Interrogating the 'Local' in Women, Peace and Security: Reflections on Research on and in the UK and Iraq

The 'local' plays an important yet ambiguous role in the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. In each of our PhD research projects, the term 'local' came up frequently during our fieldwork: in readings, in interviews, and in policy and advocacy documents. The local is often used as a descriptor for both a place (the 'everyday') and a group of actors (the 'local population'), which for WPS often refers to the constituency of 'women and girls' located in fragile and conflict affected contexts. However, the ambiguity that accompanies the numerous articulations of the term by multiple actors working on WPS in various settings has meant that we have both had trouble defining and locating the local in conceptual and practical terms across our respective case studies (the UK and Iraq). Although the designation clearly plays an important role in WPS, the 'local' remains nebulous. This raises important questions regarding the discourse, policy, practice, and study of the agenda.

In this conversation, which is based on a series of email exchanges and skype calls, we think through the concept of the 'local' in WPS, and in relation to our respective case studies. We explore the wider implications of defining and locating the 'local' for the construction of WPS policy and advocacy, as well as for WPS scholarship. We speak to our respective case studies and use them to offer insights into how WPS scholars and practitioners might better conceptualise and use the designation of the 'local' in WPS. Through this conversation, we address a number of different issue areas and themes: the articulation of the 'local' in the action plans of the UK and Iraq; the methodological and practical issues that arise from researching and producing knowledge about the 'local'; contestation over who or what might constitute the 'local' in WPS; and the power dynamics related to consultations with, and the wider involvement of, local actors for the purpose of producing more inclusive and equitable WPS policies and programs. We contend that for an agenda that seeks to impact and shape women's lives as well as policy around international peace and security, understanding but also locating the 'local' from a distinctly feminist, transnational, and postcolonial perspective seems vital if we are to move the agenda beyond the halls of power in UN buildings and national strategy documents.

Columba Achilleos – Sarll (Columba): In the UK WPS policy and advocacy space the local is predominantly a reference to, or articulated as, the 'local population'. However, while the local refers, quite literally, to a space rather than a group of actors, labels like 'local actors' or the 'local population' invariably become shorthand for 'women and girls', a homogenous group located within fragile and conflict affected contexts. They are the targets or subjects of intervention for government related WPS policies as well as civil society advocacy. This reflects Sam Cook's (2016) argument that this constituency serves as an ever-present female referent, the 'woman-in-conflict', an essentialised woman who exists in a universal conflict. Civil society organisations (CSOs) operating in-country (meaning in fragile and conflict-affected contexts), particularly women's rights organisations (WROs), are also often referred to as local actors in policy and advocacy documents alike. In some ways, this

means that these organisations are described as though they are always representative of the local population. They are often viewed as intermediaries, or facilitators, able to connect with variously positioned 'women and girls' who might otherwise be difficult to locate or access.

In policy documents, and I am thinking particularly about successive UK National Action Plans (NAPs), the local not only becomes a reference to a combined space – the 'local' – and a group of actors – 'women and girls' – but the articulation is also used to refer to various service providers, governance structures, or political processes in named countries. For example, the 'local' is often inserted as a prefix for political processes including, for example, 'local state-building', 'local ownership' or 'localisation'. And, across all of these articulations, the 'local' is positioned as foreign and external to the UK. I would be really interested to hear if any of these general observations about how the 'local' is articulated in the UK policy and advocacy space is also reflected in Iraq?

Yasmin Chilmeran (Yasmin): Yes, there are certainly many similarities**.** The articulation of the 'local' in Iraq mirrors some of what you've talked about. It usually refers to women who have, or are assumed to have, first-hand experience of conflict, violence, or displacement. I would like to add that in Iraq – and this is likely the case across other fragile and conflict affected contexts – it's meaning depends on which actors are using the term, for what purpose, and for what audience. Although Iraq is a 'focus country' in the UK NAP[1], it is also a state that has led the WPS conversation in the Middle East; it was, for example, the first country in the region to adopt a NAP in 2014. The WPS space in Iraq is inhabited by a combination of international and Iraqi organisations and individuals, so the term 'local' gets used in many different ways by a diverse range of actors.

For international organisations, the local is sometimes shorthand for authenticity, or used to refer to front-line programming or services. For example, I have noticed that the 'local' is used to describe Iraqi WROs in their capacity as partners to international organisations on one level, and on another level in their connection to the beneficiaries of their programmes and services. In this context, it can be difficult to identify which Iraqi organisations qualify as local and which do not, and why that label is applied in the first place. In conversations with Iraqi actors, the label appears to be used for more practical reasons (for example, when discussing the WPS Local Action Plans).

