessment towards an agenda for future research’, *Third World Quarterly*, 36, no. 5 (2015): 857-874; Thania Paffenholz, ‘International peacebuilding goes local: analysing Lederach’s conflict transformation theory and its ambivalent encounter with 20 years of practice’, *Peacebuilding* 2, no. 1 (2014): 11-27; Timothy Donais, ‘Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-conflict Peacebuilding Processes’, *Peace and Change* 34, no. 1 (2009): 3-26; Severine Autesserre, ‘International Peacebuilding and the local success: assumptions and effectiveness’, *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2017): 1-19.

<sup>3</sup> Dylan Mathews, *War Prevention Works: 50 Stories of People Resolving Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford Research Group, 2001); European Centre for Conflict Prevention, *People Building Peace: 35 Inspiring Stories from Around the World* (Utrecht: European Centre for Conflict Prevention, 1999); John Paul Lederach, *Memoirs of Nepal: Reflections Across a Decade* (London: Blurb Books UK, 2015).

patterns over more time-consuming and messy analyses which include everyday experiences of those living amongst conflict.

In this article we argue that local people's experiences of conflict must be included in conflict analysis because, even in the context of time and resource constraints, these experiences enrich our understanding of conflict and improve peacebuilding and aid work. In this context, we use the notion of everyday (or everyday life) to describe the people's routine activities – assuring their livelihood, raising a family, being member of a community etc. – which in this case happen in and are shaped by sites and times of violent conflict. By experiential knowledge we mean ways of knowing, and stocks of knowledge, that are based on practice or being in a situation. It relies on listening to how those experiencing conflicts describe these knowledges. Finally, we use the adjective 'local' to include the people who are directly affected by a localised violent conflict, as combatants or civilians, but without disputing that localised violent conflicts usually have national and international causes and/or dimensions, which may not be explored fully through local experience.

We begin with an analysis of critical scholarly literature in peace and feminist studies to illuminate how the use of the category 'the local' has not led to an inclusion (beyond mere recognition) of experiential knowledge in conflict analyses. This enables us to critique the work of organisations who recognise the importance of 'the local', but their epistemic practices lead to exclusions of local people's experiences from organisational knowledge production.

We then explore how a feminist epistemology helps to cherish the value of experiential knowledges in understanding violent conflict. A key finding here is that the everyday activities of those living with violent conflict give us different, more nuanced insights into the nature and complexity of a conflict, which complement in rich ways the interpretations by outsiders.

Finally, we draw on the example of the ‘Raising Silent Voices’ research project conducted between 2016 and 2018 in Myanmar to illustrate what an inclusive methodology for conflict analysis can look like in practice.

### **‘The Local’ in Conflict Analysis and the Privileging of Expert Knowledge**

By directing the research focus away from global and national elites and processes in peace-making, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, critical peace and conflict studies have over the last two decades contributed greatly to a now almost common-sensical recognition of ‘the local’ into our thinking about conflict transformation. Different strands such as scholarly critiques of the liberal peace,<sup>4</sup> the rise of participatory analyses in development studies,<sup>5</sup> studies of civil society’s role in peace and conflict,<sup>6</sup> and approaches that seek to rebalance power in terms of bottom-up peacebuilding,<sup>7</sup> or stress the importance of listening,<sup>8</sup> have all contributed to a general acceptance that scholars and practitioners working on peace and conflict must

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Oliver Richmond, ‘Becoming Liberal, Unbecoming Liberalism: Liberal-Local Hybridity via the Everyday as a Response to the Paradoxes of Liberal Peacebuilding’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 3, no. 3 (2009): 324-44.

<sup>5</sup> David K. Leonard, ‘Social Contracts, Networks and Security in Tropical African Conflict States: An Overview’, *IDS Bulletin* 44, no. 1 (2013): 1-14.

<sup>6</sup> Thania Paffenholz, ed., *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2010), 65-78.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace* (Washington: USIP, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Tom Woodhouse and John Paul Lederach, *Adam Curle: Radical Peacemaker* (Stroud: Hawthorn Press, 2016).

recognise ‘local people’. Often, the latter are conceptualised as ‘insiders’<sup>9</sup> and thus bearers of ‘local knowledge’, which is seen as crucial to understanding causes at different scales of a violent conflict and thus finding better tailored solutions.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, although ‘the local’ is now accepted as a crucial arena for scholarly scrutiny and governance action in the field of peace and conflict, the meaning and use of the term is contested and its usefulness for bringing ‘local voices’ into conflict analysis has been argued to be limited. For one, local actors and processes, and their relevance to the dynamics of violent conflict, are identified, classified and understood differently by different actors in both academia and practice, hinting at less clarity about the role of ‘the local’ in the transformation from war to peace than the rise of the concept might suggest.<sup>11</sup> More importantly for the argument of this article, scholars have also drawn on feminist and other traditions of critique to explore ‘the local’ within a context of multiple levels of engagement, hybridity and

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<sup>9</sup> Reina C. Neufeldt, “‘Frameworkers’ and ‘Circlers’ – Exploring Assumptions in Impact Assessment”, in *Advancing Conflict Transformation: The Berghof Handbook II*, eds. B. Austin, M. Fischer and H.-J. Giessmann (Opladen and Farmington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Severine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Severine Autesserre, ‘Going Micro: Emerging and Future Peacekeeping Research’, *International Peacekeeping* 21, no. 4 (2014): 492-500.

