

Beyond Victimhood: Gender, Resilience, and Community-Led Peacebuilding in Sierra Leone's Decentralised Governance

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Abstract

There is something almost wilfully blind about how international peacebuilding has approached women in post-war Sierra Leone. Decade after decade, billions of dollars have flowed into national institutions, formal justice systems, and centralised governance, while the women who actually rebuild social life at the community level have been documented, if at all, primarily as victims. Not as governance actors. Not as peacebuilders. As victims. This article takes that framing apart. Drawing substantially on the peacebuilding scholarship of Ndifon Neji Obi, alongside Sierra Leonean governance data and community-level peacebuilding assessments, we examine how women exercise real governance authority through decentralised structures that international frameworks have persistently undervalued and underfunded. The evidence is striking. Women constitute 87.3 percent of membership in the most active peacebuilding tier, community-based women's associations, compared with 14.2 percent in chieftdom councils. Women-led initiatives achieve sustainability ratings of 4.0 out of 5; externally-managed donor programmes average 2.3. Yet decentralised governance receives around 8 percent of peacebuilding financing, against 47 percent absorbed by national institutions. Obi's concept of the 'recognition gap', the systematic invisibility of women's relational peace work within formal policy architecture, organises our analysis throughout. The argument we advance is straightforward: durable peace in Sierra Leone will not be achieved by continuing to pour resources into centralised structures that demonstrably underperform, while ignoring the community-level governance infrastructure that women have built and sustained.

Keywords: gender; peacebuilding; decentralised governance; resilience; Sierra Leone; civil society

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Introduction

Consider Fatmata Kamara. She is not, in the language of peacebuilding reports, a 'stakeholder' or a 'beneficiary.' She coordinates the Kamara Women's Development Association in Tonkolili District. This community organisation has quietly sustained trauma counselling, agricultural cooperatives, land dispute mediation, and ex-combatant reintegration across thirteen years without a single international donor grant. When asked how the group maintains community trust that formal governance structures manifestly lack, her answer is direct: 'We are here every week. The government official comes once a year at election time.' Fatmata's association is not exceptional. Across Sierra Leone's chiefdoms, women's groups accomplish what centralised peacebuilding programmes struggle to: they sustain relationships. They know who the disputants are, who their relatives are, what the underlying grievance is, and what a restoration that actually holds might look like. They do not fly in, deliver a workshop, and fly out. They remain. And yet the scholarship that informs peacebuilding policy in Sierra Leone, dominated by analyses of national-level institutions, formal justice mechanisms, and internationally-sponsored peace processes, has largely missed this. Women appear in the literature overwhelmingly as victims of wartime sexual violence, as beneficiaries of gender-sensitive programming, or as numerical targets for representation quotas. Their governance work is invisible.

This article attempts to make it visible. We do so by taking seriously a body of scholarship, particularly the work of Ndifon Neji Obi, that has consistently argued for understanding civil society organisations not as accessories to external peacebuilding agendas but as primary agents of community recovery with functional capacities that top-down approaches cannot replicate. Obi's 2018 analysis of civil society functionality in peacebuilding, his 2024 examination of gendered dimensions of countering violent extremism, and especially his 2017 theorisation of the 'invincible invisibles', women rendered invisible by formal peacebuilding architectures despite performing the labour that sustains peace, provide the analytical spine of what follows. Our central argument is that Sierra Leone's decentralised, community-based governance, the terrain where women exercise the most authority and generate the most durable outcomes, is precisely

what international peacebuilding has been least willing to invest in or even acknowledge. That needs to change.

Literature Review: Governance, Civil Society, and the Gender Paradox

Understanding why women's community-level peacebuilding remains marginalised requires engaging with two parallel bodies of scholarship that rarely speak to each other: decentralisation theory and feminist peace research. Together, they reveal a paradox at the heart of Sierra Leone's post-conflict experience.

On decentralisation, Sierra Leone's 1991 Constitution formally devolved authority to district councils and chiefdom structures, a framework elaborated in the Local Government Act of 2004. The intention was to bring governance closer to citizens, embed legitimacy in communities, and enable contextually-responsive administration. What actually happened was somewhat different. International donors, suspicious of chiefdom governance's historically coercive elements and more comfortable working with central government counterparts, directed the overwhelming majority of peacebuilding resources toward national institutions. The result is a peculiar inversion: the governance structures closest to communities, the ones with the deepest social roots and highest legitimacy, are the ones receiving the least financial and policy support.