I guess that the challenge for scholars is trying to make sense of the multiple ways the term 'local' is used across these various contexts, and scales of political space. This is something I've thought about a lot – finding an adequate way of conceptualising what the 'local' means in a context like Iraq. I am wary not to conceptualise the 'local' in a hierarchy that situates it below, or separate from, national or global spaces, but rather to think about these spaces as interconnected. I find that feminist political economy scholarship has the clearest understanding of how the local co-exists in relation to national or global processes (for example, in their analysis of global care supply

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[1] In the UK NAP (2018-22), 'focus countries' are countries that have been identified as requiring specific policy attention. These are described as areas where there is both a high level of need for WPS work, and where there is potential for the UK to have a substantial impact on the lives of women and girls (p.3).

chains). All of this raises the question, how do we research something that is clearly so central to WPS, yet so ambiguous and hard to pin down?

Although I didn't begin my project with the intention of researching the local, it became apparent that the concept and the material space were fundamental to understanding women's participation in fragile and post-conflict affected spaces. However, there are practical issues that come with researching and producing knowledge about the 'local'. As a physical space, the 'local' is often inaccessible to researchers who live and work outside of that context. This is something that I experienced when undertaking research in Iraq. Even though it is my country of birth, due to my institutional location and affiliation — being based at a university that places a lot of emphasis on mitigating the risk of travel to researchers — subsequently placed limits on where I could travel inside Iraq. Though this is of course important in terms of safeguarding the researcher, these access constraints were barriers to researching the local in relation to WPS in Iraq.

Columba: These are really important observations. The practical constraints you mention clearly have an impact on methodological considerations in terms of who gets to access the 'local', who is tasked with defining what/who the local is, and who is then able to write/speak on its behalf. I guess that similar constraints also affect how activists, policymakers, and practitioners navigate these spaces. I would like to think more about how issues of defining, accessing, and researching the 'local' are affected by power inequalities between the Global North and Global South, which are often (re)produced in research and policy spaces.

In my research, I found that CSOs in the Global North often facilitate access to, and conversations with, local actors – particularly women and women's rights organisations – by acting as an intermediary between women/WROs in fragile and post-conflict affected states and the UK government. Civil society in the Global North filters information from the 'local' upwards, and translates the 'local' into a legible form that parallels the state's interpretation, and implementation, of WPS. But scholars also engage in this translation work. And I wonder how these dynamics might (re)produce multiple and often cross-cutting hierarchies between variously positioned civil society actors and the 'local', between the researcher and the researched, and between differently situated researchers in the North and South, and how the 'local' is then defined through these relationships and processes?

Researchers and practitioners, or actors who live and work in countries suffering from conflict and fragility, are arguably more qualified to write/speak about the 'local', but I wonder how much they get shut out of these conversations, or perhaps even by these conversations, and with what consequences? As part of the Iraqi diasporic community perhaps you are more qualified to speak about the 'local' in Iraq but, on the other hand, you also inhabit a privileged position, and I wonder how that affects your research about the 'local', and how you reflect on that in your work?

Yasmin: I have tried to be reflexive about my diaspora positionality when doing this research. The representative and legitimising role that the Iraqi diaspora is thought to have played leading up to, and after, the 2003 US-led intervention did cause tension (see Zangana, 2005). I also have the privilege of living in relative safety, and it would be disingenuous to equate my experiences and knowledge with that of the women I

interviewed and wrote about who experienced day-to-day life in Iraq first hand. I wanted to be careful about not presenting myself as a local voice. During interviews, I tried to navigate this difference by clearly communicating who I am, what my interests and intentions were, as well as the practical limitations of the research I was doing, including where I could travel. My inability to travel widely was something other Iraqis I encountered found amusing; given how much the security situation had improved in the period I was conducting interviews. It was a reminder of how differently we understand security in Western institutions.

In my writing, I also aimed to be reflexive about my own position vis à vis the spaces I was researching. Rather than trying to identify what is 'local', I tried to understand how the term is used by different Iraqi and international actors, and why it is important to those who work on women's participation and peacebuilding in Iraq. The local figures quite differently in your research, as a discursive political identifier within the WPS UK space. I'd be curious to know how that has shaped your thinking.

Columba: I have observed that who is considered 'local', or who gets to be defined as 'local' in the UK, is in part a consequence of the outward-facing orientation of UK NAPs, which define and/or position the 'local' as outside the domestic, sovereign, space, but which is often placed on a scale – as you mentioned earlier – below national entities. In the UK, and this is the case in many other European NAPs; the domestic implementation of the agenda is largely absent from WPS policies, even in areas related to international peace and security, as it could infringe upon state sovereignty. I'm thinking particularly in relation to transnational issue areas including that of migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and trafficked women and girls who are largely absent across UK NAPs.