<sup>11</sup> Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, *How to Guide to Conflict Sensitivity* (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, February 2012); Hannah Reich, *Local Ownership in Conflict Transformation Projects* (Berlin: Berghof Centre, 2006); Carolyn Hayman, ‘Local First in Peacebuilding’, *Peace Review* 25, no. 1 (2013): 17-23. For different understandings of ‘the local’ in academia, compare e.g.: Autesserre, *Peaceland*; Autesserre, ‘Going Micro’; Roger Mac Ginty, ‘Indigenous Peace-Making versus the Liberal Peace’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 43, no. 2 (2008): 139-63; Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding*; Oliver Richmond and Audra Mitchell, eds., *Hybrid Forms of Peace: From Everyday Agency to Post-Liberalism* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).



relationships to international policy.<sup>12</sup> What many of these observations and critiques of the use of the notion of ‘the local’ and related concepts amount to, is that ‘the local’ is an inherently western concept, which by its very virtue of claiming to recognise and include ‘the other’ pretends to be inclusive and non-hierarchical, while in reality reinforcing entrenched power hierarchies and forms of exclusion.<sup>13</sup> This observation is of crucial importance when it comes to the inclusion of so-called ‘local knowledge’ or ‘local voices’ into conflict analyses with the aim to make these more relevant to the contexts in which peace research and peace work take place.

In particular, ‘the local’ is positioned and defined in relation to ‘the international’, thus reflecting (neo-)colonial attitudes and reproducing hierarchical ways of imagining international politics that are embedded in the type of conflict analysis that the critical peace and conflict studies literature seeks to critique.<sup>14</sup> Equally important, who or what constitutes ‘the local’ is

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<sup>12</sup> Laura McLeod, ‘A Feminist Approach to Hybridity: Understanding Local and International Interactions in Producing Post-Conflict Gender Security’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 9, no. 1 (2015): 48-69; Nicole George, ‘Institutionalising Women, Peace and Security in the Pacific Islands: Gendering the “architecture of entitlements”?’ *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 3 (2016): 375-389; Hannah Partis-Jennings, ‘The (In)Security of Gender in Afghanistan’s Peacebuilding Project: Hybridity and Affect’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 19, no. 4 (2017): 411-425; Laura Shepherd and Caitlin Hamilton, *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in the Digital Age* (London: Routledge, 2016); Hannah Partis-Jennings ‘The ‘Third Gender’ in Afghanistan: A feminist account of hybridity as a gendered experience’ *Peacebuilding* 2019; Nicholas Lemay-Hebert and Stephanie Kappler, ‘From power-blind binaries to the intersectionality of peace: connecting feminism and critical peace and conflict studies’ *Peacebuilding* 2019

<sup>13</sup> Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, ‘Beyond Hybridity to the Politics of Scale: International Intervention and “Local” Politics’, *Development and Change* 48, no. 1 (2017): 54–77.

<sup>14</sup> Phillip Darby, ‘Recasting Western Knowledges about (Postcolonial) Security’, in *Rethinking Insecurity, War and Violence: Beyond Savage Globalisation*, eds. D. Grenfell and P. James (London: Routledge, 2009): 98-109;

defined, grouped and categorised externally and a priori. Such ‘local’ categories include, most prominently, women (of a specific locale or ethnic, religious, etc. group), youth (often understood as urban, violent, or unemployed), victims (e.g. of war atrocities, war-time sexual violence), ex-combatants, rural communities, or urban populations, which are all externally defined with no or little involvement of the thus-grouped (and often essentialised) individuals in the construction of these categories. Rather, the source of the categories are more often than not the international policy agendas they relate to and which drive not only peacebuilding planning – such as programmes for youth in peacebuilding, women-related programmes, or disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes – but also much of our scholarly production of knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, although recognising ‘the local’ has undoubtedly led to a broader range of perspectives on the dynamics of violent conflict and opportunities for peace than the sole focus on the role of states and elites, which had dominated peace and conflict studies before, the problem with the ‘local turn’ is that the *recognition* of local actors is different from their *inclusion*. In terms of the quality of conflict analyses, this is a crucial point since it means that the privilege of outsider expertise has remained largely unchallenged despite the heightened

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Philip Cunliffe, ‘Still the Spectre at the Feast: Comparisons between Peacekeeping and Imperialism in Peacekeeping Studies Today’, *International Peacekeeping* 19, no. 4 (2012): 426-42; Chandra Talpade Mohanty ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’ *Boundary 2*, Vol. 12, No. 3, On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism. (Spring - Autumn, 1984), pp. 333-358.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) on youth, peace and security; UN Women, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study in the Implementation of the Global Study on the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325* (New York: UN Women, 2015); United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre, [www.unddr.org](http://www.unddr.org) (accessed 9 June 2018).

attention to ‘the local’. On the one hand, this relates to the politics of categorising discussed above. The inclusion (as opposed to mere recognition) of local experiences and knowledge requires a challenging of the power structures which construct the relationship ‘international–local’ and the categories within which the local is conceived and constructed, because it is this construction which gives power to outsiders and experts from the so-called ‘international community’<sup>16</sup>.

On the other hand, a change from recognition to inclusion of the local must challenge experts’ ideas of what constitutes knowledge and valid ways of knowing. Driven not least by donors’ demands to evaluate projects and evidence impact,<sup>17</sup> outsider expertise that feeds into international and national aid organisations’ conflict analyses and peacebuilding strategies builds on an (implicitly or explicitly) positivist understanding of knowledge and recognised knowledge production methods. These tend to privilege quantifiable data (e.g. household surveys) or written/spoken text (e.g. interviews, focus groups) over other forms. To ensure generalisability of findings, research often involves either large numbers of participants/data, or concentrates on individuals and organisations such as village leaders or community-based organisations, whose views are taken as representative of the larger category of ‘local people’ they are seen to represent. In short, expert knowledge about the local, albeit focusing more at a micro level, still looks for the universal rather than the particular and context specific

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<sup>16</sup> Andreas T. Hirblinger and Claudia Simons, ‘The Good, the Bad, and the Powerful: Representations of the “Local” in Peacebuilding’, *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 5 (2015): 422–439; Heather L. Johnson, ‘Narrating Entanglements: Rethinking the Local/Global Divide in Ethnographic Migration Research’, *International Political Sociology* 10, no. 4 (2016): 383–397.