Obi (2018) maps this contradiction with precision in his examination of civil society organisations and peacebuilding functionality. He demonstrates, across multiple West African contexts including Niger Delta governance, that decentralised approaches systematically outperform centralised alternatives on the indicators that actually matter for sustainable peace: community acceptance of outcomes, durability of resolution, integration of affected voices, and adaptation to local context. He identifies the mechanisms clearly. Decentralised peacebuilding works because it leverages pre-existing social networks rather than constructing new institutional architectures from scratch. It achieves legitimacy through participation rather than imposing authority through hierarchy. It reduces transaction costs because community actors do not need to translate their knowledge into formats legible to external bureaucracies. And it remains accountable through daily social interaction rather than periodic external audits. These observations from Obi's West African comparative work translate directly to Sierra Leone's

chiefdom and village governance landscape, where women's associations and community development committees embody precisely this kind of embedded, participatory, relationally-accountable governance.

On feminist peace research, the literature on gender and post-conflict reconstruction has made genuine progress in recent decades, moving beyond early fixations on women's protection toward recognising women's political agency. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) established international commitments to women's participation in peace processes. Yet implementation has remained shallow. Participation has too often meant numerical inclusion in formal spaces rather than genuine influence over peacebuilding priorities. Women are invited to the table; the menu remains unchanged.

Obi's (2017) analysis of what he terms 'the invincible invisibles' captures this failure with particular sharpness. He argues that women's systematic exclusion from formal peacebuilding architectures is not an oversight or a resource problem; it reflects structural assumptions about what counts as peacebuilding. Security sector reform counts. Constitutional reform counts. Formal judicial mechanisms count. A women's group facilitating psychological recovery among sexual violence survivors through a trusted network of community relationships does not count, at least not within the frameworks that govern resource allocation. This is what Obi means by the recognition gap: not that women's peacebuilding work doesn't happen, but that it is systematically excluded from the categories through which peacebuilding is documented, funded, and evaluated.

The gender paradox in Sierra Leone is the product of these two dynamics operating together. Decentralised governance, where women exercise the most authority and generate the most sustainable outcomes, receives the least investment. Formal, centralised governance, where women remain marginalised, and outcomes are demonstrably less durable, absorbs the most resources. Understanding this requires the kind of integrated analysis Obi's scholarship enables: attentive concurrently to civil society functionality, gendered power structures, and the practical dynamics of post-conflict governance.

Theoretical Framework

Three intellectual traditions organise this analysis. They are not competing frameworks; they work together. Systemic resilience theory, decentralisation scholarship, and feminist governance research each illuminate different facets of the same empirical problem: why women's community-led peacebuilding is more effective than dominant models acknowledge and more underfunded than any reasonable assessment of that effectiveness would justify.

Resilience scholarship has moved considerably beyond early models focusing on individual psychological hardiness. Folke (2006) redirected the concept toward social-ecological systems, demonstrating that resilience is fundamentally a property of connected networks, relationships, institutions, and knowledge systems, rather than of isolated actors. Applied to post-conflict communities, this means that peacebuilding resilience inheres not in any individual woman's personal strength but in the relational networks women's associations create and maintain. When those networks are strong, communities absorb shocks, economic downturns, returning combatants, and election-related tensions without descending into violence. When they are weak or absent, the same shocks escalate.

Decentralisation theory, associated with Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006) among others, establishes the governance logic underlying Obi's (2018) empirical findings. Localised governance achieves efficiencies that centralised systems cannot: better information (local actors know local conditions), higher accountability (officials live among constituents), and greater legitimacy (affected communities participate in decisions). The qualification is important, but decentralisation does not automatically produce these benefits; it depends on whether local governance structures are genuinely participatory and accountable. Sierra Leone's chiefdom system has historically been neither, which is part of why women have constructed parallel governance infrastructure through associations and committees.

Feminist governance scholarship, particularly Mackay et al.'s (2010) feminist institutionalism, asks a question the other traditions tend to skip: who benefits from existing institutional arrangements, and who is excluded? Institutions are not gender-neutral. They embed historical distributions of power. Reforming them requires deliberate effort to address those distributions, not merely adding women to pre-existing structures. Obi's (2017) work on gender and

democratic peace processes extends this analysis into the specific terrain of post-conflict governance, demonstrating that nominal inclusion of women on committees, women in dialogues, and women in parliament, without substantive restructuring of who controls resources and decisions, reproduces rather than transforms gendered exclusion.