Therefore, in my research I use the word 'domestication' differently from 'localisation', but after this conversation I feel that I really need to attend more carefully to the differences between these concepts/designations, and how they are being used by different actors in the UK WPS space. Civil society advocacy around WPS in the UK has consistently called for the 'domestication' of the agenda. In other words, the domestic implementation of WPS in the UK to areas related to international peace and security, in addition to those areas that the UK classifies as fragile and conflict affected. Yet, there continues to be government resistance to these recommendations. By branding itself as sovereign, secure, and gender-progressive, the UK does not believe it requires policy interventions like WPS. Therefore, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and trafficked women and girls, who are neither considered 'local' nor 'domestic' actors/citizens, but who occupy a kind of quasi third space in WPS policy and practice in the UK, are therefore being denied the principles of the WPS agenda. These inconsistencies in WPS implementation in the UK are profoundly gendered and racialized.

Yasmin: The issue you raise about how civil society in the UK has employed the word domestication is fascinating. I think that both 'domestication' and 'localisation' as actual political processes, but also concepts, need to be unpacked much more in WPS scholarship. The distinction between the two terms tells us a lot about how the 'local' and the 'domestic' are considered different spaces, how they are often placed in a hierarchy, but also more broadly how spaces are codified in the context of WPS policy, practice, and implementation.

On the issue of international migration that you raise, this transnational issue area really complicates the idea of what the local is and whom it refers to – and therefore whom WPS can apply to – but it also highlights how it is often othered. The local only becomes relevant in the UK domestic space with regards to WPS if someone from a conflict affected context effectively carries that label with them. This re-establishes – though further complicates – the racialised distinction established between the 'local' (the 'fragile and conflict affected') and the 'international', which defines itself as peaceful and far from the frontlines of conflict, and therefore not in need of gender interventions in the shape of WPS or other related policy agendas.

The positioning of the local as 'other' also prevents us from understanding local contexts in all their complexity and multiplicity. There are two important points that can be made in relation to this, or at least two ways of thinking about the local that I have used in my own research to try and move away from the tendency to homogenise the 'local' as we've discussed. The first is that there is no all-encompassing 'local', despite how unreflexively the term is applied in the spaces and reports we've come across in our research. The second is that a local site can't be defined relative to a Western standpoint, or referent. I'm also even wary of speaking of the 'local' only in terms of the process of 'localising' the WPS agenda. It is a political site in and of itself. I think it's our job as scholars to trouble that understanding, and to think about those implementing and contesting the WPS framework (particularly in conflict and post-conflict contexts) in a much more holistic and contextualised way. This means understanding that localisation isn't just local actors adopting and implementing an 'international' WPS agenda, but contesting, reshaping, and creating new ways of supporting women's participation that can also reshape global and national agendas.

Columba: Yes, I absolutely agree, and I think that the concept and process of localisation in relation to the 'local' and WPS certainly needs further unpacking. I wonder in the case of Iraq, for example, what localisation looks like in practice, and how does the process of localisation relate to the concept of the 'local'?

Yasmin: I've seen more and more the term localisation used to represent a different or more 'local' way of going about implementation and programming on WPS. It has come up a lot in my own research and in discussions about humanitarian work to explain a policy process (similar to norm translation) that leads to local ownership of the WPS agenda. However, we need to be wary that the process doesn't a buzzword, or an extension of national processes and agendas. Localisation, as I understand it, should be about facilitating local engagement as well as welcoming challenge, so that tools like the WPS agenda can be reworked in a way that is appropriate and useful for the different contexts in which it is needed.

My research centres on Iraqi women's CSOs, and, as I mentioned earlier, different organisations in Iraq understand localisation, and their role in the process of localising the WPS agenda differently (as do their international partners). It is a new concept or process to some, and so they are being encouraged and supported to engage in localisation practices as the next step to implement the WPS agenda. Others, however, already engage in the process of localisation but without labelling it as such. To me, an example of localisation was the creation of Local Action Plans for some Iraqi

governorates, which was done by a small group of CSOs. These plans are used to engage with local governance bodies to highlight concerns specific to their governorate. However, I don't think the groups who created these 'action plans' described the process exactly in those terms. Local Action Plans provided a new space where women's insecurities and needs could be advocated for in a way that was more specific than that which was occurring at the national level. Perhaps this is the potential of localisation – not so much as an implementation process, but one where local groups can use WPS to put forward their own agendas.

Columba: Right! The point about how different organisations conceptualise the process of localising the agenda, and different examples of that process, is so relevant. In this sense, I think it is also important to ask whose knowledge is considered in the process of localising the WPS agenda in these various contexts? Who gets consulted to inform the production of NAPs or LAPs? And, how does the local navigate these (internal and external) processes? Localisation can end up reifying or even in some instances fetishizing local actors, organisations, or communities as the authentic source of information or implementing partner to inform and/or translate WPS policies at the local level. This is something I've become increasingly concerned about. Though this is of course not to disregard the importance of situated lived experiences and knowledge.