<sup>17</sup> Rachel Julian, ‘Is it for donors or locals? The relationship between stakeholder interests and demonstrating results in international development’, *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business* 9, no. 3 (2016): 505–27.

knowledge about conflict and peace. Stemming from the organisational necessity to come to systematised findings<sup>18</sup> that can guide action that benefits the majority of people and does no harm, situated and embodied forms of knowledge usually do not figure in these reports, or are only incorporated in the form of illustrative single-case stories aimed to bring a broader (generalizable) point to life and/or to arouse empathy in the target audience.

Our findings, from reviewing Myanmar-related conflict analysis documents available publicly or from the project partner, confirm scholarly critiques that preconceived framings of ‘the local’ by ‘outsiders’ (researchers, consultants, experts) constrain their level of engagement. Even when they recognise the importance of ‘the local’ for comprehensive and meaningful knowledge production, outsiders approach conflict analyses with ways of categorising research participants and methods that seek to find the general in the particular, which limits the inclusion of the ‘the local’ because they are not always represented by the general.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that international organisations do not aim to employ methodologies that capture local conflict dynamics as accurately as possible, while ensuring that their programmes address people’s needs and do no harm to beneficiaries. Nonetheless, in the reports that were available to us, experiential knowledge was only considered in very few cases and only to inform broader patterns and conclusions, rather than speaking to the diversity and intersectionality in conflict experience, which may provide new, additional insights.

There is thus a gap in the way conflict analysis models and methods are constructed. There is no position, language or expectation on how the direct experience of people living in

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<sup>18</sup> See for instance ActionAid, *Resource Pack on Systematization of Experiences* (The Hague: ActionAid, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix A

the midst of violent conflict can, or should, be included (rather than merely recognised) in the knowledge produced. This raises the question of what methodologies are available to capture the knowledge arising from the experience of living amidst violent conflict and feasible within the institutional context and constraints of conflict knowledge production by international peacebuilding and aid organisations.

The importance of the everyday and personal experience in understanding peace and war is well established in feminist literature,<sup>20</sup> where peace is seen as an everyday mundane process<sup>21</sup>. Feminist scholars argue for the inclusion of ‘voices’ and life stories of people who experience war and violence in international politics, whereby they also highlight the importance of women and family in understanding peace and conflict. Our methodology of inclusion, inspired by feminist epistemologies,<sup>22</sup> ensures direct involvement of local people in

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<sup>20</sup> Sara Ruddick, *Maternal thinking: Toward a politics of peace* (The Women’s Press, 1990); Elise Boulding, *Cultures of Peace: The Hidden Side of History* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Vivienne Jabri and Eleanor O’Gorman, *Women, Culture and International Relations* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1999); Jo Woodiwiss, Kate Smith, and Kelly Lockwood *Feminist Narrative Research: Opportunities and Challenges* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017); Catherine Baker, ‘Veteran masculinities and audiovisual popular music in post-conflict Croatia: a feminist aesthetic approach to the contested everyday peace’ *Peacebuilding* 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Tara Vayrynen, ‘Mundane Peace and the politics of Vulnerability: A nonsolid feminist research agenda’ *Peacebuilding* 2019; Tina Vaittinen, Amanda Donahue, Rachel Kunz, Silja Bara Omarsdottir and Sanam Roohi, ‘Care as Everyday Peacebuilding’ *Peacebuilding* 2019

<sup>22</sup> Brooke Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True. *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, ‘Making sense of violence: voices of soldiers in the Congo (DRC)’. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 46, no. 1 (2008): 57-86; Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern. ‘Fearless Fighters and Submissive Wives: Negotiating Identity among Women Soldiers in the Congo (DRC)’, *Armed Forces and Society* 39, no. 4 (2012): 711-739; Carolyn Nordstrom, ‘Global Fractures’, *Social Analysis* 52, no. 2 (2008): 71–86; Carolyn Nordstrom, ‘Women, Economy and War’, *International Review of the Red Cross* 92, no. 877 (2010): 161-176.

the collection and dissemination of experiential knowledge. This provides a basis for extending the inclusion of local ‘voices’, experiences and life stories to conflict analysis.

### **Feminist Epistemology and the Analysis of Violent Conflict: Experiential Knowledge**

A feminist epistemology asks why socially marginalised groups are absent from the design and conduct of research about them and seeks to transform those political practices that legitimate this exclusion.<sup>23</sup> This involves the inclusion of the researched in the research, revealing the power dynamics between researcher and researched and stressing the value of local knowledges or experiences.<sup>24</sup> It demands scrutiny of our own practices as scholars as well as a commitment to transformative politics.<sup>25</sup> Knowledge is understood as an intersubjective process, it is produced through encounters with others.<sup>26</sup> This means that knowledge is ‘not just “out there”, but the result of a particular engagement in a particular context as a continuous way of “becoming”’<sup>27</sup>, highlighting the crucial role the researcher-researched relationship plays in (conflict) knowledge production - a role that is usually written out of conflict analyses.

