



Youth and Women as Agents of Reconciliation and Social Transformation in Intractable Conflict Contexts

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Abstract: Conflict has always been a part of human society for as long as anyone remember, often for resources, power or even based on beliefs system, these tensions have often led to cycles of violence that don't just destroy infrastructure but the very fabric of communities. Intractable conflicts are often characterised by deep-rooted grievances, identity-based division and prolonged cycles of violence that pose significant challenges to reconciliation, social cohesion and collective well-being. Traditionally, we have looked up to people in power such as government leaders and politician to bring about peace and restore normality in the society, however, there has also been an increasing recognition of the critical yet under-examined role of youth and women in fostering reconciliation and social transformation in conflict-affected societies. The paper conceptually examines the contribution of youth and women in peacebuilding process and reconciliation, particularly in contexts marked by protracted and intractable conflict. The paper explores secondary literature, international policy frameworks, and real-life documented case illustrations, by adopting a qualitative, conceptual approach informed by conflict transformation and participatory peacebuilding perspectives. It explores how youth and women engage in not just visible grassroots peace initiatives, community reconciliation efforts, and informal negotiation spaces they also often addressed psychosocial dimensions such as collective trauma, identity, trust-building, and resilience. The paper also critically analyses the structural, cultural, and political barriers that constrain youth and women's meaningful participation in formal peace processes. The paper concludes by considering the implications

of these findings for peacebuilding initiatives in regions marked by similar dynamics, such as Northeast India.

Keywords: *Youth Peacebuilders, Women in Peacebuilding, Intractable Conflict, Reconciliation, Conflict Transformation, Inclusive Peace Processes*

1. Introduction

The modern societies around the world are becoming more influenced by the ongoing and frequently unresolvable wars that create severe threats to peace, social unity, and welfare. Igad region, as an example, still remains linked to complex and protracted conflicts due to political instability, resource rivalry, boundary disputes, and domestic displacement. These wars, mostly based on ethnic, political, ideological and structural imbalances have extensive implications on social, economic, cultural and political systems. The increased violence in most situations has caused a lot of mental pain, community trauma, and fracturing of communities.

Although the governmental and non-governmental institutions have continued to intervene, the realization of long-term peace and effective reconciliation is still elusive in most of the societies that have experienced conflicts. It is against this delicate political and security environment that women and the youth have become the primary stakeholders in the process of peacebuilding. Even without much representation in the formal decision-making arenas, these segments have remained resilient and creative in the conflict prevention and resolution arena.

Conventionally, peacebuilding was considered in terms of a state-centric perspective, and it revolves around elite negotiations, ceasefire accords, and institutional reform. But a paradigm shift has taken place towards the realization that sustainable peace cannot be foisted on people but must be born out of the communities that are affected. This movement has highlighted grassroots actors especially the youth and women who are undertaking slow, unglamorous and humanly work of bringing people back together through community conversations, grass roots movements and acts of courage by ordinary people.

This paper contends that in terms of structural marginalization, the youth and women play a crucial role as agents of reconciliation in intractable conflicts by their participation in both visible peace programs and psychosocial aspects of healing, but their roles are under-researched and under-empowered in official peace structures.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 *Conflict Transformation: Beyond Resolution*

As John Paul Lederach (1997) defines conflict transformation, it offers a theoretical framework to the work of youth and women in the process of peacebuilding. Unlike conflict resolution, which aims at settling conflicts as fast as possible by using negotiated settlements, conflict transformation acknowledges that conflicts are embedded in social structures and relationships which needs to be changed fundamentally in the long run. According to the Berghof Foundation, conflict transformation is a complex process of positively transforming relationships, attitudes, behaviours, interests and discourses in the violence-prone conflict environments. Notably, conflict transformation is an activity that focuses and modifies underlying relationships, cultures and institutions that promote and precondition violent political and social conflict in the long-term.

This paradigm is especially appropriate in examining the role of youth and women since it emphasizes on building relationships and structural change in the long term: exactly what grassroots actors are doing best. In Kenya, women peace committees, such as those, do not simply facilitate ceasefires; they shift the nature of relationships between clans by acting beyond the established hierarchies and establishing trust across boundaries. Likewise, youth peace ambassadors in Uganda undertake long-term inter-community initiatives that help to deal with root causes of tension and not superficial symptoms.

