

PEACE AND EMPOWERMENT IN HISTORICAL AND MODERN  
WOMEN'S COOPERATIVES: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

by

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As cooperatives, both the Women's Cooperative Guild and the Nyamirambo Women's Center share commonalities in their dedication to promoting women's rights, fostering economic empowerment, and advancing positive peace. Despite operating in distinct historical and cultural contexts, the organizations exemplify the transformative potential of women-led cooperatives in challenging traditional gender norms and addressing socio-economic disparities in conflict environments.

As such, NWC and the Guild are best understood together as peacebuilding organizations that utilize the tenets of cooperation to directly account for the needs and aspirations of women. Within these organizations, women engage in peace processes, build community, and gain a degree of economic independence, resulting in greater empowerment. This empowerment enables cooperative members to occupy dual cultural expectations as domestic workers and participants in the formal labor force during and after conflict. Although they promote women's empowerment, cooperatives operate under the pressures of nation-building and longstanding patriarchal structures in conflict environments. These organizations thus exist within the dichotomy of patriarchal social and cultural expectations while simultaneously promoting women's agency and equity through the cooperative model.

NWC and the Guild function as sites of negotiation, allowing women to both resist and operate within the limitations of patriarchy amidst conflict.

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## **Introduction**

Cooperatives are best understood as a movement. While it is at once a tangible social and economic model, it is also an ideology, an embodiment of utopian values against discriminatory and unjust practices. A cooperative is an independent, democratic, and jointly owned organization comprised of individuals who voluntarily unite to address their mutual economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations. It is a concept and structure utilized not only by impoverished or oppressed peoples, but also adopted by the privileged who seek to dismantle repressive systems. In this way, we see how cooperation embeds itself in other social movements like peace processes and women's empowerment. Cooperation, in its potential for collaboration and collective power, can be a tool for peoples' success. Idealistically, it is a concept, a structure, a movement that emancipates people from economic injustices that compound with other social and political systemic issues. Whether or not cooperatives have lived up to that expectation is subject to debate, case by case; however, there remains a need to understand and record their collective impact to trace how the principles of the movement manifest around the world.

Considerable research has been done on women's cooperatives, largely revealing how these models effectively localize poverty-alleviation and peacebuilding while promoting women's empowerment. Nevertheless, there exists a notable gap in comparative cooperative literature across cultures and contexts. Little to no research compares historical and modern cooperatives, particularly ones that have existed over disparate locations. This paper seeks to fill that gap through a comparative analysis of two women's cooperatives: one from present-day Rwanda and the other from 20<sup>th</sup> century England. To interpret current attitudes toward cooperation, women's empowerment, and peacebuilding, I use qualitative data from eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with Rwandan women at Nyamirambo Women's Center

(NWC). Data collected in Rwanda is compared to historical accounts of the Women's Cooperative Guild (WCG) in England. Thematic analysis, in conjunction with an extensive literature review, guides the discussion of prevailing similarities and differences between the two organizations. The cooperatives are compared at the height of their activity - the early and mid-twentieth century for the WCG and post-genocide Rwanda for NWC. These are periods of immense trauma and loss wherein women faced both direct and indirect forms of gendered violence. This, coupled with preexisting patriarchal structures, presented pivotal moments for women to assert their agency and resilience in navigating the challenges of conflict and reconstruction. To better understand these conditions, this paper will seek to answer the following research questions: What do the similarities and differences between the two organizations tell us about the conditions of women in conflict environments? How are women's empowerment and peacebuilding reflected in these two organizations? What is the importance and potential of women's cooperatives in conflict environments?

This paper illustrates how NWC and the Women's Guild function as peacebuilding entities, leveraging cooperative principles to address women's needs and account for their positionalities within conflict environments. Within these organizations, women gain education and training, participate in peace processes, foster community, and achieve economic independence, leading to enhanced empowerment. This empowerment enables members to navigate the "double burden" as long-standing cultural norms and the demand for women's labor in conflict areas complicates women's societal roles as caregivers.<sup>1</sup> Despite operating under patriarchal structures and the pressures of conflict environments, these cooperatives

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<sup>1</sup> Coined by Arlie Russell Hochschild, the term "double burden" describes cultural norms that place unequal expectations on women, requiring them to manage both disproportionate domestic responsibilities and active participation in the workforce.

simultaneously adhere to societal norms/demands while promoting women's agency and equality through the cooperative framework. As such, they function as sites of negotiation, enabling women to both confront and navigate the constraints of both patriarchy and conflict.



## **Methods and Methodology**

### **I. Methods**

#### *Ia. Research Design*

This report adopts a case study format, matching the trend of studies within cooperative literature. This study consisted of three phases: a literature review, qualitative data collection, and historical data analysis. I acted as the primary researcher throughout each stage. The first phase involved reviewing current literature and predominant theories on cooperation, peace/peacebuilding, and women's empowerment. The review sources information from both Rwandan and international academics, with a deliberate emphasis on works authored by individuals from the communities under study, particularly Rwandan scholars. The selection of sources was informed by their relevance to this study and my familiarity with them from prior undergraduate coursework. I acknowledge that the literature on peacebuilding and women's empowerment is vast and that the sources selected represent only a fraction of the work done by scholars in those disciplines.

Phase two focused on the collection of qualitative data at the Nyamirambo Women's Center in Kigali, Rwanda. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, participant-observation, and hands-on engagement with the cooperative. The aim was to obtain firsthand insights into the subjective attitudes and experiences of members at NWC. Further details regarding the interviewees and the interview process are provided below.

The third stage of data collection consisted of historical data analysis. In shaping my methodology, I followed Berg and Lune's description of historical analysis as an "[attempt] to systematically recapture the complex nuances, the people, meanings, events, and even ideas of the past that have influenced and shaped the present" (159). Drawing primarily from the works

of historians in women's and gender studies and the early and mid-twentieth century in England, I gathered both primary and secondary data. Additionally, I consulted archives of newspaper clippings and reports from the Women's Cooperative Guild to deepen my understanding of its structure, mission, and the experiences of women involved in the organization. This approach combines archival research with secondary source analysis to trace the development and activities of the Women's Cooperative Guild in England and correlate it with qualitative data from the Nyamirambo Women's Center.

### *Ib. Sampling Frame and Interviews*

A total of seven cooperative members were interviewed, along with one local artist/cooperative owner. The women interviewed were between the ages of 24 and 66, had mixed educational backgrounds, and all but one had children. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants (Appendix A). Considering that many cooperative members were not literate, distributing papers for consent was neither logistically feasible nor culturally sensitive. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants, irrespective of literacy, to ensure an equitable and comfortable consent process. Participants were given the choice to refuse recording and decide whether to include their full name or just their first name. Many opted for only their first name, while others preferred their full name.

Participants were selected using linear snowball sampling, where each participant recommended another suitable person for the study (Heath). I initiated interviews with the president and vice president of the NWC, and each of them recommended one additional participant. This approach secured both the endorsement and guidance of cooperative leaders in the study, as well as the consent and enthusiasm of each participant. I emphasized that participants were under no obligation to participate, even if recommended by their supervisors or

peers. This approach allowed qualitative data collection to be community-directed, generating representative insights into the present perspectives.

A translator was used throughout the duration of the interviews. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes to one hour. I tailored my interview questions to address the structure of the cooperative and women's experiences within the organization. Moreover, the content of the questions was carefully designed to minimize risk to the participants' wellbeing. While the discussions did not explicitly delve into post-genocide reconstruction, I remained cognizant of the context in which the interviews were conducted. Both my questions and the informed consent process were designed to ensure that participants did not feel uncomfortable or pressured to disclose any traumatic experiences. Questions about participants' ethnicity were also intentionally avoided for sensitivity reasons.

To enhance the accessibility of my interviews, I made deliberate choices regarding the terminology I employed. Rather than approaching participants with the term peacebuilding, I deconstructed its components into more tangible and less potentially distressing questions (see Appendix B). I did, however, directly ask about the term "empowerment," inviting women to provide their own definitions. Additionally, I presumed the term cooperative was a mutually understood concept, thus directing my questions about cooperation towards participants' perceptions and understandings of their own organization (see Appendix B).

### *Ic. Data Management and Analysis*

To facilitate communication and data analysis, a translator assisted in translating interview questions, coordinating with the cooperatives, and conducting in-person interviews with participants. I worked carefully to brief and prepare the translator to ensure she understood

the purpose and objectives of my study. All in-person interviews were recorded in encrypted audio files, with exclusive access granted solely to me for both the files and their transcriptions.

The descriptive data obtained during qualitative data collection served to contextualize my research inquiries and steer the direction of my research outcomes. To guide this paper's discussion, I adopted Creswell's (2014) interpretivist approach. Interpretivism prioritizes understanding processes over merely identifying facts, recognizing that realities are constructed and conditioned by various intersecting social, cultural, political, and economic factors (Niyonkuru & Barrett 4). Embracing interpretivism enables this research to capture both subjective and collective experiences within women's cooperatives, analyzing both individual perspectives while also considering broader systemic influences.

## **II. Scope of Study and Limitations**

### *IIa. Scope*

This paper explores interconnected themes and practices within women's cooperatives. It is not designed with the purpose of comparatively elevating the status of one cooperative over another. Rather, it seeks to engage and establish a broader dialogue about the agency of women within cooperatives, acknowledging the considerable variation in context and systems of oppression affecting these organizations.

It is essential to recognize that the oppression and violence experienced by women are not uniformly distributed worldwide. Allison Jaggar, in her article "Saving Amina: Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue," sheds light on how Western feminist theories often overlook the role of the Western-dominated global political and economic order in perpetuating poverty and unjust cultural practices among non-Western women. Therefore, I want

to acknowledge my understanding of both the positionality of women overall in addition to the nuanced global positionality and systemic subversion of non-Western women.