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<sup>23</sup> Marianne Janack, ‘Standpoint epistemology without the ‘standpoint’? An examination of epistemic privilege and epistemic authority’, *Hypatia* 12, no. 2 (1997): 125-139.

<sup>24</sup> Bat Ami Bar On, ‘Marginality and Epistemic Privilege’ in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. L. Alcoff and E. Potter (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 83-100.

<sup>25</sup> Daphne Patai, ‘U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?’, in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. S.B. Gluck and D. Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 137-153.

<sup>26</sup> Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, ‘But the empress has no clothes! Some awkward questions about the “missing revolution” in feminist theory’, *Feminist Theory* 1, no. 3 (2000): 261-88.

<sup>27</sup> Tine Davids and Karin Willemse, ‘Embodied engagements: Feminist ethnography at the crossing of knowledge production and representation – An introduction’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 43 (2014): 2.

The feminist approaches we draw on highlight everyday experience as crucial to knowledge. Feminist ethnographies, for instance, consider the ‘everyday’ activities of people to show the complexities of local-global relations.<sup>28</sup> They ‘listen to the unsaid’<sup>29</sup> in the everyday and produce ‘sincere and reliable knowledge’<sup>30</sup>. The feminist approach accounts for embodied knowledge: how we make sense of the world based on our own experiences in it.<sup>31</sup> While experience is universal in the sense that we all experience everyday social reality, it is also personal in that it cannot be generalised or categorised by an external actor. It incorporates what is of central importance to the person having the experience, including the perceptions, narratives, myths and relationships that surround it. In much the same way that the study of practice challenges the norms of institutionalised politics, an understanding of the importance of everyday experience challenges the dominance of the outside expert in creating knowledge about conflict, violence and peace in several ways. Inspired by these insights of feminist methodologies,<sup>32</sup> underpinning the research agenda of ‘Raising Silent Voices’ was a strong commitment to developing and valuing experiential knowledge, which re-defined what counted as ‘knowledge’ in understanding conflicts.

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<sup>28</sup> Isabel Dyck, ‘Feminist geography, the “everyday”, and local–global relations: hidden spaces of place-making’, *The Canadian Geographer* 49, no. 3 (2005): 233-43.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Dresch and Wendy James, ‘Fieldwork and the passage of time’, in *Anthropologists in a Wider World: Essays on Field Research*, eds. P. Dresch, W. James and D. Parkin (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 122-25.

<sup>30</sup> Samar Kanafani and Zina Sawaf, ‘Being, doing and knowing in the field: reflections on ethnographic practice in the Arab region’, *Contemporary Levant* 2, no. 1 (2017): 4.

<sup>31</sup> Robin Redhead, *Exercising Human Rights: Gender, Agency, and Practice* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Woodiwiss, Smith and Lockwood *Feminist Narrative Research*.

Feminist approaches provide us with at least two reasons why including everyday experiences into our analyses of violent conflict enhances understanding. Firstly, experiences cannot be categorised by group (e.g., the experience of all women), but rather need to be treated as a set of narratives from which we can learn more and which may challenge the assumptions or systematising analyses of outsiders. Thus, understanding that there are different knowledges that emerge from lived experiences, and that all these experiences have value. This also means that not all specific or personal experiences can be represented solely by community leaders or civil society representatives. Civil society and community leaders are not interest-free conduits of knowledge, but their position is already a manifestation and a potential source of the power struggles in the conflict area. This is an important insight when considering that community and civil society leaders feature prominently in conflict analysis approaches, where these actors are often taken to be able to speak on behalf of those they represent. Feminist approaches remind us that we need many experiential knowledges in order to achieve a fuller picture, not all of which can be represented by ‘local elites’.

Studying ‘ordinary people’ rather than starting with ‘local elites’ promises to unearth insights, knowledges and strategies that currently tend to remain hidden in conflict analysis which starts with outsider views. Indeed, what emerges from our research is that those who live amidst violence, seek to protect people, or create peace, are far from ‘ordinary’, but are courageous, creative and extraordinary people who have interwoven relationships and protection into their everyday lives in order to deal with the fears, insecurities and threats they face. Using a feminist conception of knowledge production opens up spaces to allow for different actors and actions to form part of the knowledge that is seen as valid in these circumstances. This may ultimately have a positive impact on everyday peace strategies, for when someone is recognised as an actor, they are empowered with the capability to act and with that comes recognition of the validity of their actions. In this idea of inclusion of local



agency and people's everyday actions, we are not following the much debated 'participatory' models, which can reproduce hierarchies of power and expertise in their own right, but rather the idea of 'capacity recognition',<sup>33</sup> which begins with the understanding that people already have agency, that their actions have value and importance in the local context, and that people's everyday experiences based on these actions make them valuable holders of experiential knowledge that gives them the capacity to act knowingly (i.e. with an awareness of what they are doing). This form of empowerment-through-inclusion raises the significance of everyday activities to more than a local matter,<sup>34</sup> and writes them into the dominant narratives and practices of peacebuilding.

Secondly, experiences are important for conflict analyses because they are likely to defy any uncritical form of universal or generalizable narrative coherence. By their virtue, experiences are diverse, producing many knowledges. Including the diversity of experiences – including past, present and future thinking – into conflict analyses, reveals how people's varied interpretations and perceptions create a set of different knowledges, which all contribute to understanding the web of conflict and potentials for peace. People living amidst violent conflict know the significance of details – that it matters what they wear, which symbols are of importance in identifying allegiances, which routes, roads and paths are safe and at which times, who is aligned with whom, and how to find safe escape routes when necessary. They see conflict and violence in their many forms, and they also know what peace looks like.