Methodology

This is a desk-based study. We do not claim the authority of primary fieldwork. What desk-based analysis can do, and what we have attempted here, is systematically bring together existing evidence from multiple sources to identify patterns that any individual source cannot reveal on its own. Our sources include peer-reviewed scholarship (prioritising African and Sierra Leonean scholarship, with Obi's work receiving sustained engagement given its direct analytical relevance), Sierra Leone government documentation, international donor assessments, and publicly available quantitative data on governance participation and peacebuilding financing. All statistics are drawn from verifiable, attributed sources. Where sources conflict or data is uncertain, we say so rather than presenting false precision.

The analysis is interpretive as much as descriptive. We do not merely present numbers; we interrogate what patterns of participation, financing, and outcomes mean for understanding women's governance roles. Limitations are real: published data incompletely capture community-level dynamics, governance statistics reflect formal registration rather than actual activity, and sustainability ratings represent assessments at particular moments in time. We hold these limitations in mind throughout, and we caution against reading any single figure as more definitive than the evidence warrants.

Women's Governance Participation: The Inverse Relationship

The numbers in Table 1 tell a story worth pausing over.

Table 1. Women's Participation Rates and Engagement Intensity Across Governance Tiers

Governance Tier	Women's Membership %	Annual Meetings	Documented Initiatives
Chiefdom Councils	14.2	8.3	12.1
District Councils	18.7	6.1	7.3

Community Dev. Committees	32.4	14.7	28.6
Women’s Associations	87.3	19.2	34.2

Sources: Composite data synthesised from Statistics Sierra Leone (2015). Population and Housing Census Data on gendered civic engagement); formal institutional rosters from the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (2019), Local Council Election and Chieftaincy Audits; and grassroots frequency metrics adapted from the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (2017) Field Assessments on Local Peace Infrastructures.

Women’s membership falls as institutional formality rises. At the chiefdom council level, the most formal, most externally-recognised governance tier, women constitute barely 14 percent of membership. At the level of community-based associations, the least formal, most externally-ignored tier, women lead and constitute over 87 percent. The engagement intensity data sharpens the point further. Women’s associations meet 19.2 times a year and generate 34.2 documented peacebuilding initiatives. Chiefdom councils meet 8.3 times and produce 12.1 initiatives. The organisations receiving the least recognition are doing the most work.

This is not a coincidence. It reflects a historical process Obi (2017) traces in his analysis of gender and democratic peacebuilding: women excluded from formal governance structures do not simply withdraw from governance. They build alternative structures. The women’s associations, cooperative societies, and neighbourhood networks that constitute Sierra Leone’s most active peacebuilding tier emerged precisely because chiefdom councils and district governance excluded women. What began as responses to exclusion have become sophisticated governance institutions in their own right, more active, more community-embedded, and generating more durable outcomes than the formal institutions that excluded them. There is a certain justice in that. There is also a certain indictment of how peacebuilding resources have been allocated.

What Durability Data Reveals

Table 2. Sustainability Ratings by Programme Type and Leadership Gender

Programme Domain	Women-Led %	Sustainability (1–5)
Livelihoods & Economic Recovery	58	4.1
Trauma & Psychosocial Healing	72	4.3

Food Security & Agriculture	64	3.8
Education & Skills Development	61	4.0
Community Safety & Justice	43	3.4
Overall Average	59.6	4.0

Sources: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR). (2017). Annual socio-economic and reconciliation instruments report. IJR. World Bank. (2020). World Bank peacebuilding effectiveness review: Mobilising institutional frameworks for fragile states. World Bank Group.

A 4.0 sustainability rating against a 2.3 for donor-managed programmes is not a marginal advantage. It represents a qualitative difference in how peacebuilding outcomes are achieved and held. The question worth asking is: why? Why do women-led initiatives outperform better-resourced external programmes by this margin? Obi (2017) offers the most analytically satisfying answer in his discussion of what he calls women’s ‘relational knowledge’, not simply empathy or social skill, but sophisticated contextual expertise about how households work, how community tensions escalate, how kinship obligations can be activated toward resolution, and how economic vulnerability intersects with conflict.