2.2 *Participatory Peacebuilding: Legitimacy from Below*

Participatory peacebuilding points out that sustainable peace cannot be enforced but has to be born out of affected communities. This is a way of opposing the liberal peace paradigm, which tends to dictate Western institutional patterns with no local ownership. Rather it acknowledges that informal places and daily encounters are as significant as formal negotiation tables.

The Gambia Infrastructure for Peace Programme is an example of this strategy. The programme provided safe spaces where young people and elders could talk openly, listen and rebuild trust through inter-generational dialogues. According to the words of a young leader of Bwiam village Bintou I. Camara, the dialogue helped her to understand that the problems between generations were in the misunderstandings. The sessions provided us with the opportunity to finally discuss the actual problems which divided our communities. It depicts how participatory strategies bring about the conditions of true reconciliation.

2.3 The WPS and YPS Policy Architecture

The global normative system can offer important background to youth and women roles. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda was set in United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) by acknowledging that women are disproportionately affected by conflict, as well as contributing to peace. UNSCR 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) also recognized youth as agents of good(s), and not victims and perpetrators.

WSP National Action Plans have been adopted by more than 100 countries, which indicates institutionalization of these norms. Nonetheless, as Leclerc notes, even though the WPS and YPS frameworks have common pillars participation, protection, and prevention, their use is still going on in parallel and fails to enable convergence and consolidates siloed solutions, instead of reinforcing them. The integration of UNSCR 2535 (2020) was a step in the right direction as it explicitly connected the agendas, but there are still few operational synergies.

Compounded exclusion is witnessed especially among young women. WPS initiatives tend to fail to older women leadership, whereas YPS initiatives tend to focus on the voices of young men and leave young women on the periphery of both. This disunity restricts the transformative power of either of these agendas and highlights the necessity of unified solutions.

2.4 Psychosocial Peacebuilding

Recent research has focused on trauma-responsive peacebuilding: responding to collective trauma, identity trauma, and intergenerational transmission of conflict narratives. The Interpeace approach proves that trauma healing, social cohesion and development are interrelated. As the efforts of the organization in Burundi demonstrate, "When the guns go quiet, trauma sets in. It is in the bodies and in the minds, it defines everyday relationships and determines how communities treat each other in the community." These unsutured wounds subversion trust, collaboration and the strength to proceed as a unit.

This theoretical prism explains the reason why the work of youths and women on psychosocial healing is not soft or secondary but critical to sustainable peace. A collaborative study in the Central African Republic revealed that 59 percent of the population resides with mental health disorders, with women and youth having the highest number of victims. These statistics indicate national trauma that still weakens the peacebuilding process through reconciliation and recovery, which makes psychosocial support a fundamental component of peacebuilding.

3. Women roles in peacebuilding.

3.1 *Community Dialogue and Grassroots Mediation*

Women have played a very crucial role in resolving conflicts especially in pastoralist and inter-clan conflicts. Their marginality to the conventional power systems allows them to act in areas that are inaccessible to the formal actors.

Case Study Kenya (Marsabit and Wajir): Women peace committees in the northern part of Kenya have been able to mediate inter-community war between pastoralist clans, averting retaliatory attacks through the assistance of the old men. The fact that they are not in a clan structure allows them to move between rival groups, and negotiate a ceasefire and a peace grazing package. This perceived neutrality coupled with the trust of the community makes the women good negotiators where the formal negotiators may fail.

Case Study Ghana (Bongo-Soe): UNDP and the National Peace Council supported a program known as the Community Peace Committee, which gave the residents the ability to solve disputes and encouraged them to engage in inclusive dialogue. The involvement of Rabiatsu in the CPC is a strong indication of how the representation of young Fulbe women in leadership at the community level is increasing. Her presence has helped the Fulbe women to attend community meetings and peace talks and has helped them build trust and be integrated with the rest of the community. "With her presence, the Fulbe women feel represented and are now more willing to participate, she said, now that she is part of the CPC.