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<sup>33</sup> 'Capacity recognition' is one of the good practices of unarmed civilian protection (UCP) work that emerged from workshops organised by Nonviolent Peaceforce to capture UCP practitioners' experiences in different world regions when trying to protect other civilians from political violence.

<sup>34</sup> Dyck, 'Feminist geography, the "everyday", and local–global relations'.

Especially for work in the areas of protection and conflict transformation, such experiential micro-insights are invaluable.

This leads us to the question of how to access experiential knowledge methodologically, without reproducing the power hierarchies inherent in outsider-expert knowledge production discussed above. While ethnographic approaches seem promising as a way of knowing experiences and are now used more frequently in peacebuilding studies,<sup>35</sup> Macaspac has shown that most of this ethnographic research still revolves around the experience of researchers from the Global North, thus perpetuating the outsider-expert view on conflict at the cost of a more meaningful inclusion of local experiential knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, ethnography usually presupposes a longer-term engagement with ‘the field’ in which the ethnography takes place, thus making this methodology difficult to realise within the time and financial constraints of international organisations’ project work. Critical peace and conflict studies scholars have provided some ideas on how to foreground the centrality of local people’s knowledge and experiences (rather than that of the Northern researcher) in violent conflict and conflict transformation. These include approaches based on reflective practice,<sup>37</sup> empowerment and

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<sup>35</sup> Gearoid Millar, *An Ethnographic Approach to Peacebuilding: Understanding Local Experiences in Transitional States* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Adam Moore, *Peacebuilding in Practice: Local Experience in Two Bosnian Towns* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013); Autesserre, *Peaceland*; Autesserre, ‘Going Micro’.

<sup>36</sup> Nerve Valerio Macaspac, ‘Suspicion and Ethnographic Peace Research (Notes from a Local Researcher)’, *International Peacekeeping* 25, no. 5 (2018): 677-694.

<sup>37</sup> John Paul Lederach, Reina Neufeldt and Hal Culbertson, *Reflective Peacebuilding: A Planning, Monitoring, and Learning Toolkit* (London: International Alert, 2007).

emancipation through listening,<sup>38</sup> and patience and humility.<sup>39</sup> Lederach has used some of these approaches in his argument that some people in the midst of conflicts can become key catalysts and produce dramatic results, describing them as ‘critical yeast’, that is, people who are engaged in constant and growing ‘web-weaving’ (or building of relationships between people) to make them connected and stronger.<sup>40</sup> Ideas of reflexivity, listening, critical yeast and web-weaving all provide clues for how we can re-think peace and conflict studies in ways that give primacy to local experiences and overlap with feminist epistemology.

A shared insight is that revealing experiential knowledge requires research methods which involve trust and a recognition of the power or agency of the local everyday experience. Standard social science methods often find their limits when applied to topics that involve complex or strong experiences, emotions and/or cultural taboos and shame, which may resist objectification in language. For one, human knowledge constitutes more than just that which can be put into words, or as Polanyi writes about tacit knowledge: ‘The fact that we can possess knowledge that is unspoken is of course a common-place and so is the fact that we must know something yet unspoken before we can express it in words.’<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, health and psychology research suggests that people may find it hard to voice traumatic or tabooed experiences, especially in front of others, or that they simply lack the words to describe how

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<sup>38</sup> Woodhouse and Lederach, *Adam Curle*.

<sup>39</sup> John Paul Lederach, ‘Keynote address at Adam Curle’ (Centenary Conference, Bradford University 2016).

<sup>40</sup> John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Lederach, *Memoirs of Nepal*.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Polanyi, ‘Sense-giving and Sense-reading’, *Philosophy* 42, no. 162 (1967): 306; cf. also Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966).

an experience makes them feel, to make the unheard and invisible heard.<sup>42</sup> Sexual violence, torture and other common conflict-related experiences are prone to fall into this category, but also situations that do not constitute an unspeakable issue in one culture (e.g. that of the aid worker) may resist direct reporting in the context of different cultural conventions and norms.<sup>43</sup> Methods to reveal experiential knowledge thus ideally need to create safe space for sharing and provide tools that empower people to do so.<sup>44</sup>

Exploring experiential knowledge also involves revealing and working to mitigate power relations between researcher and researched, since the use of methods that do not challenge power would risk perpetuating the norms created by ‘external experts’ and encourage local people to ‘just tell you what they think you want to know’. Therefore, overcoming the shortfalls of outsider/expert methods is the task of studies that try to include experiential knowledges of ordinary people living amidst violent conflict. In ‘Raising Silent Voices’ we develop a methodology that achieves inclusion. It is to this we will now turn.

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<sup>42</sup> Marilyns Guillemin, ‘Understanding Illness: Using Drawings as a Research Method’, *Qualitative Health Research* 14, no. 2 (2004): 272-289; Louis Tinnin, ‘Biological Processes in Nonverbal Communication and Their Role in the Making and Interpretation of Art’, *American Journal of Art Therapy* 29 (1990): 9-13.

<sup>43</sup> An example discussed in the aforementioned UCP workshops organised by NP is the under-reporting of violent incidence in refugee and IDP camps in the Middle East due to the shame male heads of family feel vis-a-vis their inability to protect their families.

<sup>44</sup> This includes recognising the risk of re-traumatisation by re-living experiences. In the next section we explain the steps taken during our ‘Raising Silent Voices’ project to give control to the people sharing their experiences in order to reduce the risk.