Despite their distinct origins, both cooperatives under study share foundational similarities. They are women's cooperatives that address systemic women's issues and contributing to peacebuilding efforts in their respective conflict environments. In emphasizing the capacity building of female members, particularly through education, both organizations serve as valuable case studies as they reflect each other's efforts. This paper utilizes these two organizations to position one cooperative within the context of the other, attempting to place NWC within a greater history of women's cooperation and connect the Guild to a contemporary model. In doing so, this paper aims to trace the evolution of women's roles in cooperatives and acknowledge their contributions to broader communities within conflict environments.

The Women's Cooperative Guild was chosen over other women's cooperatives due to its historical status as one of the first recognized women's cooperatives and its prominence during the early and mid-twentieth century. It serves as a valuable starting point for understanding women's empowerment efforts within a conflict environment. Meanwhile, the Nyamirambo Women's Center represents a modern cooperative that I have developed a deep understanding, trust, and community with. Thus, the selection of these cooperatives is informed by both the larger history of women's cooperation and my subjective experiences with Nyamirambo Women's Center.

### *Iib. Limitations*

As an undergraduate study, this paper is limited by both my own personal experience, access, and time. Additionally, there are several limitations considering the scope, sources, and data collection methods within the study. Firstly, the scope of this study could be widened to

include more cooperative cases to progressively link cooperation, peacebuilding, and women's empowerment, rather than jumping from one time period to another.

Second, the availability and reliability of historical documents pertaining to the Women's Cooperative Guild may present challenges. While efforts were made to access and analyze historical materials, the accuracy and completeness of these documents cannot be guaranteed. Furthermore, potential biases in historical accounts, such as selective reporting or interpretation, may influence the analysis of the guild's activities and impact. It is also important to note that the literature on the Women's Cooperative Guild often focuses on their pacifist stance, which is not the primary focus of this study. Consequently, this limitation may affect the depth of historical context provided and the interpretation of the guild's role within the broader cooperative movement.

In terms of qualitative data collection, my semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and hands-on engagement with the cooperative may introduce various biases and limitations. The interviews were collected at the center during the workday, limiting the privacy yet enhancing the convenience of the study. Moreover, the study was largely conducted with a translator due to my limited abilities in Kinyarwanda. My limitations in Kinyarwanda shaped my interviews as I was only able to directly communicate with people who had a certain level of proficiency in English. The use of a translator may also introduce translation biases, as differences in language proficiency, cultural nuances, and communication styles between the researcher, participants, and translator may impact the accuracy of translated responses.

Furthermore, the snowball sampling method for participant selection may introduce sampling biases, as the participants are recruited through existing contacts within the

cooperatives, potentially leading to a non-representative sample. This may limit the generalizability of the study findings.

### **III. Ethical Considerations and Positionality**

#### *IIIa. Ethical Considerations*

To ensure the ethical collection of data outside of my literature review, I underwent the IRB exemption process. When collecting qualitative data, my methodology was guided by commitments to ensuring mutual benefit, working around the schedules of the organization and participants, revising objectives and questions to align with their goals, and adopting consent-based processes for discussing what will be shared post-research.

I worked intimately with a Rwandan cooperative I had previous connections to ensure the trust and transparency participants deserved. In prioritizing immersion, I developed questions and analyses that are contextually grounded and avoid assumptions about specific relationships, practices, feelings, or definitions. Research in a post-conflict context requires not only adherence to the ethical considerations of any other research undertaking, but also a commitment to sensitivity, respect, thoughtfulness, and privacy.

#### *IIIb. Researcher Positionality*

Throughout this project, I also tried to maintain a high level of awareness of my positionality as a white, American, female student. Due to this combination of identities, certain limitations and preconceptions concerning the nature of my presence inevitably arose. Some of these limitations were mediated by my previous academic experience in on-site in Rwanda wherein I took Kinyarwanda language classes, lived with a host family, and produced a 40-page capstone project on my internship at the Women's Center. My previous immersion was one of my strengths in this project and contributed greatly to my success returning to NWC for formal

interviews. This, in addition to my undergraduate coursework, provided me with a wealth of background knowledge to rely on and hold me accountable. This is my introduction, however, to more robust independent field research.

Nevertheless, my immersion into the Nyamirambo Women's Center also introduces a certain level of bias. I acknowledge that I have become personally invested in and supportive of the NWC's work, which unavoidably influences my analysis and conclusions about the cooperative's function and successes. Though there is typically pressure in research to remain unbiased and objective, I recognize that my research reflects both patterns that I have identified in the literature and the data I collected but is also shaped by my experiences and involvement in this post-conflict environment.

My positionality also influences how I am viewed in Rwanda. I recognize that a perceived level of wealth, status, and privilege informs certain interactions. Given this identity barrier, it is challenging to fully gauge the extent of truthfulness or honesty in a participant's response. These challenges are also variable given the participant's trust and comfort with me as a foreigner or researcher. As I developed stronger connections with community members, I was able to gain a more complex understanding of their opinions and beliefs. However, this was often facilitated by the participant's English proficiency, which unintentionally prioritized my identity and skills over theirs. I have done my best to consider these various factors in my analysis, but there are certain limitations that may inherently exist in my study.



## Literature Review

### I. Cooperatives: History, Myth, and Application

A cooperative is a self-governing and collectively owned organization comprised of individuals who voluntarily unite to address their shared economic, social, and cultural goals and aspirations. Despite being a 180-year-old movement, with around 1 billion contemporary practitioners worldwide, cooperatives receive little attention in our understandings and approaches to confronting large- and small-scale conflicts and structural inequalities (Fairbairn 1). According to data from the World Cooperative Monitor, there are over 3 million cooperatives worldwide, encompassing more than 12% of the global population. As such, cooperatives contribute significantly to the world's economic landscape, with the top 300 cooperatives generating a staggering total turnover of 2,409.41 billion USD. Cooperatives play a crucial role in fostering sustainable economic development by offering stable, high-quality employment. They directly employ or provide work opportunities for a massive 280 million individuals globally, representing approximately 10% of the world's workforce (World Cooperative Monitor 2023).

Although the ethical principles that underscore cooperation existed long before the movement began, the institutionalized application of these principles started around 1844 in Rochdale, England. A group of 28 male textile workers conceived of the first cooperative society as they grappled with “the social dislocations of the industrial revolution” (Fairbairn 2). The mid-nineteenth century brought forth the harsh reality of unemployment, low wages, and exploitative merchants in a time without social benefits or political representation (ibid.). In the absence of democratic governance and protective institutional policies, they found solace and agency in mutual cooperation. By supporting each other collectively, they aimed to overcome the

daunting social challenges arising from their vulnerable positions in an era devoid of voting rights and state support (ibid.).

The story of the well-known “Rochdale Pioneers,” as Fairbairn (1994) puts it, is just as much myth as it is historical reality. As part myth, Rochdale represents more of a cultural symbol than event, and should be understood as a fluid starting point for cooperation. Cooperative history has, therefore, been constructed and (re)imagined to suit the context in which it is being applied. Recognizing this as a fundamental aspect of Rochdale is crucial, as its origins in the industrial era have underpinned its innovative adaptation to numerous colonial and post-colonial settings. This is no coincidence:

The problems of 1844 in some ways resemble those in developing countries and less developed communities today. The solutions in Rochdale look something like the modern idea of socially sustainable development: in the most general terms, Rochdale stands for development in the long-term interests of people and communities—development controlled by the people it affects. Rochdale is a vision of participation in social change (Fairbairn 1).

As such, the cooperative movement of this period is both a history and an ideological foundation that is continuously extended, adapted, and contested. In it, we see a myriad of ways to prioritize the rights of people and condemn their exploitation within the workplace and society at large. Its application to diverse contexts, particularly in developing or conflict-ridden communities, makes it an incredibly useful framework to study confrontations of broader social issues.

The principles set forth by the Rochdale Pioneers continue to be tangible and lasting frameworks that shape cooperation worldwide. The principles epitomize a commitment to democratic control and equitable member benefits. Central to the Rochdale ethos is the principle of voluntary and open membership, advocating inclusivity irrespective of societal distinctions (Fairbairn 7). Within this cooperative framework, as delineated by the 1996 International Cooperative Alliance’s (ICA) “Commission on Cooperative Principles,” democratic member

control is paramount, embodying the egalitarian philosophy of “one member, one vote.” Another cornerstone of the Rochdale Principles is the concept of member economic participation, mandating equitable contributions to the cooperative’s capital and the democratic governance thereof. Autonomy and independence are imperatives, positioning cooperatives as self-sufficient entities capable of forming external affiliations while retaining internal autonomy. By emphasizing education, training, dissemination, and citizenship cooperatives actively engage in empowering their members. The seventh principle, concern for community, underscores cooperatives’ commitment to contributing to the sustainable development of its localities, thereby addressing various shared social challenges (ibid.). These principles have been revised continuously throughout the last century and, as such, do not necessarily encompass every organization that names itself as a cooperative. Cooperation, as stated above, is fundamentally fluid.

For the purposes of this paper, however, I will define cooperation as it relates to the two case studies below. I am using the ICA’s 2015b “*Guidance Notes to the Co-operative Principles*” definition:

A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. Co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. The co-operative principles are guidelines by which co-operatives put their values into practice.

This framework underscores both the social and economic dimensions of cooperation, that help us understand how cooperation intersects with peacebuilding and women’s empowerment. As MacPherson (2007) notes, capturing this duality is important as it underscores cooperatives’

“capacity to reach out over differences and bring people who are estranged from each other closer together” (36).

The contemporary literature on cooperation encompasses a diverse range of studies. Cooperative literature often includes various case studies and reports, allowing authors to contextualize their findings and frameworks.<sup>2</sup> There exists a significant gap, however, in comparative case studies between cooperatives themselves and cooperatives and other organizational structures. Few publications have also adopted a non-country specific approach (Duguid & Weber 17). The sparsity of comparative literature restricts us from being able to map the successes and limitations of cooperatives cross-culturally/contextually. Without this kind of information, we have limited data on the unique attributes of cooperatives and their potential contributions to societal development outside of circumstantial evidence. Moreover, by examining the differences and similarities between cooperative organizations, researchers can identify best practices that enhance the resilience and efficacy of cooperatives at large. Although cooperatives reflect ideological principles, their applications are equally important.