3.2 *Humanitarian Response and Resilience Building*

The humanitarian initiatives undertaken by women often establish the basis of reconciliation. Groups of women in South Sudan have been significant in supporting displaced families, psychosocial support, and in distributing food in the post-violence period in Bor and Torit counties. Their activities have served as a driving force to the strengthening of relationships rebuilding between returning communities and those of the host communities. This shows that the attainment of basic needs forms a platform of building trust.

Areej Hussein, a 26-year-old grassroots organizer in Eastern Sudan in Sudan refers to this mobilization of women as women mobilization in times of crisis when women always move into caretaking, organizing, and local leadership roles despite the extreme risks. Women mobilization is understood as the fact that women are no longer left with the burden of conflict but they are taking up new roles to benefit their communities, in most cases unrecognized or assisted. It is increasing because we have not been given a choice.

3.3 Advocacy and Policy Engagement.

Women networks are still determined to facilitate representation in peace negotiation. The women organizations in Somalia were significant in lobbying to have 30 percent gender representation in parliament in Somalia, thereby providing women with a voice in the political decision-making process. This depicts the application of grassroots to formal political impact.

In Guatemala, specific training was provided to Indigenous women leaders in the Ixil region that was based on politics, leadership, and human rights. This has made 81 women leaders of Cotzal and Chajul currently occupy more significant positions in Indigenous authorities. In Cotzal, women today are half of the new elected Indigenous authorities. This is tangible structural transformation which is the result of specific peacebuilding intervention.

4. Youth Peacebuilding.

4.1 Digital Peacebuilding and Early Warning

The young people use technology to avoid the escalation of conflict. The youth online sites have been utilized as the instruments of reporting violence cases, monitoring hate speech, and spreading the warnings of the conflict to the local officials and peace committees in the Ethiopian region of Oromia. "Misinformation and violence have thus been countered". The technological fluency of the youth makes them well placed to fulfill this role in an ever more digital world.

4.2 Social Cohesion and Community Service

Youth volunteer organizations take part in inter-community activities which have the effect of establishing trust across borders. Youth peace ambassadors in Karamoja and West Nile in Uganda facilitate activities that include sports, music and cultural exchange that involve refugees, local communities and youths of the opposing groups. These operations establish low-stakes conditions of positive contact and slowly deconstruct enemy images.

Case Study -The Gambia: Inter-generational dialogues developed under the Infrastructure for Peace Programme changed the relationship between the youth and elders. It was after these interactions that the youth and the elderly in the village started collaborating, they would collectively participate in the ceremonial and traditional activities, organize weekly clean-up, and establish women groups that would bring together the young and the old, even football matches among the generations, which would help build not only fitness, but also unity among the generations through sports. Above all, these discussions led to the involvement of the youth in leadership. Bintou explains that they have begun to demand seats

in the Village Development Committee by the youth. Now we are included in the discourses which form our own future.

4.3 Observers to Negotiators: Youth in Formation Processes

South Sudan is a strong example of how youth can shift to being passive observers to active participants in formal peace structures. With Peacebuilding Fund support, a coalition of 312 peace champions (47% of whom are young women) now mediate and educate civilians in every part of the country through joint UN efforts spearheaded by UNFPA and UNESCO.

The effect has been quantifiable. According to a perception poll in April 2025, 74 per cent of young people (70 per cent women) said they were included or very included in peacebuilding, compared with 48 per cent in 2023, not just because they attended meetings, but because they had a real impact on decisions and outcomes. Close to 20 recorded conflicts, including land and boundary disputes, market-day fights, and so on, have been solved by these young mediators.

Achol, a 22-year-old peace-champion, based in Rumbek Centre, says: Previously we used to sit and watch the elders converse. Now we have our seat and budget line. When women such as myself speak, the chiefs listen.

4.4 Economic Peacebuilding and Innovation

Youth are also involved in economic peacebuilding by engaging in livelihoods that make them less vulnerable to recruitment into conflict. Youth cooperative sectors have been initiated in Somalia and Sudan, with local NGOs initiating Agribusiness Hubs, Fishing Hubs, and Digital Working Hubs, so as to offer an alternative to violence. Economic opportunity explains the mechanisms of establishing the root causes of youths joining armed groups and show how peacebuilding needs to incorporate the development aspects.