## **Applying an Experiential Knowledge Methodology to Violent Conflict in Myanmar**

The 'Raising Silent Voices' is an Arts and Humanities Research Council UK (AHRC) project, funded under the AHRC's Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research (PaCCS) programme. Its project partner is the Myanmar office of Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), an international non-profit organisation working 'to promote and implement unarmed civilian protection as a tool for reducing violence and protecting civilians in situations of violent conflict'.<sup>45</sup> One of the project's main objectives is to explore how local experiential knowledge can be accessed and incorporated into the conflict analysis and protection work of its partner organisation. Our interest as researchers is in understanding the way in which the roles and tasks of civilians who protect other civilians are influenced by their everyday life and experiences, and how they use their experiential knowledge in their community and protection work. Building on Rachel Julian's previous work with Nonviolent Peaceforce, we know that civilian peacekeepers hold knowledge which is not captured in 'normal reporting mechanisms'.

Our methodology investigating this experiencing knowledge challenges the conventional researcher-researched relationship because it moves the 'expert' role to include those who live in, and experience, conflict and violence. Our approach to inclusion is understanding it is the local people's choice to share their experiences, and it is the local people's direct involvement, rather than being represented, which defines it as inclusive. We begin with listening to local people and reflecting back to them their stories so they can analyse their own practice. This form of experiential knowledge production can then feed into expert knowledges increasing the rigor and efficacy of conflict analysis.

This paper shows how we explored three different ways through which to turn the general principles of this research into research practice. Firstly, the involvement of Burmese research associates throughout the design and activity of the fieldwork; secondly, conversations with

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<sup>45</sup> Nonviolent Peaceforce website: <http://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/> (accessed 9 June 2018).

Yangon-based artists and peace activists as a ‘different’ initial entry point to conflict knowledges; and thirdly, the use of arts-based workshops as a sensitive and non-intrusive method to access experiential knowledge of ordinary people living in two violent conflict areas of Myanmar.

### ***Working with Burmese Research Associates***

Our first research strategy was to work with Burmese research associates. Beyond practical necessity, there was a strong epistemological reason for our choice to work closely with Burmese research associates, since we hoped that their involvement would help challenge the power relationships that exist in the collection of information that creates knowledges. The practical reasons were the need for translation and (cultural) interpretation given our lack of Burmese language knowledge; time and budget constraints both of our own research project and of our partner organisation Nonviolent Peaceforce; and most importantly Myanmar authorities’ access restrictions for foreigners to the conflict zones we were interested in. The three persons (S, B and R) we worked with in this project were initially contacted through personal networks of our core research team in an organic and iterative manner. All three live in Yangon but come from different parts of Myanmar: S is a female Arakanese Buddhist entrepreneur from Rakhine state in western Myanmar, B a female artist from Karen state in the southeast bordering Thailand, and R identifies as a male Christian of Kachin ethnicity from Northern Shan state on the border with China. All three areas of origin are conflict zones, and Kachin and Rakhine state also constituted the two areas in addition to Yangon where our research took place.

S, B and R’s initial role was to facilitate our research conversations with artists and peace activists in Yangon. But through discussion and identification of shared values in the objectives of the research our initial facilitators soon became partners in the research and we

built more long-standing friendships with them. The involvement of local people as part of the researcher team in collecting data is not unproblematic. As Macaspac has shown, despite their cultural understanding and language familiarity, local researchers may not be seen as ‘neutral’, and their interrogations may create risks for them and turn them into objects of suspicion.<sup>46</sup> Aware of these risks, we worked together to ensure their safety, and the safety of research participants. The three Burmese research associates brought an insider understanding of the places, cultures and histories our research addressed, a deep care about people which was visible in their respective own charitable and activist work, and an existing commitment to understanding more about conflict, violence and peace that arose out of their own interest in, and family experiences with, violent conflict. By working with S, B and R, we co-created the drawing workshop method in a culturally acceptable (if in part a little unusual) way enabling them to express and share their experiences. The implementation of our drawing workshops, by the Myanmar researchers (the international researchers chose not to attend the workshops) helped challenge the power hierarchies between researchers and researched, and showed that is possible to produce ‘sincere and reliable knowledge’ in ‘local-local’ conversations.

To achieve this co-design of the drawing workshops, we deliberately tried not to control the process. The Myanmar researchers had the decision-making roles in the arts workshops. They chose the venue and appropriate levels of staffing for logistics and cooking, contacted potential participants and arranged travel, and had all communication with the participants. The researchers from the UK and USA each made a video about themselves and their life stories, which were translated and shown at each workshop. We had an ‘always available’ communication approach using email, WhatsApp and social media to provide support and advice where needed and wanted, but without aiming to control or steer the research process

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<sup>46</sup> Macaspac, ‘Suspicion and Ethnographic Peace Research’.

from afar. We also tried to give the Myanmar researchers the budget responsibility for the workshops but they declined, so we managed the overall accounts based on their good bookkeeping. In addition to the actual workshops, we developed friendships which includes sharing aspects of our daily lives, offering support to challenges beyond the project and continuing to meet when travel plans meant we could overlap.<sup>47</sup>

### *Choosing a Non-standard Entry Point to the Field*

Our second research strategy was to choose an entry point for our exploratory conversations that would not fall into the trap of outsider experts' preconceived (social-scientific or other) categories. To this effect, rather than visit international NGOs, government officials or academics, we started our research in Myanmar by visiting art galleries, monks, former political prisoners, small businesses, film makers and musicians in Yangon. We had conversations with them about their lives and how they understood the conflicts and peace process in their country. Our conversation partners talked about the transition from military rule (and in the case of an older man even British colonial rule) to the current democracy, and both the opportunities and problems that emerged from it, what they had learned, and how their experiential knowledge informed their actions now. Although these persons were in some ways the city elite in cosmopolitan Yangon, their insights into how their own knowledge about conflicts and peace in Myanmar had been formed demonstrated the diversity of understandings and knowledges about the conflicts.