Another noteworthy dimension within the existing literature revolves around the comparative analysis of organizational structures concerning their impact on women’s empowerment, gender equality, and peace. Despite the recognized potential of cooperatives to address gender disparities and contribute to conflict navigation, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that systematically and qualitatively compare cooperative structures with other

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<sup>2</sup> Many of these reports and studies are conducted by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA). Examples include the annual “World Cooperative Monitor”, “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Co-operatives” (2016) referenced in this study, and “Transforming our World: A Cooperative 2030” (n.d.). Often, these materials are jointly developed by academics, international organizations like the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs or Euricse, and the ICA.

organizational models in these specific contexts. This paper seeks to fill some of these gaps in the literature by taking a cross-national/cross-cultural comparative approach to analyzing a historical and modern women's cooperative. Further research has the potential to map their collective and historical impact and identify best practices for their resilience and efficacy in confronting social and economic issues.

## **II. Cooperation and Peacebuilding: Bridging Local and Global Initiatives**

Peace, although a widely used term, has many competing definitions both within and outside of peace-studies literature. For the purposes of this paper, I employ the framework of positive and negative peace. Johan Galtung (1964) developed this theory in response to 1950s peace research's heavy focus on direct violence, such as warfare and assault. His work shifted peace research's focus into the conditions that move us closer to peace or further from violence. He defined negative peace as the "absence of violence, absence of war" and positive peace as the "integration of human society" (2). In referring to the "integration of human society" Galtung introduced the issue of structural violence as a barrier to achieving lasting and equitable peace. Positive peace has thus brought into question the agency and roles of marginalized people inside and out of conflict environments.

Researchers have noted that the staunch dichotomy between negative and positive peace is not nearly as visible within the reality of violence (Grewal 5). Pursuits of negative and positive peace often inform and direct each other, complicating our understanding of what conflict is. Emmanuel & Macpherson's inclusive definition of conflict accounts for the complexities between negative and positive peace:

Conflict comes in many guises – from difficulties in our everyday interactions to outright war. It includes many forms of physical harm, and it develops from inequality, discrimination, oppression, and the dark consequences of these

behaviors – poverty and deprivation, underemployment and unemployment, despair, and death (2).

Nevertheless, the conceptual dichotomy between negative and positive peace can help us understand the different actions taken to establish peace within societies (Grewal 2). In this case, cooperatives address the structural barriers and inequalities to peace. Cooperation accounts for the skills, resources, and access of peoples to create a safe and functioning existence and promote the absence of structural violence (Grewal 5). As cited above, cooperative principles such as concern for community, democratic member control, and economic independence are but some of the ways cooperatives contribute to visions of positive peace.

In attempts at addressing structural inequalities, we must consider sources of peace. Where and who peace derives from is at the heart of the debate of ethical peacebuilding. Peacebuilding itself is hard to define as conflict prevention, mitigation, and reconstruction mean different things to different people (Swanström & Weissmann 19). Broadly, peacebuilding pertains to the efforts of people in conflict environments to prevent or mitigate conflict or engage in reconstruction efforts (Cooperatives and Peace 18-20). Prevention, mitigation, and reconstruction mark different stages of conflict, however, the lines between each are not always clear, nor are they mutually exclusive.

Prevention typically pertains to activities “aimed at anticipating and averting the outbreak of conflict” and address either the structural underpinnings of conflict or the intensification of imminent violence (18). Mitigation “consists of actions that aim to positively transform the causes of conflict through addressing the structural, behavioral and attitude aspects of conflict, and makes efforts to limit the damage, by containing and reducing the potential harm” (19). Lastly, reconstruction “responds to the immediate aftermath of a conflict, [and] aims to improve

systems and processes, economic, social and political, to create enduring stability and prevent future manifestations of conflict” (ibid.).

Frameworks of liberal and hybrid peace have emerged to better understand how nations pave paths toward nonviolence and justice. Since the mid twentieth century, liberal peace – the top-down approach – has prevailed internationally (MacGinty & Sanghera, Richmond & Mitchell). As this standard has been set, local voices and agency are devalued and undermined (Richmond & Mitchell). The literature in peace and conflict studies has seen a strong shift in focus from large-scale capacity building to understanding and empowering local agency (MacGinty & Richmond 763). This ‘local turn’ is largely informed by the works of scholars and practitioners from the global south and an emerging critical approach to peace and conflict studies that is “heavily influenced by critical and post-structural theory, postcolonial scholarship and practice, interdisciplinarity, as well as a range of alternative ethnographic, sociological and action-related methodologies” (ibid.).

Nevertheless, much of neoliberal international policy continues to promote singularly liberal peacebuilding approaches. Liberal peace is defined as “the promotion of democracy, market-based economic reforms and a range of other institutions associated with ‘modern’ states as a driving force for building ‘peace’” (Newman et al. 3). Liberal peacebuilding efforts thus promote the values of liberal peace, positioning the market and the state as central tenets of internationally backed peacebuilding efforts around the world (Kappler & Richmond 267). Western democracy and the market economy are imposed and enforced, thereby neglecting other more culturally and socially grounded means of problem-solving. Liberal peacebuilding is often criticized for failing to adequately account for local needs and perspectives in its pursuit to impose foreign economic and governance systems that promote Western ideologies (Guhunta,

Kappler & Richmond, MacGinty & Richmond). This approach continually reinforces hierarchies as “coercive forms of international governance,” projecting “universal blueprints” onto vulnerable post-conflict regions (Kappler & Richmond 263).

The failure of institutionalized international peacebuilding initiatives to consider the everyday and local mechanisms of peace has prompted resistance from many communities. This resistance frames emancipation from liberal peace as “local agency and autonomy – internationally supported, perhaps, but not externally provided” (Kappler & Richmond 264). Hybrid peace/peacebuilding is “a condition that emerges from top–down and bottom–up interactions” (MacGinty & Sanghera 4). It is the process where the local and everyday needs, attitudes, experiences, activities, and interests encounter international and state agendas for peace (Richmond & Mitchell 1). Hybridity is a “conceptual tool that facilitates a move beyond center-to-periphery modes of analysis and examines the multiple sources of agency at play in (hybrid) peacebuilding” (Redwood et al. 42). It is important to note that hybrid peace/peacebuilding is not a framework that is explicitly deployed within post-conflict societies. Rather, hybrid peace emerges at the interface where the “everyday activities, needs, interests, and experiences of local groups and the norms and practices of international policymakers/implementers overlap” (Richmond & Mitchell 1). Peace and peacebuilding can therefore be understood as a habitual practice, a continuous and collaborative project that is shaped not by hierarchical impositions but, rather, by the mundane and monotonous interactions that bring communities together.

The cooperative movement has a long history of involvement in peace processes. Many influential cooperatives thriving today have roots in times of crisis, evolving in response to the needs of vulnerable populations facing challenging conditions (Parnell, 2001). This historical context positions cooperatives as dynamic entities that emerged in times of adversity,



underscoring their resilience and adaptability as contributors to peacebuilding efforts. In their seminal work *Cooperatives and the Pursuit of Peace: Cooperatives & Peace* MacPherson and Emmanuel (2007), with contributions from other leading peace and cooperative scholars, highlight the enduring traditions of cooperative involvement in peacebuilding. They argue that cooperative fundamentals make them uniquely positioned to respond to violent and oppressive conditions that other mechanisms may not be as efficiently or directly able to address:

Co-operatives are distinct in terms of their particular combination of principles and values and their capacity to create democratic economic organizations that place people and the environment at the centre of the development process. Within the traditional business world, they are notable for their unique control structures, use of surplus funds or profits, community associations, and social commitments (3).

The connection we see between peacebuilding and cooperation is evident within the case studies we will explore below but can be observed in a myriad of other post-conflict contexts and seen institutionally in the ICA's current partnership with the United Nations.

As such, cooperatives often overlap with multiple sectors in peacebuilding and the lines between their direct impact and other initiatives' efforts makes it difficult to delineate their singular contributions to peacebuilding. "Cooperatives and Peace: Strengthening Democracy, Participation and Trust" is a case study report produced by Cooperatives Europe that was conducted to substantiate long standing claims that cooperatives "mitigate violence" and "help create more cohesive communities" through empirical evidence (11). Across 35 different communities, cooperatives were shown to aid social, political, and economic stabilization. Cross-culturally, albeit to varying degrees, cooperatives promoted community participation, autonomy, and democracy, (re)established relationships between local groups and international representatives from the ground up, and provided education and training that enhanced self-sufficiency and encouraged long-lasting peace (129-131).

As an instrument within positive peace and peacebuilding, cooperation embodies a hybridity in practice. It expands the capacity of grassroots movements and strengthens collaborative solutions to violence and oppression (Souleymane Kibora 218). As institutions of solidarity, cooperatives play a pivotal role in creating connections between divided communities and fostering social inclusion and conflict mitigation (Emmanuel & MacPherson). The cooperative model promotes collective action and democracy, offering a platform for individuals to unite for mutual benefit and shared objectives (MacPherson 39). Furthermore, cooperatives contribute significantly to economic empowerment and poverty alleviation (Emmanuel & MacPherson). Instead of externally imposing democratic institutions and a market economy solution onto communities, cooperatives localize development processes, allowing for the benefits of economic development are more evenly distributed, and decision-making power remains within the community (ibid.). This multi-level collaboration aligns with the principles of hybrid peacebuilding, effectively bridging local needs with broader peace agendas.

### **III. Women, Peace, and Empowerment: Toward Equality and Empowerment**

Within oppressive systems, women are often considered to be “those who suffer the most” (Zaharijević). They are those “who experience an uneven distribution of resources and wealth, or an unequal share of power in public and its repercussions in the private sphere” (ibid.). During active conflict gender shapes the form and execution of violent acts. Gender “permeates the crime of genocide. It is woven into the perpetrators’ planning and commission of coordinated acts that make up the continuum of genocidal violence. It is through these gendered annihilative acts that perpetrators maximize the crime’s destructive impact on protected groups” (Ashraph 2). These destructive acts often include non-killing acts of violence, such as rape or torture, but also include the decimation of the nuclear family and communal support systems (O’Mahony). In

societies where war roles are assigned based on gender, men are also typically the primary fighters. The gendered nature of warfare is consistent across cultures, with men traditionally taking on combat roles (Goldstein). Consequently, men are the major direct victims of killing acts within conflict.