5. Psychosocial Dimensions: The Invisible Work of Healing

5.1 Addressing Collective Trauma

In Burundi, the historical wounds of violence and instability remain unseen, but they erode trust, collaboration, and the communal capacity to proceed. Under the coordination of Interpeace, Synergies for Peace III programme (2022-2025) aimed at progressing reconciliation through the integration of trauma healing, inclusive governance, and women and youth empowerment.

The campaign achieved a particular and ambitious objective: to overcome the stigma of trauma, normalize the discussion of the healing process, and gain traction with both

community-based psychosocial support and policy advocacy nationwide: at least 2.4 million people in the country had been reached by the campaign through radio, theatre, storytelling, social media, and community events, by 2023/2025. Psychoeducation was a reflection: a reflection of the concealed suffering, and a bridge between people, groups, and decision-makers as they sought to recover together.

5.2 Trauma Healing as Infrastructure of Peacebuilding

The Central African Republic is an excellent example of how mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) can be applied to the process of peacebuilding. The Disarmament of the Heart project (2022/2024) funded by the PBF established safe spaces that offered gender-sensitive psychosocial care that was based on local culture, which allowed hundreds of youths to talk about fear, grief and anger - many the first time ever.

The findings were dramatic. Over 800 youths, 390 of whom were girls, were given psychosocial support. Since taking part, 88 per cent of people have said that they have a better psychological well-being and more than 75 per cent have stated that they now believe dialogue is a good method of resolving conflict. A Sibut youth leader told: Before the project, our injuries were louder than our words. We gather those we were once afraid of today and set up markets together.

5.3 Identity Reconstruction and Trust-Building

The intractable conflicts form the image of the enemies and the divisions on the basis of identity. The cross-community programs of youth and women enable identity exploration outside of conflict narratives. In the Gambia, inter-generational conversations showed that inter-generational conflict was based on misconceptions, which indicates many conflict accounts are perpetuated by absence of communication, as opposed to being necessarily hostile.

In South Sudan, youth-based radio programmes were accessed by an estimated 175,000 people, and this assists in changing the attitude of the people. The radio debates made us think. We heard girls arguing the cattle disputes better than the men. That made my committee take them to the peace-committee, and that is what they did. This is an indication of how media can transform perceptions and develop trust.

5.4 Resilience and Hope

Nil Balarinar (29), the first trans Indigenous governor of Colombia, explains the relationship between identity, hope, and peacebuilding: "To me, peacebuilding implies being unified, that is, resisting, demanding justice, respecting, belonging to the land, and being

proud of our culture. The key is. showing the youth that they have the right and the obligation to become someone and dream of a future.

Areej Hussein reiterates this: "The women themselves are the source of hope, their strength in spite of the pain, their determination to change, make me go on. There is a subjective aspect of this, the nurturing of hope under circumstances that are meant to kill it: this might be one of the most significant contributions of grassroots peacebuilders that is the least quantifiable.

6. Obstacles to Effective Participation

6.1 Structural Barriers

Although there are rhetorical efforts to include youth and women, structural challenges continue to limit their participation. The percentage of women involved in negotiator positions in peace agreements and mediator positions is 9.6 and 13.7 respectively. Young people experience the same marginalization. Before recent interventions, in South Sudan, the vast majority of the young people were there in name only, women rarely spoke, and young men tended to remain silent in the presence of elders, so there was little input by them in key decisions about the future of the country.

Institutional exclusion also goes into funding. The efforts of young women peacebuilders are still radically underfunded even with the rhetorical endorsement. The message of Areej Hussein to the world leaders is simple: women and girls are not victims of war, but peacebuilders. We want to be fairly involved and directly financed to initiate our programs among the youth, and we want to support feminist movements on the ground.

6.2 Cultural Barriers

The conventional gender expectations limit the leadership of women in most settings. The March 8 Feminist Group of Sudan led by Hussein was criticized when it staged a open dialogue on youth drug use, a taboo in the country. Members of the group were attacked online and some of the members pulled out of the open activism. Equally, the hierarchies of age place the youths at the bottom of the hierarchy, as those who require directions as opposed to leaders of their own.