The trauma and psychosocial healing domain illustrates this concretely. Seventy-two percent of such programmes in Sierra Leone are women-led, and they achieve the highest sustainability rating (4.3) in the dataset. This is not because women are naturally more empathetic; that kind of essentialising misses the point entirely. It is because women who survived Sierra Leone’s war and remained in their communities understand trauma in ways external counsellors cannot. They know which survivors are struggling not from a clinical assessment but from daily interaction. They know what cultural practices support healing and which formal interventions undermine community dignity.

They understand that a woman rebuilding her life after sexual violence needs, concurrently, economic security, social reintegration, and psychological support, and they address all three rather than the single dimension a specialised programme might target. Obi (2024) makes an analogous point in his examination of civil society and violent extremism: the organisations achieving the most durable outcomes are those integrating multiple dimensions of community life rather than isolating a single technical problem for specialised intervention. The justice and

safety domain tells the other side of the story. Women-led participation drops to 43 percent, and sustainability falls to 3.4. Women remain most excluded from formal justice mechanisms despite exercising sophisticated customary justice through community channels. The cost of that exclusion is visible in the data.

The Decentralisation Paradox

Table 3. Distribution of Peacebuilding Implementation Across Governance Levels

Function	State / NGO-Led %	Community-Led %
Conflict Mediation	42	58
Peace Dialogue & Education	38	62
Social Cohesion Building	35	65
Justice & Accountability	61	39
Economic Empowerment	44	56

Sources: Adapted from baseline metrics by the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MoPED), Government of Sierra Leone (2019), Report on Local Peace Architectures; cross-referenced with contextual institutional performance scores from the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) Dataset (2020) for Rule of Law and Voice & Accountability.

Table 3 captures something important about how peacebuilding actually works in Sierra Leone, as opposed to how donor reports describe it. Conflict mediation is 58 percent community-led; peace dialogue is 62 percent community-led; social cohesion building is 65 percent community-led. These are the functions that donors most consistently claim credit for through their formal programmes. Yet the data indicate that most of the work is happening at the community level, largely invisible to external monitoring systems. When Obi (2018) argues that civil society organisations accomplish conflict resolution work that formal justice systems cannot achieve, these numbers put flesh on that argument.

Justice and accountability are the exception, 61 percent centralised. This reflects international investment in formal judicial infrastructure and, more subtly, a cultural resistance among donors

to recognising customary justice as legitimate accountability. Sierra Leonean communities have long resolved serious disputes through processes prioritising acknowledgement, compensation, and reconciliation over punishment and incarceration. These processes often achieve outcomes, genuine community reconciliation, sustained deterrence of recurrence, that formal prosecution cannot. But they are harder to document in a way that satisfies donor accountability requirements, and so they receive minimal support, whilst formal court systems that deliver neither justice nor deterrence efficiently absorb significant resources. The mismatch is stark: the functions most effectively implemented at the community level receive the least financial support, while functions demonstrating lower community effectiveness absorb the most resources. This is the decentralisation paradox in concrete terms.

Discussion: What the Evidence Is Actually Telling Us

Taken together, the three tables present a consistent picture. Women exercise the most governance authority in the tier with the least formal recognition. Women-led initiatives demonstrate the most durable outcomes despite the most constrained resources. Community-led functions outperform centralised alternatives in precisely the domains of mediation, dialogue, and cohesion where peacebuilding ultimately happens. And yet financing flows in the opposite direction, toward formal institutions demonstrating lower effectiveness and lower community trust.

How do we account for this? Part of the answer is institutional inertia: donors and governments are more comfortable working with formal counterparts who speak familiar organisational languages, produce standardised reports, and fit within recognisable accountability frameworks. Part is about risk: community-based organisations are harder to monitor, more difficult to hold contractually accountable, and more likely to operate through informal processes that resist documentation. Part, and this is where Obi's analysis becomes essential, is about what counts as peacebuilding. The recognition gap he identifies in his 2017 work is not accidental. It reflects structural assumptions embedded in international peacebuilding frameworks: that governance happens in formal institutions, that accountability requires legalistic processes, that expertise is technical rather than relational, and that peace is built through high-level processes rather than

sustained community interaction. These assumptions are wrong, or at least severely incomplete, but they are deeply entrenched.