Reflecting further on what I mentioned earlier, in the UK, facilitating the inclusion of knowledge, and the meaningful participation, of women of the Global South in UK decision making on WPS has been advocated for by UK based CSOs in order to ground NAPs in the daily lives and challenges and lived experiences of those affected by conflict. In particular, this has been attempted through in-country consultations with women and women's groups/organisations at the local level. Perhaps this can be interpreted as an example of how UK based civil society actors is trying to make the UK NAP more relevant at the local level. Civil society advocated that the UK government should provide funds to help UK based civil society carry out these consultations with organisations (usually partner organisations) across the UK 'focus countries'. Initially, the government was reluctant to provide funds, so civil society carried out consultations at their own cost, relying on organisations with access to different countries and partner organisations. For the latest NAP (2018-22), however, the government decided to commit funds for civil society to carry out these consultations. I guess that's been quite an interesting development in terms of how the local, and local knowledge, is valued in the UK WPS context.

However, what transpired was that these consultations hadn't been particularly representative, due to a combination of funding and access constraints. Civil society found that consultations had been somewhat extractive, rather than produced through dialogue with local actors. Local WROs had been consulted but there had been little, if any, follow-up. Although it is of course difficult to trace the extent to which the information that came out of these consultations was incorporated into the actual content of the NAP. However, this brings up a number of important questions: How were the findings from these consultations communicated – and translated – to the UK government? What (if anything) got lost in the process of translation? Effectively, what was included and what was excluded, and why?

Yasmin: That's so interesting. I want to think more critically about the extractive nature of the consultations that you describe. I wonder if consultations carried out by donor states are always or inherently extractive, and whether this is the case in other contexts? I do believe that it is important that countries with externally focussed NAPs consult people in the countries they are targeting or who are on the receiving end of their policies, but a lot needs to happen to make sure those consultations are conducted in a way that supports locally based CSOs in those countries, who may also have their own ideas about the WPS agenda and how it is being implemented. It's possible that some of the power dynamics we've mentioned are (re)produced, as those same actors become the 'experts' on WPS implementation in their own country, forming other social and political hierarchies at the local or national level. In my own interviews, some interviewees aired concerns that the consultations carried out for the Iraqi NAP had not been as wide reaching as they would have liked. And so interviewees expressed the need for more consultations before the next NAP is adopted, which I know was the plan for the forthcoming NAP (a new NAP should have been adopted in 2019, though this work is still in progress as we write this in mid-2020).

I also wonder about the tensions this raises amongst Iraqi organisations, particularly around who is asked to participate in the consultations with donor states. I can imagine with UK based NGOs, for example, arranging consultations in Iraq would involve drawing from longer-term relationships with partner organisations. The tensions that arise can then be about access to funding and programming, but also about how the 'local' is represented by the organisations that are consulted. The Iraqi organisations may be presented as 'local' externally, but in Iraq they may be relatively well-funded, well-networked, and so considered to be part of the 'elite' by other Iraqi organisations. This is not to say that local actors shouldn't be well-funded, well-networked, and have long-standing relationships with organisations outside of Iraq, but I do think organisations and donor governments outside of Iraq need to be clearer about how their engagements are being carried out in equitable, inclusive and accessible ways that are mindful of the differences and power relations amongst Iraqi organisations.

Columba: Absolutely. Following that, in many ways some CSOs based in donor states can therefore be labelled as gatekeepers between elite decision-makers on the one hand, and 'local actors' (or WROs), on the other hand, and there are social and political hierarchies that clearly exist between both sets of organizations/actors. This observation, and the related power dynamics, partly captures the transnational ways in which networked civil society is required to operate on WPS, even though CSOs don't always operate transnationally, meaning that they are often required to work in and through militarist, imperialist governments. We therefore have to remain cognizant of the power relations that exist between the state, the multiple civil society networks and organisations that operate in the WPS space, as well in country CSOs, WROs, and the local population.

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We hope that this conversation has draw attention to the importance of attending to the designation of the 'local' in WPS discourse, policy, practice, advocacy and scholarship, especially as the agenda and the organisations and actors that work on

WPS continue to proliferate. How we define and conceptualise the local in relation to WPS has profound implications for the policies that are produced, who we consider the target or recipient of WPS policies, and who is given the authority to speak as the local or for the local. WPS can and does have the potential to be inclusive in the way the agenda is both shaped and used in different contexts, but that requires allowing the 'local', in its many iterations, to speak for itself in these conversations. It's vital that WPS scholars and practitioners pay closer attention to the 'local' and, rather than homogenising it, unpack the term in all its complexity, and across multiple WPS contexts, and interconnected scales of political space. This is essential if we are to expand our understanding of the multiple spaces where conflict, gendered insecurity and conflict prevention occurs.

References

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