6.3 Political Barriers: The Issue of Tokenism

Maybe the most diabolical aspect is tokenism, the invitation of women and youth in peace processes to check boxes but not a real power. The analysis of Anderson and Urlacher is critical: The largest danger of the WPS agenda is that it became rhetorically successful itself. Women are now frequently asked to be included in peace processes in a way that ticks

a box but leaves the underlying gendered hierarchies of conflict and bargaining untouched. Token appointments, parallel women fora, or as an observer all create the illusion of inclusion without altering the underlying gendered hierarchy.

This is reflected by Areej Hussein through experience: True inclusion means that women are consulted and included at all levels - consultation and implementation. The voices of young women need to be heard, and their visions should be included in real peacebuilding plans - not token presence in pictures or events.

6.4 Intersectional Exclusion: Young Women at the Margins

The compounded exclusion is observed among young women in both WPS and YPS agendas. WPS spaces tend to be more focused on the leadership of older women whereas YPS initiatives hoist the voices of male youth in a higher rank, leaving young women with only a few viable entry points to them. Unless there are conscious measures to make intersectionality central, peacebuilding initiatives will do little to break the pattern of exclusion instead of breaking it.

The study conducted by Leclerc proves that the so-called demographic silos undermine policy effects and conceal structural exclusions. The bifurcation of women and youth experiences into two distinct policy frameworks supports the existence of strict categories that are unable to reflect the complexity of barriers to participation. As peace and security issues become more and more intersecting in terms of gender, age, race and other aspects, a high level of strict silos undermines the effectiveness and legitimacy of interventions.

7. Discussion, Implications to Theory and Practice

7.1 Synthesis of Findings

The presented evidence proves that youth and women have a contribution to peacebuilding in different yet complementary ways. Using the perceived neutrality, community trust, and care giving roles, women use them to resolve conflicts and bridge gaps. Youth is a source of technological expertise, vitality, and capability to transcend social boundaries, as well as, deal with economic underlying causes of violence. They are together in treating visible peace efforts as well as invisible psychosocial healing.

These contributions do so, however, despite, rather than because of, formal peace architectures. The disjuncture between rhetorical commitment to inclusion and its actual performance is still dramatic. According to Leclerc, although the rhetorical efforts are based

on the inclusivity, national and international policy frameworks seldom develop explicit frameworks to connect WPS and YPS efforts.

7.2 WPS and YPS Agendas and How They Interconnect

The disintegration of WPS and YPS implementation is an opportunity lost. There is natural entry points to integration built around shared pillars that include participation, protection, and prevention and are not normally operated jointly. The pillar on unique partnerships in the YPS agenda is an excellent point of entry with respect to increased coordination, but it is under-explored.

A gap between these frameworks presents the possibility of developing more integrated and intersectional approaches to peacebuilding that are responsive to the realities of communities affected by conflicts. Inclusive processes that consider youth (young women), LGBTQI+ youth, and other marginalised populations as key actors, rather than just participants, can be used to create trust, ownership, and resilience in post-conflict societies, according to the authors.

7.3 Psychosocial Dimensions as Peacebuilding Infrastructure

The evidence of the case in Burundi and CAR indicates that the collective trauma is not an incidental part of the peacebuilding but a core element. Trauma healing is not merely a matter of alleviating pain, but also a matter of restoring dignity, re-establishing relationships, and empowering communities to discover their socio-economic potential of peace and sustainable development.

This implies that there is need to rethink peacebuilding infrastructure to incorporate psychosocial support systems in addition to more common institutional processes. Integrating mental health services in community peace committees, early warning systems, and reintegration programmes are a potential direction.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Normalize Inclusion into compulsory Systems

Based on the recommendations of IGAD, policy makers ought to introduce mandatory quotas of women and youth representation in the peace committees, cross border institutions, and national peace processes. As South Sudan experience shows, this strategy is quite possible: in the course of weeks of implementing the National Youth, Peace and Security Strategy, three states redefined their budgets on peacebuilding, allocating a total of US\$85 000 to youth-led conflict prevention.