There is also a gender dimension that runs through all of this. The governance tier where women exercise the most authority, community associations, is precisely the tier that peacebuilding frameworks least recognise. The functions where women's leadership is strongest, trauma healing, economic recovery, and social cohesion, are precisely the functions donors fund least generously. This is not a coincidence, though it may not be conscious discrimination. It reflects the same structural logic Obi traces in his analysis of the invincible invisibles: peacebuilding frameworks were designed by and for particular institutional actors, and those actors were not Fatmata Kamara and her association. The women who sustain community peace are invisible, not because their work is invisible to their communities, their communities know exactly who is doing what, but because they are invisible to the monitoring and evaluation systems that determine resource allocation.

Making them visible requires more than adding gender indicators to donor reporting frameworks. It requires fundamentally reorienting what we understand peacebuilding to be. Obi's scholarship across all three works examined here points toward a conception of peacebuilding as fundamentally relational, contextual, and community-embedded, sustained through daily interaction and accumulated trust rather than time-bounded interventions. That conception fits women's community governance far better than it fits the formal, centralised, externally-accountable institutions absorbing most current resources.

Conclusion

The case this article makes is not, in the end, complicated. Women in Sierra Leone's communities are doing peacebuilding work, real, sustained, effective peacebuilding work, through decentralised governance structures that international frameworks have systematically failed to recognise or resource. The evidence is consistent across multiple datasets and multiple analytical frameworks. Women-led community initiatives are more active, generate more durable outcomes, and achieve higher community trust than better-resourced, externally-managed

alternatives. The decentralisation paradox, most effective at the level receiving least support, is not a mystery. It is a policy choice, and it is one that can be changed.

Obi's intellectual contribution to understanding this situation cannot be overstated. His 2018 work on civil society functionality gave us the analytical tools to understand why decentralised approaches outperform centralised ones. His 2024 examination of gender and violent extremism demonstrated that women's integrated, holistic approaches to community recovery are more effective than specialised technical interventions. And his 2017 theorisation of the invincible invisibles named the structural problem precisely: these women are not absent from peacebuilding; they are absent from the recognition systems that determine who counts as a peacebuilder. Addressing that absence requires more than goodwill. It requires the kind of structural, resource-backed commitment the recommendations below outline.

Sierra Leone's durable peace will be built beneath tamarind trees in Tonkolili District, in community halls in Bo, in agricultural cooperatives in Kenema, through the sustained relational work of women who have never been offered a seat at the formal peacebuilding table and have built their own table instead. The least scholarship and policy can do is acknowledge that this table exists, understand why it works, and ensure it receives the support it has earned.

Policy Recommendations

Seven concrete shifts follow from this analysis:

First, rebalance financing to address a situation where decentralised governance currently receives 8 percent of peacebuilding resources. This should be a floor of 35 percent, not a ceiling. Women's associations, community development committees, and chiefdom-level peacebuilding must receive multi-year, flexible funding, not the short-term, tightly-conditioned grants currently on offer. Second, build governance capacity where women already lead. Capacity-building programmes should target women's associations and community committees rather than directing women toward formal governance structures that have historically excluded them. Support should be sustained over at least five years and responsive to organisational priorities rather than donor priorities.

Third, legitimise community justice. Customary justice mechanisms, community mediation, and informal dispute resolution generate more durable outcomes in Sierra Leone's context than formal prosecutorial alternatives. Policy frameworks should recognise these mechanisms as valid, support their development, and build bridges between formal and informal systems rather than treating them as competitors. Fourth, fix the data. Peacebuilding monitoring systems must collect data disaggregated by governance level and gender. Outcome indicators must capture what community-led and women-led initiatives actually achieve, including relational outcomes, community trust, reconciliation quality, conflict recurrence rates, not only the outputs formal programmes find easy to count.

Fifth, create partnership structures. Formal mechanisms enabling community-based organisations to inform and shape national peacebuilding policy are essential. This is not about inviting community representatives to consultations; it is about giving decentralised governance genuine authority over priorities and resources. Sixth, change the narrative. Donors, governments, and scholars must stop describing women in post-conflict Sierra Leone primarily as victims. They are governance practitioners, peacebuilding experts, and community leaders. The language we use shapes what we resource and what we overlook. Seventh, take Obi seriously. The scholarship is there. Obi's body of work on civil society functionality, gender in peacebuilding, and community governance offers a rigorous, evidence-based framework for policy redesign. The argument that international peacebuilding lacks the intellectual tools to do better is no longer credible. The question is whether it has the institutional will.

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