Nevertheless, there are many social implications for the gendered roles and consequences of conflict. The concept of the double burden, or the double burden hypothesis, was developed to describe the workload of individuals, particularly women, who balance both paid employment and substantial unpaid domestic responsibilities (Hochschild). Coined by Arlie Hochschild in her book “The Second Shift,” this phenomenon highlights the unequal allocation of household chores and caregiving duties, with women typically shouldering a greater portion than men. This inequity stems from entrenched traditional gender roles and labor market constraints (ibid.).

Although initially conceived outside the realm of direct conflict, the consequences of the double burden are prominent within conflict environments (Irving). As a result of the conflict conditions described above, the simultaneous responsibility of caregiving and workforce participation falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women. At once, they must balance their domestic duties, the protection of their families, and employment (ibid.). Given women’s positionality during and outside of conflict, many conflict environments have a need to consider gender and women’s empowerment in peace processes (Niykindu).

International, state, and local non-governmental actors have begun to address this issue through a variety of legal, institutional, and alternative mechanisms. On the 31st of October 2000, the United Nations (UN) adopted the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSC Resolution 1325). This “landmark” resolution was the first UN Security Council acknowledgement of women’s unique suffering and positionality as well as their role in

sustainable peace and security (“Landmark Resolution...”). As a result, UNSC Resolution 1325 and later UN resolutions on women, peace, and security helped develop an international framework for advancing considerations for women’s rights and gender issues in peace work (O’Reilly 1). These resolutions “[call] on all actors involved, when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, to adopt a gender perspective” (UNSC Resolution 1325). International bodies and state governments were then advised to support existing feminist peace initiatives, consider the needs of women in reintegration, and ensure the protection of human rights for women (UNSC Resolution 1325).

The paradox between the inclusive language and exclusive action of international and state actors, in addition to patriarchal cultures, has sparked many grassroots feminist peace and resistance movements around the world. There is pushback from feminist theorists and activists about the legal devices and international institutions which “posit the state as the site and conduit of transition” (Ní Aoláin & O’Rourke 2). By assuming that the state is “the locus of reform” we “obscure a range of other important actors relevant to securing transition” and overestimate the ability of fractured and divided states and international organizations to secure justice and reparations (Ní Aoláin & O’Rourke 2). Female perspectives and participation in conflict environments is, therefore, “essential for achieving lasting, just, and sustainable peace” (“Prioritizing Prevention...”).

Amidst the turmoil of conflict societies, there arises the potential for both negative and positive peace to establish novel structures – such as cooperatives – that actively contribute to addressing structural and direct violence. Women’s empowerment transcends mere compensation for the suffering and oppression endured, particularly in the harrowing contexts of war and genocide. Rather, it stands as an integral component of the solution for rebuilding and

fostering peace. It is a multifaceted process in which “women gain skills, knowledge, confidence, resources, and other means to increase their agency and potential to live healthy, independent lives, and decrease their vulnerability to structural inequities” (Duguid & Weber 10). This holistic perspective underscores the interconnected nature of empowerment, recognizing that it involves not only economic aspects but also social, educational, and health dimensions. In the discourse on women’s empowerment, the Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) approach has emerged as a pivotal strategy for promoting social justice and economic development. Focusing on economically marginalized groups, particularly rural women, this approach aims to contribute to gender equality and national economic development (UN 2011). However, the realization of social justice and equal rights for both genders are ongoing global development and peacebuilding challenges, with barriers such as limited access to education, paid work, healthcare services, and decision-making opportunities persisting as impediments to women’s empowerment (Duguid & Weber).

The gender gap in labor force participation exacerbates challenges faced by women. In developing contexts, “women spend two and half times more hours on unpaid labor than men, and their work is most likely to be informal and unprotected” (UN Women 2015). The need to bolster women’s participation in the labor force is emphasized as both a means to challenge global poverty but also to address issues of regional economic stability and structural inequalities (OECD 2012). The disparities in labor force participation, in addition to uneven access to education, paid work, and healthcare services, underscores the need for targeted efforts to create equitable opportunities for women. As a comprehensive framework, women’s empowerment requires interventions that span economic, social, and cultural spheres to create an environment

where women can thrive and contribute meaningfully to both their individual well-being and broader societal progress (MacPherson).

As Duhacek (2015) notes, “...all feminist theories basically originate in the experiences of injustice...feminist theories are inspired, even provoked, implicitly if not explicitly, by the pervasive injustices of the whole social and political order...” (166). Emerging literature on some developing countries suggests that there exists “a higher participation of women in cooperatives compared to their involvement in the overall labor force” (Centre for Strategic Statistics & Information, 2015). Duguid and Weber’s report notes that over the past two decades, there has been a notable surge in women’s participation in cooperatives, particularly in sectors like housing, healthcare, childcare, and eldercare (8). This surge not only facilitates women’s access to employment but also dismantles barriers to entry into the labor market, generating significant employment opportunities.

The incorporation of women into cooperation is important for “[broadening] political dialogues” and enabling diverse perspectives to challenge hegemonic societal, economic, and cultural norms (ibid.). Cooperative enterprises further promote this intersection as they are “based upon values such as self-help, equality, and equity, and principles of voluntary and open membership and democratic member control” (Duguid & Weber 5). In conjunction with these cooperative principles, Bertulfo argues that the seventh cooperative principle, “Concern for Community,” accentuates the immediate relevance of gender equality efforts in peace-building initiatives. Recognizing the inseparability of sustainable development and conflict prevention, co-operatives advocate for collaboration to create cultures of peace (106). Moreover, they foreground feminist thought and praxis that offer anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist perspectives that allow us to reimagine the conditions of marginalized groups around the world. These values

not only underscore the importance of women's participation in cooperatives, but also how cooperative enterprises are uniquely suited to ensure and promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

Still, gendered challenges persist within cooperatives. Robby Tulus' highlights how historical societal norms restrict women's eligibility for cooperative membership and limits their influence in decision-making processes. Moreover, many cooperatives "[struggle] to get traction in terms of financial, human, and social support from members, employees, the government, men, and the general public" (Duguid & Weber 22). The limited support for women's cooperatives is emblematic of how cultures of patriarchy continue to exclude women from peace efforts, empowerment and agency, and the enjoyment of their rights (Wyanamana). These challenges pose a need for a more comprehensive redefinition of the cooperative role:

Pursuing gender equality requires that co-operatives go beyond their traditional role of providing financial services only, but rather that they must address issues of inequality in the community, specifically, in relation to access of resources and enjoyment of benefits and of decision-making (Bertulfo 106).

Nevertheless, women's cooperatives are not a "panacea for solving women's empowerment or gender equality issues" but rather tools to help women address the compounding and intersecting issues of patriarchy and conflict (Duguid & Weber 22).

Despite the abundance of scholarly literature and organizational documents on cooperatives, there remains a noticeable scarcity in literature specifically addressing the concepts of gender equality and women's empowerment within cooperative structures (Duguid & Weber 31). As highlighted in Duguid and Weber's report, "Gender equality and women's empowerment in co-operatives: A literature review," part of this discrepancy can be attributed to a general lack of specificity in the language used to describe organizational structures, making it challenging to find concrete evidence on women's cooperatives and the strategies employed for gender equality

within the cooperative movement (21). However, the absence of explicit mentions of organizational structures underscores “the transient, fluid, applicable, and accessible nature of the Co-operative Principles across a continuum of informal to formal” (ibid.).



## **Background and Cooperative Profiles**

This section aims to link historical insights with present-day narratives, connecting two distinct organizations: the Women's Cooperative Guild and Nyamirambo Women's Center. By delving into the historical context of each cooperative, we gain a deeper understanding of the social, political, and economic factors shaping women's involvement in these movements. Through exploring each cooperative's history, structure, mission, and initiatives, we can compare the two and recognize them as spaces for women's empowerment that contribute to positive peace efforts. Additionally, this section highlights the multifaceted nature of women's roles within these organizations, acknowledging the challenges they face amidst competing demands, particularly in their respective conflict environments.

### **I. Historical Context Behind the Two Cooperatives**

#### *Ia. Women and Cooperation During World War II*

Massive in scale and toll, over 384,000 British soldiers were killed in combat and 70,000 civilians died between 1939 and 1945 (Royal British Legion). WWII was an assault on civilian populations, not only physically but economically. Food rationing started in January 1940, followed by clothing rationing in June 1941. By 1943, nearly every essential household item faced scarcity, requiring people to wait in queues for some necessities, while other items were simply unavailable (Imperial War Museum). The sheer scale of the war effort required mass mobilization of all British citizens, thereby “[blurring] boundaries between military and home fronts and between men and women. Dominant conceptions of gender roles were put under intense pressure, making possible greater awareness of their constructed and hence malleable nature” (Gurney 189).

Women engaged in the war effort, with the most dramatic social changes seen in their joining the military. While this shift often accrues more attention, the working-class housewife persisted as an invaluable fixture of the British war effort. Not only were these women subject to mass amounts of civilian violence, but they also had to integrate themselves in some capacity into the paid labor force while men were at war. This class of women bore the cultural burden of a “working-class ‘mam’, [a] timeless figure, stoic and sensible, the bedrock of family relations and national stability” (Gurney 190). They had both the role of provider and protector, balancing the challenge of providing food and clothing for their families amidst severe shortages while also navigating the complexities of part-time employment, as many were conscripted into the workforce (Ibid.). These social and cultural expectations demonstrate how women’s war-time experiences are incredibly nuanced and fluid.