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<sup>47</sup> While overall the collaboration between our western team and the Burmese research associates worked well, the process was not without frictions and occasional misunderstandings. We are currently working on two publications which are intended to give voice to the different parties to this process and reflect on the potentials and limits of this type of research collaboration.



From these open-ended conversations we realised that some ideas re-occurred, for example, challenges of the changing identity of the majority Burman population group as an ‘ethnic’ group, and the lack of self-identification as Burman, which contrasted with conflict analyses that conceptualise the Burmans as the largest among over 120 ethnic groups in the country. Another reoccurring insight was the complexity of identity in Rakhine state which stands in contrast to some outsider analyses which tend to concentrate on a simplified antagonism between Buddhist Arakanese and Muslim Rohingya as the major conflict line. These initial conversations showed the experiences of people living in and coming from different parts of Myanmar would reveal important nuances and insights about conflicts and peace. Examples of other topics that were brought up as part of understanding the conflicts were i) the persecution of IDPs including being isolated and cut off, moved between camps, lacking education, and high levels of fear, ii) the constitution, iii) the limited education system including how it is uncritical and not available equally to everyone, iv) the treatment of political prisoners, and v) the lack of clear and open communications, and the extent to which many are still not aware of the conflicts and violence in other parts of the country.<sup>48</sup>

The stories from the personal experiences provide insights into the complexity of the relationship between identity, politics, social structures and violent conflicts in Myanmar and conflicts driven by narratives that are familial, generational, political, social and personal. The personal transformations that people experienced as they challenged the antagonising narratives that they had previously internalised were highly significant in forming their political and social views, which in turn informed their actions for positive change.

### ***Using an Arts-based Method to Explore Peoples’ Experiences***

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<sup>48</sup> These topics are explored more fully in our presentations and papers about the findings, and are included here as examples of how the local knowledges produced a range of influences on the conflicts.

Our third research strategy consisted of two drawing workshops in Myitkyina (Kachin) and Mrauk U (Rakhine), with participants from a variety of ethnic groups in Kachin and Rakhine states. The co-designed arts workshops were for those experiencing violent conflict where they would have the time, space and support to communicate, through metaphor-centred drawing, their experiences and life stories, how they saw the conflicts, and their ideas of what peace would be like for them, their families and communities.

The arts workshops were residential, and inspired by DrawingOut, a method developed in health-related research of minority groups.<sup>49</sup> DrawingOut uses metaphor-centred drawing as a way to prompt and elicit participants' ideas and stories and is able to mitigate the limits and disadvantages of standard data collection methods. The method works without preconceived frames and categories, and allows people to express experiences that might reject objectification in language. Metaphors are central to this method as they allow for the use of tangible imagery (e.g., things, animals, persons, or situations) to express something intangible such as feelings or thoughts. The three-day workshops in Kachin and Rakhine states allowed time to create safe space and trust for discussion and using arts enabled participants to control the speed, timescale, and boundary of their stories, thereby reducing as much as possible pressures to re-visit traumatic experiences. The workshops included spaces where participants could step outside the drawing activities and sit quietly or talk with others.

Our drawing method helped shift the starting-point of analysis from concepts and categories to the meanderings of lived experience. The feedback suggests, for instance, that the workshops enabled an equality of participants and their stories during the workshop.

For example, about the Rakhine workshop:

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<sup>49</sup> Sofia Gameiro, Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Alida Payson and Elisabeth El Refaie, 'DrawingOut - An innovative drawing workshop method to support the generation and dissemination of research findings', *PLoS ONE* 13(9) (2018): e0203197.

In Rakhine, the majority tribe [Arakanese Buddhists] could listen to minority tribe's [Mro] story, and also the educated man (a lawyer) had time to listen to very poor villagers of the Chin-Rakhine sub-tribe from the mountain – they had a chance to listen to each other, it was great and very interesting for the participants.<sup>50</sup>

B also reported the following workshop conversation, which hints at the workshop as a positive experience for participants beyond the immediate research aims, so research through arts is a potentially more respectful way of engaging with 'the local':

I want to talk about something that really pleased me. There was a participant, a Christian from a very small minority group who is a Christian priest who works at a church. Recently there was a cyclone [in Rakhine], it caused flood and that destroyed his crop of betel, all the trees were gone, he had no money. He had some children schooling in the city who called him for some money, and his wife was complaining to him as well about the lack of money. He was very unhappy [...] at home. During the workshop in Rakhine, there was background music, and the man commented: "The first day I was boiling, they second day I became stable, now I am calm. I really liked the music while I was drawing".<sup>51</sup>

Although the workshops had not been intended to provide a therapeutic space for participants – after all none of the team members were qualified to do any form of counselling – this story indicates how research methodologies can play a role in providing a space for

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<sup>50</sup> Skype conversation with B, research associate and workshop facilitator for Raising Silent Voices, 15 July 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

people to actually ‘raise their voice’. A Kachin workshop participant confirmed this when saying in a group discussion of the artwork:

Let me speak in Jin Phaw Language. I had many things that I was afraid of, because of family, because of environment, because of war. So many things that I am afraid of. I fully participated in yesterday’s discussion and what I reflected myself was that I had never had a chance to express things inside my mind. Now I have got the chance to express and it makes me feel something, I feel I have got something [positive].<sup>52</sup>