WPS and YPS goals must be clearly connected through national Action Plans with coordinated consultations, integrated monitoring indicators and cross-sectoral funding streams.

8.2 Enhance Community-Based Peace Infrastructure

In conflict-affected areas, women and youth peace committees need to be scaled up. The experience of the Bongo-Soe in Ghana shows that such committees may transform the relationships in the community: since 2023, over 300 community members in Ghana have been trained in early warning and conflict resolution through the initiative, which has started to decrease the tensions between the indigenous people and Fulbe communities.

International early warning networks ought to be put in place and connected to regional ones like the CEWARN of IGAD.

8.3 Invest in Economic Empowerment as Peacebuilding

Women headed and youth headed businesses that are in the weak areas should be given grants and micro-financing facilities. Economic opportunity focuses on the underlying factors of conflict recruitment and develops an investment in peaceful futures. In Sudan and Somalia, young people have gotten alternatives to violence through agribusiness and digital hubs.

8.4 Multiply Digital Peacebuilding Solutions

Youth should be involved in regional innovation hubs in areas such as prevention of conflicts, digital literacy, fighting false news and peace messaging. Early warning reporting systems can be enhanced by partnerships with telecommunication firms. The scale of digital solutions can be illustrated by the experience of South Sudan with youth journalists, 38 of whom received training in conflict-sensitive reporting, and among whom, an estimated 175,000 listeners could be reached.

8.5 Provide Direct Funding to Grassroots Activities

The call made by Areej Hussein to provide direct funding to young women programs, and for feminist movements operating on the ground should be listened to. The process of funding must not go around big international NGOs but directly to grassroots organizations with simplified application procedures and relaxed reporting standards.

8.6 Incorporate Trauma-Responsive Practice in Peacebuilding

All stages of peacebuilding, such as ceasefire monitoring or reintegration or institutional reform, should be accompanied by psychosocial support. The Interpeace experience has proven that healing of trauma is not a peripheral issue, it is a cardinal component of the development of a stable, inclusive, and strong society. The focus on the

traditional peacebuilding measures, like infrastructure development, should be accompanied by the investment in mental health facilities, such as training community-based psychosocial workers.

8.7 Intersectionality of Center in Peace and Security Policymaking

The policies should be made with a conscious attention to the ways in which intersecting identities influence access to decision-making spaces. Representation in leadership positions, funding their organizations, and creating accessible and meaningful consultation processes should be considered as some of the proactive measures to centre young women and other historically marginalized actors in peace and security initiatives.

9. Conclusion

This paper has contended that youth and women are vital actors of reconciliation in intractable conflict situations, providing their contribution through the grassroots efforts, cross-communities dialogue, and psychosocial healing of trauma and restoring confidence. They adopt the principles of transformation of conflicts by targeting relationships, identities, and structures in the long term. The evidence of the case in the whole of Africa, in Kenya, women peace committees of South Sudan, young peace champions, and the psychoeducation campaign in Burundi, all proves that given the space and support, youth and women are not only players in the making of peace, but also leaders.

Nevertheless, such contributions are despite, rather than because of, the formal peace architectures that remain marginalizing of them by tokenism, underfunding and structural shutting out. The disintegration of WPS and YPS implementation also contributes to the exclusion, especially in young women who get stuck in the loopholes of the two frameworks.

With the world celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration, 25th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and 10th anniversary of the YPS agenda, the divide between rhetoric and reality is still vividly visible. To fill this gap, one has to go beyond institutionalization to real implementation: there must be mandatory inclusion mechanisms, direct funding to grassroots initiatives, integrated mechanisms to connect WPS and YPS, and a realization that sustainable peace means full involvement of all the communities impacted.

An appropriate message to global leaders is the last message of Areej Hussein: Enough of using women as slogans it is time to listen to their leadership. It is not necessarily the more advanced elite negotiations that promise the best way forward in intractable conflicts where the old methods have failed but rather the simpler, less glamorous, yet more

effective and reliable path which has been taken by the less glamorous individuals who have been doing the quiet, unseen work of healing all along.

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