Post-World War II in England ushered in a period of recovery, reconstruction, and profound societal change. The Labor government, elected in 1945, implemented transformative policies, starting with the establishment of the welfare state and nationalization of key industries. The newfound emphasis on social welfare marked a departure from pre-war conditions (Royal British Legion). Many saw the cooperative movement as a vehicle for change, particularly as the capacities of cooperation pre-war were a cornerstone of the British economy:

By the late 1930s, there were approximately 8.5 million members of around 1,200 local retail societies operating over 12,000 shops and the CWS owned more than 300 factories and warehouses. It was the biggest distributor of tea in the country, milled a third of total flour imports and baked one in five loaves. At the end of the war the Co-operative movement was feeding at least a quarter of the population (Gurney 191).

Cooperation was thus no small movement before, during, or after the war, and hallmarked the capacity of collective movements and social welfare/advocacy groups in establishing positive peace.

The Women's Cooperative Guild (WCG) was no exception to this trend. This organization offers keen insights into working-class women during this period as, "there can be no doubt about the importance of a group that constituted the majority of adult women, about 55 per cent or 8.75 million in 1943 when mobilization was at its height" (Ibid.). The WCG emerged as a crucial voice for working-class housewives during this era, advocating for their needs and concerns. Moreover, in the early war years, the guild actively campaigned for the implementation of a comprehensive rationing scheme (Gurney 193). Amidst scarce and rationed resources during the World Wars, the WCG aimed to ensure fair and equitable distribution to housewives around England. The collaborative nature of the guild allowed women to unite, share experiences, and collectively address the difficulties imposed by wartime conditions. By advocating for comprehensive rationing, the Women's Co-operative Guild exemplified its commitment to securing the well-being of working-class households, highlighting the often-underappreciated role of cooperative movements in shaping social and economic policies during times of conflict.

#### *Ib. Female Experiences during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide*

The 1994 Rwandan Genocide against the Tutsi claimed between 800,000 to one million lives over the course of 100 days. This represented a significant portion of Rwanda's population at the time, leading to widespread trauma, displacement, and societal upheaval. The genocide also resulted in the destruction of communities, infrastructure, and the social fabric of Rwandan society ("Historical Background to the Rwanda Genocide"). Gender largely determined the nature of violence individuals experienced, as sexual violence was widely mobilized as a weapon against Tutsi women. The UN estimates around 250,000 to 500,000 women were raped during the genocide and nearly every female Tutsi survivor over the age of twelve had been a victim of

sexual violence (Ashraph 64). This sexual violence included rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, and sexual mutilation, which often occurred after women watched the killings of their families and the looting of their homes (Nowrojee 2-4). Consequently, many women were forcibly impregnated and infected with AIDS/HIV, with survivors left to “die of sadness” (Ibid., *The Uncondemned*).

Following the genocide, women were not only traumatized, but also widowed, sick, and in financial crisis. The systematic use of rape during the genocide was intended to shatter women emotionally, physically, and communally (Ashraph). In the immediate aftermath of the genocide, survivors faced barriers to social reintegration and stigma around their experiences (De Brouwer *Introduction*). Women of both ethnic groups were treated as “witnesses to” rather than “victims of” genocide (O’Mahony). This was largely due to the lack of legal recognition and frameworks around gendered violence on both national and international levels (Ashraph 62). Vast social grievances amongst women also complicated the process of social reintegration. For many years, women did not come together across ethnic lines, there was strife about who participated in the genocide and differential access to resources, meaning that much of the community rebuilding took place in the decade that followed (*The Uncondemned*). The aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide Against the Tutsi, therefore, necessitated serious political, economic, and social rebuilding.

Despite these challenges, women in post-genocide Rwanda valiantly fought for and achieved recognition and justice. Transitional justice for women involved not only judicial mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the Gacaca Courts, but also the mobilization of civil society to provide symbolic, personal, and material forms of justice (Eftekhari 4). Rape victims were identified as among the most vulnerable in

society (MINUMBWE). Government-funded cell-level interventions provided crucial material and financial support, encompassing assistance in finances, housing, school aid, and counseling for survivors (Ibid.). Women's groups within civil society also became crucial spaces in providing inclusive support for women and survivors of sexual violence. As noted above, however, many of these organizations did not form immediately following the genocide. These groups provided assistance to sexual assault survivors, widows, orphans, and other traumatized peoples, along with human rights advocacy after many years ("Rwanda: Civic Freedom Monitor"). For the greater public, a 2010 CIVICUS Civil Society Index Analytical Country Report for Rwanda reported that Rwanda's civil society sector promotes positive values such as "anti-corruption practices, gender equity, poverty eradication, tolerance and democracy promotion" ("The State of Civil Society in Rwanda in National Development"). As a cooperative within civil society, Nyamirambo Women's Center exemplifies the achievements of the sector at large.

Moreover, the Center fits within the national agenda of the Rwandan government. The Rwandan government sought to remedy systemic issues through gender equality reforms that were central to the reconstruction of the country and nation building (Niyonkuru & Barrett 3). The Women's National Council (WNC) formulated gender-focused policies and initiatives like the Land and Matrimonial Laws and the Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV). These legal reforms grant women equal rights to land ownership and inheritance, as well as criminalizing SGBV, including marital rape. Furthermore, the national government increased women's political visibility in parliament (Ibid.). Almost two decades after the genocide, 64 percent of parliamentary seats were held by women, following the 2003 constitution amendment

that set a 30 percent quota for women in all elected political positions (“Rwanda: Women in Parliament”).

Despite these legal and political advancements, challenges remain in translating policies into tangible improvements for marginalized women. Deep-rooted societal norms and practices continue to perpetuate gender inequalities, hindering the full realization of women’s rights and opportunities (Debusscher & Ansoms). Niyonkuru & Barrett note, “at the local level, especially in rural areas, economic inequality [is] still an issue, with women suffering disadvantage as a result of long-standing traditional customs and structures” (3). Likewise, Rwandan civil society has its weaknesses. Most notably, civil society has less power “in holding government to be transparent, ensuring environmental protection and influencing public policy” (Ibid.). The sector struggles with geographic distribution of services (as most organizations operate in major cities), influence of foreign funding, and interaction with private and corporate sectors. Furthermore, civil society organizations are “aid dependent and 75% rely on international aid” (Ismail 3). Thus, while the government’s gender-focused legal and policy frameworks signify progress, there remains a pressing need for sustained efforts to address deeply ingrained gender inequalities and ensure the inclusive participation and empowerment of all women in post-genocide Rwanda.

## **II. Cooperative Profiles**

### *Iia. History of the Women’s Cooperative Guild*

The Women’s Cooperative Guild formed as an autonomous branch of the larger co-op movement in the 1883. Prior to their formation, women were barred from all cooperative participation (“Women's Cooperative Guild”). Alice Acland, an editor for the “Women’s Corner” column of the Cooperative News newspaper, and Mary Lawrenson sought to create an

organization that focused on offering educational and recreational classes for mothers and girls (Blaszak 77). Acland started the Women's League for the Spread of Cooperation, convening its inaugural meeting during the 1883 Co-operative Congress in Edinburgh. The 50 women in attendance helped establish local branches to further the guild's objectives and activities (Ibid.).

The guild's founding marked the beginning of a concerted effort to promote cooperation and provide educational and recreational opportunities for women and girls in the community. The Women's Guild soon moved beyond cooperation's retail-based objectives and additionally focused on addressing large-scale systemic issues, organizing political campaigns on women's issues. In 1889, Margaret Llewelyn Davies was elected to the role of general secretary of the Guild, helping expand the capacities and membership of the organization. Under her guidance, the Guild experienced substantial growth, and by 1910, its membership had expanded to 32,000 members ("Women's Cooperative Guild"). As the guild grew, so too did the scope of their political campaigns. Starting in WWI, but coming to fruition in WWII, the Guild was heavily involved in peace activism, establishing themselves as one of the most prominent pacifist groups of the WWII period. Membership reached its peak during this time, with 72,000 members in over 1,500 branches (Ibid). Although membership dropped during the reconstruction period, the Guild persisted as an organization until closing its doors in 2016 ("Women's Cooperative Guild").

### *Iib. History of Nyamirambo Women's Center*

Nyamirambo Women's Center (NWC) was formed in response to the low levels of literacy, skills, and support women had in post-genocide Rwanda. In 2007, 18 women of mixed ethnicity started the center as a support group for single mothers and women experiencing poverty and gender-based-violence in the Nyamirambo neighborhood of Kigali. The founders of the women's center sought to establish an organization that would advance gender equality and

combat gender-based violence and discrimination through education and vocational training and equal-access employment.

At first, the group formed as a collaborative educational effort; those with an education “[helped] other women to learn to read and write” (Umugeni 3:15). As the popularity of the organization grew, however, the founders decided they needed a formal gathering space outside of the living rooms of each other’s homes. In 2008, the founding women met two Slovenian aid workers who helped NWC find funding from the Slovenian Ministry. With these finances, the center rented a room large enough for their meetings and purchased materials and four sewing machines to start offering sewing courses to their members and other women in the neighborhood (Umugeni 6:42).

By late 2009, the center offered multiple sewing courses to “give [participants] a chance to learn a skill that can help them to do something and earn money” enabling women to “become [financially] independent, to be empowered, to be able to contribute to their families” (Umugeni 7:35). These machines initiated an organizational shift from education and skill sharing to vocational empowerment and capacity building. In 2013, NWC became an official equal-shares and democratically owned cooperative with the advent of their product line “Umutima” (“About”). The cooperative employed over fifty women as seamstresses, and sourced other products from female artisans in Kigali to sell in their small retail store. As a means of bringing in revenue, the center also trains women in “community-based tourism.” Currently, they have five tour guides who lead visitors through the Nyamirambo neighborhood and teach basket and cooking classes (Nyangoma 28:17). This brings in a reliable customer base that allows the center to be less dependent on external funding.



Today, the store booms with life in the Nyamirambo neighborhood. The workrooms and storefront connect, and women flow with ease between the two spaces. Constant laughter and chatter compete with the rhythmic hum of sewing machines. Community members are invited in to converse with the seamstresses or sell their goods (food, clothing, cellular data, etc.). Children run in to greet their mothers and often must make multiple rounds of hellos before they continue their walks home. Almost all the seamstresses live close to the Center, and some will bring food from their homes down the block to share with their coworkers.