In this sense, the arts-based workshops and opportunities to realise tacit knowledge and bring it into a tangible form through drawing did seem to be of benefit to at least some participants. Not least, these experiences also had a profound effect on our local research associates, with B voicing a strong desire to become a healer, using art to help communities in her country.<sup>53</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have argued that it is both desirable and possible to include the experiential knowledge of people living their daily lives amidst violence into understandings of conflicts. We first discussed that, despite the recognition of the importance of ‘the local’ and ‘the everyday’ in critical peace and conflict studies, the experiential knowledge of those people who live in the midst of violent conflict has been largely excluded. Far from this being a conscious disregard for local experiential knowledge, the demands of western academia and dominant

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<sup>52</sup> Male participant, drawing workshop in Kachin state, 25-27 May 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Skype conversation with B, research associate and workshop facilitator for Raising Silent Voices, 15 July 2017.

ideas about objective and scientific truths predicated by the demands of ‘white researchers’, whose experiences remain a benchmark, have contributed to this.<sup>54</sup>

In the second part of this article, we have drawn on feminist approaches and epistemologies to argue that the inclusion of local experiential knowledge is desirable. There are three main points. The first is that an inclusion of lived experiences helps us avoid essentialising categorisations of ‘local people’ into specific groups or types of ‘locals’. Secondly, a concentration on ‘local elites’, such as community or civil society leaders, bears the danger of privileging their representations at the potential cost of the experiences and aspirations of those whose voices are silenced by the violence. And thirdly, we have highlighted that a focus on the everyday experiences of local people helps reveal the ‘small things’ that may be crucial in navigating violence and building peace, and which are best accessed through explorations of lived experiences. We acknowledge that critical peace and conflict scholars have developed ideas of how to incorporate feminist approaches to power, experience and knowledge creation, for instance, by using ‘collaborative and practice-based inquiry’ to produce knowledge ‘in dialogue with’ beneficiaries.<sup>55</sup> The more far-reaching approach we are suggesting here is that, rather than being beneficiaries of a project, ordinary people living amidst violent conflict may be key actors whose manifold, sometimes contradictory experiential knowledges need to be accessed in order to inform meaningful bottom-up strategies for protection from violence.

In the last section of the article we have then tried to demonstrate that accessing local experiential knowledge is possible even where time and resources are limited. Drawing on

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<sup>54</sup> Macaspac, ‘Suspicion and Ethnographic Peace Research’.

<sup>55</sup> Philipp Lottholz, ‘Critiquing Anthropological Imagination in Peace and Conflict Studies: From Empiricist Positivism to a Dialogical Approach in Ethnographic Peace Research’, *International Peacekeeping*, online first (18 July 2017), DOI: 10.1080/13533312.2017.1350576.

feminist epistemology and principles of trustfulness and empowerment in research relationships for the design of our research we have given three examples of what such methods could look like and which kinds of insights can be gained from them – not to substitute, but to complement more structural analyses. The feminist and critical peace studies literatures cited throughout this article provide many more ideas of how experiential knowledge could be brought into conflict analyses and to what benefit. For all these methods, the link between trust and what can be known is crucial. Our own research experience is that conversational and arts-based approaches such as (but by no means limited to) our drawing workshops, in conjunction with local research collaborations in which outsider researchers are prepared and willing to let go of the control over the data collection process, seem particularly well suited to create the trustful space needed to explore the experiential side of our knowing even in rather short-term encounters between researchers and researched. We hope that our insights and experiences encourage others to keep exploring the range of possibilities for how to shift from expert to experiential knowledge in understanding violence in conflict.

### **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) under Grant AH/N008464/1. We are grateful to the guest editors of this special issue, Dr. Laura McLeod and Dr. Maria O'Reilly, to 'Raising Silent Voices' project researcher Dr. Ellen Furnari, and to two thorough and constructive peer-reviewers for their very helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Appendix A

We reviewed the following reports: Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, *Towards a peaceful, fair and prosperous future for the people of Rakhine: Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State* (Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, August 2017); Burma News International (BNI), *Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process: A Reference Guide*, several annual editions (Chiang Mai, Thailand: BNI, 2013-2017); Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS), *Building Relationships across Divides: Peace and Conflict Analysis of Kachin State, 2016* (Siem Reap, Cambodia: CPCS, 2016); Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS), *Listening to Communities – Karen (Kayin) State, Myanmar* (Siem Reap, Cambodia: CPCS, 2014); Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS), *We want genuine peace: Voices of communities from Myanmar's ceasefire areas* (Siem Reap, Cambodia: CPCS 2016); Durable Peace Programme Consortium, *Durable Peace Programme Baseline Report* (Yangon: Oxfam, June 2016); Stephen Gray and Josefine Roos, *Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar: Risks and Opportunities for International Assistance* (Adapt Research and Consulting, April 2014); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Myanmar: A New Muslim Insurgency in Rakhine State*, Report 283 (Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group: 2016); International Crisis Group (ICG), *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, Report 290 (Yangon/Brussels: International Crisis Group: 2017); Nonviolent Peaceforce, *Conflict Analysis Kayin State* (non-public document, Yangon: Nonviolent Peaceforce, 2014); Relief Action Network for IDP and Refugee (RANIR), *Community-led Peacebuilding in Kachin State: Findings and Recommendations* (Laiza, Kachin State: RANIR, 2016); Josefine Roos, *Conflict Assessment in Rakhine State* (consultancy report for anonymous organisations, February/March 2013); Saferworld, *A Community-led Approach to Conflict Sensitivity in Myanmar* (London: Saferworld, 2016); The Border Consortium, *Protection and Security Concerns in South East Burma/Myanmar* (Bangkok: The Border Consortium, 2014).