The Women's Center and the Guild's histories are fundamentally different. The Guild started as a means to encourage women's participation in cooperation, while the Women's Center started as a community support group. Both, however, had the rights and needs of women in mind. The Guild's shift to "citizenship" - women's civic education - ushered in a period of advocacy that platformed women's rights and the needs of working-class women during and after wartime. NWC's focus on community and capacity building reflects the founders' critical understanding of women's positionality in post-genocide Rwanda. Marie Aimeé Umugeni, one of the founding members and the cooperative's current president describes the conditions of women:

We all had different background and all had different level of education; they were like, okay, those who were able to go to university, who were able to go to school, they can help those ones who never went in school. (...) When we started as an organization, we were thinking maybe we would just be to train women and then they find their own way to find jobs. But after training them, we found out that there was those women who can't even afford to buy a sewing machine (Umugeni 7:33, 19:31).

Both organizations' respective foci demonstrate how women's cooperatives tailor their approaches to the needs and contexts of their members while pursuing broader goals of positive peace and women's empowerment.

### *Iic. The Women's Cooperative Guild – Structure, Mission, Achievements, and Challenges*

The structure of the Women's Cooperative Guild was largely informed by the broader cooperative movement. Not only did it reflect the Rochdale Principles of cooperation but was fortified by the efforts of democratically run retail stores ("Women's Cooperative Guild"). Earnings from trade within cooperative societies were distributed among members based on the value of goods acquired during a quarter. Membership was granted through ownership of a £1 share, purchasable with accumulated dividends. Like other societies, the Guild was under the guidance and supervision of two federal organizations: the Cooperative Union, which provided legal guidance and advanced cooperative education, and the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) that engaged in bulk purchasing and the production of goods (Gurney 190).

When Margaret Llewelyn Davies assumed leadership in 1889, the Women's Cooperative Guild comprised 1700 members across 51 branches. The branches were organized under six district secretaries, forming the central committee of the Women's Guild. The committee, in addition to the Union and CWS, was elected through a democratic process and primarily served in an advisory capacity. Despite the introduction of district secretaries, the boards maintained a focus on democratic self-governance at the branch level ("Women's Cooperative Guild"). Davies' tenure marked a significant period in the goals and operations of the Women's Guild. Cooperation took the form of publications and retail that promoted the principles of the cooperative movement and involvement "in a number of political campaigns designed to improve the political and legal position of women and the social conditions of women, especially of the working classes" (Ibid.).

At the 1883 inaugural meeting of the Women's Guild, Alice Acland issued the Guild's first statement of purpose. The mission of the organization was:

1. To spread knowledge of the advantages of cooperation.
2. To stimulate amongst those who know its advantages a greater interest in the principles of Cooperation.
3. To keep alive in ourselves, our neighbors, and especially in the rising generation, a more earnest appreciation of the value of Cooperation to ourselves, our children, and to the nation.
4. To improve the conditions of women all over the country (Co-operative News (Manchester) 1883, Quoted in Blaszak 77).

Acland also placed particular emphasis on the practical application of these goals, noting “Our part in Cooperation is to be the sunbeams, the encouragers. Above all things our influence must be quiet; our motto ‘Study to be quiet and do your own business’” (Ibid.). In its origins, the Guild was conceived as a conservative organization. However, as Blaszak notes, “guildswomen soon discovered that to implement item four (...) they would have to depart from their traditional roles” (77).

The ideological shift of the Guild was largely attributed to the leadership of Margaret Davies. Her background as an educated, middle-class daughter of a Christian Socialist shaped her perspective on women’s cooperation as a means of achieving greater social, legal, and economic equality. To Davies, Guild meetings did not “descend into mere sewing classes,” but, rather, functioned to instill women with a sense of public duty, ownership, education, and empowerment (Davies). Women were taught to conduct research, present their findings, and vote on Guild resolutions and campaigns (Blaszak 77). Liberation and equality were, therefore, at the forefront of the Guild’s efforts. This mission extended beyond the branch and inspired the ideological basis of the International Women’s Cooperative Guild that believed:

All the many housewives who work in the cells, so to speak, of our economic organism – the homes – must be united and educated by our Guild. That is to say that we want to unite and educate half mankind and train them for common work inside and outside the house [. . .] it is a question also of freeing the housewives from all prejudices, of protecting them against all prejudices which hinder their public work and of securing them that recognition from the community which

today is wanting, for the housewife's work is still always regarded as an inferior economic service in the life of nations (Freundlich 1).

The Women's Cooperative Guild stood as a pioneering force that not only championed women's causes within the cooperative movement but also significantly contributed to broader social and political advancements. To address the concerns of working-class women, the WCG campaigned for critical issues such as free trade, housing, and tariffs that directly impacted the household budgets of housewives. Throughout its history, the guild played a pivotal role in elevating the condition and status of working-class women and housewives who had little political visibility and education. The Guild spearheaded initiatives promoting open and shareholding membership, thereby enhancing women's participation and influence within cooperatives (Blaszak 82). They also helped increase retail workers' minimum wages, thereby improving overall cooperative working conditions (Blaszak 81). Beyond the cooperative realm, the WCG demonstrated a commitment to internationalism, pacifism, land reform, and old age pensions. By advocating for these principles, the guild showcased a dedication to addressing broader societal issues and contributing to progressive change. Most importantly, however, was the Guild's commitment to issues that impacted women regardless of class. The Guild was a prominent advocate for women's right to vote, hold municipal office, and form female trade unions (Ibid.).

Central to the Women's Guild was its focus on education. This emphasis was one of the greatest lasting impacts on Guild members as they gained vital training in citizenship, allowing "ordinary" housewives to "[gain] invaluable experience of democratic association at branch meetings, finding a space where they could discuss ideas, learn to speak in public and develop organizational skills" (Gurney 201). During the war these skills, in tandem with the Guild's pacifist policy, allowed women to think critically about conflict, especially as it intersected with

gender and class. This allowed members to “think about the structural causes that had led to war – including the often-hidden workings of international syndicates and combines” (Ibid.).

Scholars have largely cited the Guild’s stance on pacifism as the reason for their demise. In 1938, only months before WWII began, the senior leadership of the guild declared its commitment to “absolute pacifism,” despite resistance from other members of the opinion that some form of “collective security” was to be maintained in the rising conflict (Scott 80). During a cooperative meeting that year, Guild pacifists won by a vote of 897 to 623, yet never publicly acknowledged the considerable division in opinion (Scott 80). Given that the Guild focused heavily on nurturing and expanding the “citizenship” of its members, a unitarian stance on a central issue contradicted the principle of democracy within the Guild, and many members felt disregarded and unseen.

The extent to which this policy was detrimental to the Guild is somewhat up for debate. The immovability of senior leadership to consider opposing perspectives did provoke a significant drop in membership during WWII. Membership fell from “87,000 in 1939, to 65,000 in early 1940 and just over 51,000 in 1945” (Gurney 192). Nevertheless, membership across other women’s organizations also fell, pointing to a more general downtick in women’s civil engagement during that time. Peter Gurney suggests that the ultimate failure of the Women’s Guild was their inability to bridge generational divides between members. After the war, the Guild struggled to “to reinvent itself and address young women sympathetically, preferring to admonish them instead” (202). The Guild doubled down on its cultural symbolism as a space representing motherhood and housewives, ultimately alienating young female consumers and prospective leaders.

## *Iid. Nyamirambo Women's Center – Structure, Mission, Achievements, and Challenges*

Similar to the WCG, the leadership and structure of Nyamirambo Women's Center has made it a cooperative that reflects the principles of cooperation to meet its members' needs. NWC has two boards with democratically elected board members. There is the organization board and the cooperative board. The cooperative board is responsible for managing the Umutima project and the organization board coordinates larger cooperative initiatives, training, and funding. All board members are also members of the cooperative, working and earning a wage through Umutima. As such, the leaders of the organization are embedded within the structure and everyday function, "if leaders are also working, that means it's much easier because [they] can hear from other women who are not like leaders, like the struggles they are having, and she can report it to the board so that they find ways to make it easy for everyone to feel safe and be more productive" (Epiphany 7:57). The cooperative's structure is not only democratic but deeply egalitarian, ensuring that leaders and members alike have consistent agency over the decision-making process. The two boards also "communicate for much more, for bigger plans, for long-term plans" allowing cooperative and organizational goals and efforts to consistently align (Umugeni 32:23).

NWC is an organization focused on the agency and capabilities of women. Currently, NWC's goals include: "[strengthening] the institutional and organizational capacity of NWC ... [promoting] and [empowering] women through capacity development and employment ... and [promoting] women and community-based tourism" ("About"). They do this by providing education, vocational training, and employment to women based in Kigali. These trainings come at little to no cost to the participants, acting as accessible social and economic means of empowerment.

By empowering women through trainings, through skills we offer to them so they can do something and be able to empower themselves. And we are really still looking to empowering more women around this neighborhood because we still see those women who really need to learn those skills, who are looking to be empowered, who are looking to be supported for their everyday life (Umugeni 11:59).

They believe empowerment is achieved through skill sharing and education that enables women to expand their economic status. Women's economic equality is intrinsically tied to their access to skills and literacy: "That's why the center now is having that plan to build an incubation training center, for women where they can come and learn skills that will help them to improve their life" (Ibid.). The cooperative's current mission is expansive and inclusive, recognizing the multiplying effect of training programs for members and non-members alike. The organization also established a small multilingual community library that serves to promote reading amongst the children of the seamstresses and other kids in the Nyamirambo neighborhood ("About").

Umutima is the cooperative's retail product line. The project combines fiber arts, East-African culture, and economic empowerment to create a dynamic and creative development space. The initiative stands as a prime example of positive hybrid peacebuilding as it delicately balances the interplay between external support and organizational autonomy and increases women's access to income-generating activities. Umutima has steadily expanded over the years, with an average of four members joining each year since its initiation in 2014. As a result, the women have gained the respect and support of the community:

Everyone wants to be part of this. And everyone sees these women who are their wives coming from something and they'll all feel wow, this is really something needed in this neighborhood. And another thing is, we [make] some product here, but we also work with other women outside in Nyamirambo. So, we offer them a job, (...) we pay them, and then we bring [their products] to sell in our shop. So, people, they see an opportunity here. Because it's a place where they have [access to], where they can bring their product to be sold. And for the walking tours, we offer food, and [the chef] will go to buy food. So, if we have a big group every day, [the chef] will be buying food from the community here. So, there is an

impact also around the center and people in the neighborhood. They are really supporting this (Umugeni 21:54).

Rachel Iradukunda Kayizkire, a sales manager at NWC, even aspired to join the organization as a child, “I got encouragement to work with them and then I worked hard (...) it’s highly regarded because it helps a lot of people around here” (2:42).

Although NWC strives to expand operations, they are currently limited by space and finances. The center sprawls down almost an entire block of Nyamirambo, renting rooms one-by-one as the cooperative has grown. Even so, they have over ten sewing stations packed into each room and have no ability to recruit new members or purchase more machines. The disjointed rooms not only limit the size of the cooperative itself, but also make it more difficult for members to stay connected and for visitors to visualize the women’s collective efforts (Umugeni 32:33). Furthermore, the center lacks the resources to compete in online markets and participate in international sales. Visitors would be able to purchase more products and the center would attract an entire virtual market that could potentially enable them to become entirely self-funded.

While both cooperatives have made significant contributions to women’s empowerment and social change, they face distinct challenges and opportunities. The Women’s Cooperative Guild, despite its historical significance, experienced challenges in maintaining relevance and membership, particularly during periods of political upheaval. In contrast, the Nyamirambo Women’s Center grapples with issues of limited resources and infrastructure, hindering its ability to scale its operations and reach more women in need.



## **Discussion**

The above section sheds light on these cooperatives' resilience, mission, challenges, and contributions to peacebuilding and societal transformation. Both the Women's Cooperative Guild and the Nyamirambo Women's Center share commonalities in their dedication to promoting women's rights, fostering economic empowerment, and advancing community development. Despite operating in distinct historical and cultural contexts, the organizations exemplify the transformative potential of women-led cooperatives in challenging traditional gender norms and addressing socio-economic disparities in conflict environments.

As such, NWC and the Guild are best understood together as peacebuilding organizations that utilize the tenets of cooperation to directly account for the needs and aspirations of women. Within these organizations, women can engage in peace processes, build community, and gain a degree of economic independence, resulting in greater empowerment. This empowerment enables cooperative members to occupy dual cultural expectations as mothers and providers during and after conflict. Although they promote women's empowerment, cooperatives still operate under the pressures of inter/post-conflict nation building and longstanding patriarchal structures. These organizations thus exist within the dichotomy of patriarchal social and cultural expectations while simultaneously promoting women's agency and equity through the cooperative model. NWC and the Guild function as sites of negotiation, allowing women to both resist and operate within the limitations of patriarchy amidst conflict.

### **I. Peacebuilding**

The Nyamirambo Women's Center and the Women's Cooperative Guild both functioned as positive peacebuilding entities by providing women with income-building opportunities and offering training and education to advance their social status. The Women's Cooperative Guild,

however, focused on the advocacy component of peacebuilding, working to advance women's civic education, whereas NWC emphasizes literacy and technical training as a means of developing the capacities of women in the post-genocide context.

The conditions of post-genocide Rwanda and England during WWII, while distinct in their historical and cultural contexts, presented comparable challenges in national dependence on women for their labor. As previously mentioned, smaller male workforces forced women to take on laborious roles both inside and outside the household, further emphasizing their indispensable contribution to post-conflict reconstruction, wartime survival, and overall social stability. Simultaneously, women in England had little political visibility and agency, while in Rwanda "most of the ladies had no jobs, no education and it was really hard" (Nyangoma 8:24). For those reasons, women starting these cooperatives "thought we can help this group so that they can support themselves and empower themselves" (ibid.). The acute cultural and economic dependency on their work underscores the pivotal role of women in sustaining and rebuilding their communities during times of conflict and post-conflict recovery.

Given the states' dependence on women's workforce participation and domestic labor, the Guild and NWC had to address barriers to women's integration into traditionally male spaces. NWC and the Guild both opted to integrate the cooperative principle of education heavily into their operations as a means of building the capacities of women to address structural issues. Nevertheless, they each took different approaches to education to account for the needs and context of their respective periods of conflict. The Women's Cooperative Guild was focused primarily on citizenship, using it as a means of not only empowering the women they served, but also as a way of expanding their organizational influences and capacity. Their advocacy enabled women to engage in democratic association, public speaking, and organizational skills, which

allowed them to think critically about conflict, gender, and class. These efforts impacted women on various scales, demonstrating “how cooperatives engage in campaigns that transcend traditional organizational boundaries” to confront larger systemic issues to and pursue larger goals of peace (Macpherson 51). Conversely, Nyamirambo Women’s Center adheres to a more conventional approach to cooperation with an emphasis on technical training. Their literacy programs and technical training have no explicit political agendas attached to them, but rather serve as a more implicit means of development and elevating the status of women. These skills are an avenue that led to more income-generating opportunities: “after reading and writing, someone can be able to write the measurement to make the clothes” or engage in other “small-business” ventures that have low barriers to entry outside of being able to read and write (Umugeni 7:33). Within this cooperative space, members “can learn to do [something] that brings them money so that they contribute to the well-being of their families” (Epiphany 25:58). Education, of all kinds, allows women to respond to the demands on their labor, thus contributing to the wellbeing of their families and the nation.

Moreover, the two cooperatives’ commitment to democratic governance and inclusive decision-making processes highlight its role as a hybrid peacebuilding mechanism. Members actively participate in the election of leadership and the formulation of cooperative policies, amplifying the voices of women within their respective communities. In the Women’s Center:

They have learned that working together and listening to one another person’s opinion is what have brought them here. So, they keep instilling that spirit to everyone here, encouraging them to take this as a safe space to share their ideas as long as those ideas contribute to the growth of each member here (Epiphany 23:13)

Despite different educational objectives, both organizations engaged in bottom-up capacity building, contributing to peace on a grassroots level. Both can be understood under the frameworks of positive peace and hybridity, as they mobilize local communities and provide

members with tools to respond to both patriarchal systemic issues and the immediate conditions of their respective conflict environments. The extent to which they engaged with larger institutions, however, differs based on the historical and cultural contexts. In post-genocide Rwanda, the national government's explicit campaigning for women's empowerment has surely had a strong impact on the success of a smaller cooperative organization. One of the interviewees highlighted this support when she mentioned that the cooperative is "recognized on a national level" and that "they are recognized of their hard work" within their organization (Consolee 13:15). On the other hand, the influence of the Guild was much more widespread throughout England, but their efforts focused on campaigning against unjust policies within different levels of government. This reflects a different kind of multi-level collaboration, as the Guild was actively negotiating women's roles with government entities during conflict. The Guild and NWC therefore reflected the objectives of hybrid peacebuilding in their interactions with larger institutions as grassroots organizations. At large, they both promoted gender equity, peace, and social welfare, even if achieving those goals in distinct ways. In their pursuits, their organizations built up the status of women in conflict environments, thereby actively promoting positive peace.

## **II. Sites of Negotiation**

When women engage in cooperation during conflict, they are simultaneously responding to demands on their labor while carving out spaces that also account for their own needs and agendas. This positions the Guild and NWC as environments where women can navigate their roles as women under pressure from state entities and culture. Nationhood and nation building in conflict environments is particularly concerned with defining the roles of manhood and womanhood. Patriarchal structures thus shape our notions of femininity and masculinity.

Although women are often relegated to the periphery of power, it is women who “reproduce nations biologically, culturally, and symbolically” (Yuval-Davis 2). Amidst conflict, this process is even more apparent. Nations simultaneously build up a secondary female labor force as men are conscripted into violence or killed and preserve the traditional parameters of motherhood to maintain their domestic labor force. Although these two roles are contradictory, they serve the same purpose of embedding working-class women into the national identity and state security during conflict.

One way in which nations subvert women into these dual roles is through cultural signaling. Cultural representations and archetypes of women’s cooperation often revolve around imagery of motherhood and women’s duty/responsibility in nation building and national security. In England, working-class women not only had to provide for their families in times of acute scarcity but also juggle the demands imposed by part-time work. As noted by Peter Gurney:

The government certainly recognized how vital it was to get housewives on side, though it often chose to exalt them for what were seen as innate nurturing qualities rather than provide practical help for the difficulties that they routinely faced, including when shopping, for instance (190).

The propaganda film “They Also Serve” portrayed “the working-class ‘mam’ as a timeless figure, stoic and sensible, the bedrock of family relations and national stability” (ibid.). Women during this period were bombarded with signals about their responsibilities, signaling a new era of more relaxed gender roles while maintaining preexisting patriarchal expectations.

Similarly, in Rwanda, women face the cultural burden of being the “heart” of the nation and the home. Even the name “Umutima” indicates a cultural view of women’s capacity and responsibility to their families and culture at large. Plainly translated from Kinyarwanda, the word means “heart” (“About”). Kinyarwanda, however, is an incredibly nuanced language and this word is often used to describe women and their maternal nature as the center or core of

familial and national relations (Bernadette 33:24). Attached to the cooperative, this word exemplifies the responsibilities women have in maintaining the stability, integrity, and security of their homes and the country. As noted by the cooperative president: “Once you are empowering a woman, you are empowering a family. You are also empowering a country” (Umugeni 29:44).

At the same time, these cooperatives invite the rigidity of these roles to be pushed back on by emphasizing education and economic freedom. The cooperative imagery of ‘the woman with the basket’ gave members hope for a more “utopian” future, one in which a new social order could be built upon principles of greater equity (Gurney). The Women’s Cooperative Guild was a crucial voice for working-class housewives during World War II in England, advocating for their needs and concerns. The visibility and agency of this class was expanded as women engaged in civic education and collective action. Nyamirambo Women’s Center has been instrumental in providing skills and income to women in post-genocide Rwanda. This has given women “payment [that] supports them beyond work, supports them to support their families so they feel empowered” (Bernadette 23:51). And as Vice President Mary Nyangoma notes, “Of course, you can also do it when you're taking care of your kids at home” demonstrating how women’s membership within the cooperatives is integrated into their responsibilities as mothers. Both organizations empower women and address the cultural, social, and economic dependence of their societies on their contributions. However, they provide avenues for women to both challenge traditional roles and gain economic independence, thereby contributing to a more nuanced and fluid picture of how women adapt and respond to demands on their labor during times of conflict and reconstruction.

### III. Empowerment

Within this duality, women in both organizations exercise a greater degree of autonomy and independence socially, culturally, and economically. As such, these spaces have contributed greatly to women's empowerment, albeit in different ways as they cater to their respective needs and contexts. Women's economic empowerment could be deemed slightly higher in Nyamirambo Women's Center, considering their emphasis on literacy and technical training, and the availability of these skills to women even outside of the cooperative:

We give them a chance to learn a skill that can help them to do something and earn money, because we wanted them to become independent, to be empowered, to be able to contribute to their families. So, with contributing to the family or earning an income, you need to do a small business. So, that's how we said, after reading and writing, someone can be able to write the measurement to make the clothes, if you want someone's skirt, you need to measure her. So that's how we choose the sewing course as a skills that will not require a lot of calculations (Umugeni 8:05).

This accounts for the greater economic support needed by genocide survivors given that many of them were the heads of their households following the gendered violence and destruction of infrastructure during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. Empowerment in the Women's Guild took the shape of civic engagement, highlighting the different and more severe legal status of women during the early twentieth century. Moreover, given that the Guild had to respond to larger cooperative organizations (and the more conservative culture of this period), women faced greater barriers to participating in retail efforts (Blaszak).

Nevertheless, the grassroots nature of the two organizations fostered significant social bonds that embolden and support women in their daily lives. Both cooperatives emphasize the sentiment of "sisterhood" throughout their organizations and note the positive impact that working in community has on them. In NWC, members "find people who works here are the second family to [them], their friends. So that's like why [they] keep coming back, making

money but also having like supportive women, fellow women working together as a family” (Epiphany 7:17). Rachel, one of the younger cooperative members, describes the environment as full of “good moms” as a space where “you can feel your mom is around” (Iradukunda Kayizkire). The collective work effort and cooperative structure builds trust, thereby strengthening community for women who have lost so much support in their lifetimes: “teaching [us] how to love one another, how to love what [we] do, and how to really do well what [we] do is something that motivates [us] every day, something that keeps [us] strong even after genocide” (Bernadette 36:42).

For the Women’s Guild, given their emphasis on citizenship, it was not so much their collective work efforts that bonded them together but the democratic structure of the organization that promoted interclass collaboration. As one guildswoman noted, “The one great difference between the Guild and other bodies of women I have come in contact with is, may I say, its splendid democracy. The humblest member can feel that she stands on an absolute equality with the most lofty” (Margaret Llewelyn Davies, quoted in Blaszak 78). With the organization’s inclusivity, the Women’s Cooperative Guild could extend its efforts to all women, promoting solidarity and strengthening their campaigning efforts. Although the empowerment between the two organizations took different forms, the collective efforts of women across the cooperatives point to a larger trend of building community and strengthening the capacities of the whole. Together, they built a sisterhood that accounts for both the needs of the individual and the aspirations of them all.

In conclusion, Nyamirambo Women’s Center and the Women’s Cooperative Guild represent more than just cooperative organizations; they embody the resilience, agency, and transformative potential of women in conflict environments. Through their dedication to



promoting women's rights, fostering economic empowerment, and advancing community development, these cooperatives serve as dynamic agents of positive and hybrid peacebuilding. Despite operating within the constraints of patriarchal structures and the pressures of conflict nation-building, NWC and the Guild provide vital spaces where women can engage in peace processes, build resilient communities, and achieve economic independence, ultimately experiencing greater empowerment. In navigating the dual cultural expectations of their domestic and workforce roles, women within these cooperatives challenge traditional gender norms while operating within the limitations imposed by patriarchy amidst conflict. Thus, NWC and the Guild exemplify the complex interplay between women's agency, cooperative principles, and societal change, demonstrating how women-led initiatives actively contribute to positive peacebuilding efforts despite various levels of adversity.

## Conclusion

Female solidarity and women-led spaces are not merely a response to patriarchal systems but also a strategic approach to challenging them. Cooperatives provide the space in which women's collective action empowers them both materially and socially. The dichotomy of existing within and resisting patriarchal systems is not just a backdrop to the endeavors of the Nyamirambo Women's Center and the Women's Cooperative Guild; it is a central tension that shapes and defines their missions. While both organizations operate within societies where conflict and patriarchal norms exert significant influence over gender roles and expectations, the cooperatives also actively challenge these norms by promoting the agency and empowerment of women independently and collectively.

In examining their peacebuilding efforts, it becomes apparent that NWC and the Guild navigate a delicate balance between working within pre-existing and conflict-constructed social and cultural frameworks while advocating for women's rights and empowerment. The cultural negotiation apparent in these cooperatives shed light on the gendered construction of nationhood and the roles assigned to women within society. They must operate within the confines of patriarchal systems to fulfill their roles as domestic workers, all while challenging traditional gender roles and equally adhering to the expectations of the state in their nation building efforts. This duality requires tedious negotiation and is often an extreme imposition on the everyday lives and wellbeing of women in conflict environments.

The cooperatives' efforts to empower women economically and socially must be viewed through a critical lens, as they operate within larger systems of power and privilege that shape women's opportunities and access to resources. While NWC and the Guild provide valuable support and resources to women, particularly those from marginalized communities, they may

inadvertently reinforce the salience of the national identity and the double burden for women within their own organizations and broader society. Additionally, it is important to consider the limitations and constraints faced by both organizations in their pursuit of gender equality and social change. Structural barriers, such as limited funding, institutional inertia, and entrenched patriarchal attitudes, pose significant challenges to their efforts to effect systemic change. Although under these heavy social and cultural demands, women in both organizations report feeling fulfilled by the resources and skills they gain access to and the communities they embed themselves within. As such, I want to emphasize both the constraints women in these conflict environments are under, while acknowledging the strides they make in disrupting traditional gender norms and forging a more egalitarian future.

While NWC and the Women's Cooperative Guild play vital roles in promoting women's rights and empowerment, their endeavors are not without complexities and contradictions. Their dichotomous conditions underscore the nuanced nature of their work and the challenges they face in the intersection of peacebuilding and empowerment. Further research could address the compounding and intersecting pressures women's cooperatives operate under. Moreover, there is still a need for more cross-cultural comparative studies that help us understand both local anomalies and large-scale patterns. It is through these practices that we can make greater strides in understanding women in conflict environments and the means by which they navigate and combat oppressive systems.

# Appendix

## Appendix A

### Research Questions

*\*5-10 Questions per Theme\* \*Questions are subject to change\**

#### **Personal Narrative:**

- Name, age, education, children.
- How long have you worked at Nyamirambo Women's Center?
- How did you get involved in this organization?
- What kind of relationships do you have with your coworkers?
- What is your favorite product you have made?
- Do you think that the work you are doing at Nyamirambo Women's Center is important?
- What is something that you value about this organization?

#### **History and Growth:**

- How/when was the organization formed?
- What is the mission/vision of Nyamirambo Women's Center? Has it changed over time?
- Would you consider this a peacebuilding organization?
- How has the cooperative changed?
- What impacts has Nyamirambo Women's Center had on the greater community?
- What are the organization's goals for the future?
- How does the cooperative compare to others?

#### **Empowerment/Autonomy:**

- How would you define empowerment?
- How much input do you have in organization?
- Would you call yourself an artist?
- How has Nyamirambo Women's Center impacted your life?
- How has this work impacted your experience as a woman in Rwanda?
- What is it like being in a female led cooperative?

#### **Economic Development:**

- How has Nyamirambo Women's Center impacted your life?
- What is the organization's primary source of funding/income?
- Do you feel supported by external/foreign funding?
- What are some challenges the organization faces?

Examples of questions asked in semi-structured interviews (variable).

## Appendix B

### Consent for Research Participation Women's Cooperation in Post-Genocide Rwanda

The goal of this study is to learn about [insert organization] from a Rwandan woman's perspective. I want to understand how this organization has impacted your life. If there are any changes to the study that might affect your participation, I will let you know.

If you agree to participate in the research project, you will be asked to answer interview questions in a group setting. There will be about 5-7 other people present. The interview will last 20 minutes to 1 hour. There will be no follow-up interviews. You will receive no direct compensation. There may be slight risks of emotional stress, inconvenience, and possible loss of privacy associated with participating in research. Please do not tell others about what is said during the focus group.

There are no known risks to you and no foreseeable direct benefit either. However, the research will hopefully help people understand and appreciate the work you do in your organization. Your responses may be shared with the cooperative and published in academic articles.

Participation is voluntary, and it is up to you whether or not to participate.

If you have any questions regarding this research, contact:

Lucy Wesson  
+1 (970) 708-2036 (Whatsapp)  
lwesson@uoregon.edu.

#### **Your verbal agreement indicates that:**

You are at least 18 years old,  
You have heard and understood the information provided,  
And that you willingly agree to participate.

#### **Please answer one of the following:**

\_\_\_ Yes, I agree to participate.

\_\_\_ No, I do not wish to participate.

#### **Audio Recording:**

\_\_\_ Yes, I agree to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_ No, I do not wish to be audio and/or video recorded.

#### **Name:**

\_\_\_ Yes, I would like credit for my contributions to this research by allowing my name and direct quotes to be used in the published results. I understand this information may be shared with my cooperative.

\_\_\_ No, I do not agree to my name being used in published results. If any of my direct quotes will be used in the published results, please use a made-up name instead.

The consent form read aloud to participants.

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