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## Youth and Peacebuilding



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### Description

The practice of building peace is slowly becoming more inclusive. Youth have proven to be integral to this development as their contributions through formal and informal networks have challenged how we understand substantive participation and representation within this space. However, young people's visibility and inclusion within the peacebuilding discourse has been hard fought and slow to evolve as narrow social constructions of youth continue to determine how they engage with other actors, particularly at the institutional level. Youth often are characterized as potential threats or passive recipients of peacebuilding. However, youth are active peacebuilders who negotiate systems of insecurity and risk to work for peace in their communities and countries and on the international stage. This chapter examines the evolution of youth's inclusion in peacebuilding discourse and practice. It considers the theories, norms, intersections, and classifications that have informed understandings and engagements with youth in both scholarship and practice. It then turns to examine the factors that

enable and constrain youth's participation: gendered challenges, the securitization of youth, and the vexed question of youth's participation and inclusion in peacebuilding. This chapter highlights the evolving role of youth advocacy in continued efforts to ensure that their engagement with the peacebuilding discourse is substantive and meaningful.

### Introduction

Youth constitute a growing portion of the global population with 1.8 billion individuals aged between 10 and 24 years old (UNFPA 2014; Simpson 2018, p. 12). Of these, approximately 408 million live in regions or states affected by violence (Hagerty 2017). Youth also disproportionately bear the consequences of conflict as over half of those forcibly displaced by conflict are under 18 (UNHCR 2019). In 2015, for example, 90% of direct conflict deaths were young men (UNFPA 2015); between 2013 and 2017, there were more than 12,700 attacks on education (including against buildings, teachers, and students) globally (GCPEA 2018); and conflict and displacement exacerbates sexual and gender-based violence faced by young women (UN SG Report 2019). Despite young people's pervasive presence in conflict-affected areas, their experiences and contributions continue to be overlooked or mischaracterized, particularly at the institutional level. The prevalence of the youth

demographic in post-conflict communities is employed both as a call to action, most notably by youth activists, and as justification for intervention, in particular by those looking to “manage” young people’s perceived capacity to spoil peace. Given this, understanding the origins of these representations is central to broader discussions of youth in peace and security contexts.

Framings of youth often rely on simplistic tropes of youth as victim or, more often, as potential threat or risk. This has meant that when youth are considered at all in peacebuilding discourse, they are often excluded or engaged only as a problem to be managed. While some young people do engage in violence, it is curious that we rarely ask why a majority of young people remain peaceful even in violent contexts. Young people are also rarely asked about their contributions to peace. Just like gendered assumptions structure and enable conflict (Sjoberg 2014; see chapter ► “Gender Justice and Peacebuilding”), youth-ed tropes of young people as either passive victims or threats to contain limit our ability to fully account for their efforts to build peace (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015: 124). Broadly speaking, three themes underpin scholarly and policy engagement with youth in peacebuilding: youth are political actors in formal spheres of politics such as elections, youth can be conflict actors who participate in or support violence, and youth contribute productively to peacebuilding (Özderdem and Podder 2015, pp. 4–8). Even at this macro level, it is evident how diverse young people’s experiences can be.

It is undeniable that youth suffer in multiple ways due to war and violence. However, formal and informal structures of power exclude multiple experiences of youth from consideration. Youth are active peacebuilders who negotiate systems of insecurity and risk to work for peace in their communities and countries and on the international stage. Commonly, they work in diverse ways: on training and capacity building, advocacy, events, dialogues, alliances with other peace actors, networks, and specific projects (UNOY and SFCG 2017, p. 27). A few indicative, but not exhaustive, examples here help set the context and frame the work youth peacebuilders

do that is discussed through this chapter. Youth work creatively to encourage peers away from violence, such as through nonviolent hip-hop collectives in response to gang violence in Colombia that have helped transform previously highly dangerous communities (Garcés Montoya 2011), through *Luta pela Paz* (“Fight for Peace”) which teaches martial arts and boxing in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil (Simpson 2018, p. 57), or through music and dance in Northern Ireland (Pruitt 2013). Youth communicate constructively with their peers; for example, young Yemenis use radio, social media, and peer networks to explain “viable alternatives” to extremist violence and prevent recruitment (Simpson 2018, p. 48). Youth also participate in and lead short- and long-term post-conflict peacebuilding efforts: in Cameroon, former violent offenders are offered capacity-building training to support their reintegration (Sanyi and Achaleke 2017), while organizations such as *Jovenes Contra la Violencia* (Youth Against Violence) Guatemala work in communities on violence prevention initiatives. Monitoring and participation peace processes and reconciliation efforts also are sites where youth involve themselves: in Somalia, the Joint Galkayo Youth Committee is a formal, elected structure that channels youth opinions into peace negotiations (Altiok and Grizelj 2019, p. 24), and in the Solomon Islands, youth actively contested and negotiated their absence and representation in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Mollica 2017). At the micro level, young people also involve themselves in informal, community-level efforts to foster resilience and security within everyday routines in the absence of state care such as in informal communities of internally displaced people in Colombia (Berents 2018). Despite exclusion, in post-conflict contexts, young people have been operating largely from the margins of their communities, developing and implementing positive practices intended to build more secure and peaceful societies.

Young people’s contributions to peace have received increased attention within the formal structures of the international community, including the establishment of an emergent Youth, Peace and Security Agenda (see Simpson 2018; Altiok

forthcoming; IANYD 2014; Youth4Peace n.d.). In 2015, after successful lobbying and advocacy by youth-led and adult-led organizations, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS). Building on established norms around children and youth rights, Resolution 2250 recognizes youth (defined as 18–29) as having significant roles in building peace and security. It requires international actors, states, and other groups to meaningfully include youth in peacebuilding practice. The resolution established a YPS agenda that has seen a subsequent UN Security Council Resolution 2419 (2018) on youth participation in peace processes, as well as an independent progress study on YPS mandated by resolution 2250: *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security* (Simpson 2018). It also has led to the establishment of formal programs, funding streams, and commitments by states and INGOs to better include youth in peace and security programming, policy, and practice. The establishment of a YPS agenda seeks to institutionalize an understanding of youth as peacebuilders and thus challenge “contagious stereotypes” (Simpson 2018, p. x) of youth as violent that contribute to “policy panic” (Simpson 2018, p. 30). McEvoy-Levy notes that understanding youth as peacebuilders often “underestimates the structural challenges and asymmetries of power between youth and political elites that make peace action [for youth] very difficult” (2011, p. 169). While there are important cautions with the YPS agenda, it nevertheless presents an opportunity to strengthen young people’s already-existing peace work through institutional support and engagement.

This chapter first examines how “youth” is conceptualized in peacebuilding. It then introduces the scholarship and practice on youth and peacebuilding, building a rough chronology of work highlighting the emergence of attention on youth, efforts toward youth participation, and youth as partners and active agents for peace. After this brief overview, the chapter explores three contemporary thematic areas of relevance to those interested in youth and peacebuilding: the intersections of age and gender, the tensions

presented by securitized discourses of youth, and the complex pursuit of substantive participation of youth.

## Considering Youth: Classifications and Intersections

Interactions with youth in peacebuilding contexts are informed by three overarching discourses: the “age-defined perspective,” “the social construct,” and the “physiological approach” (Özerdem and Podder 2015, pp. 6–7). Taken together, these discourses provide a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing youth and their participation in peace and conflict practices. However, when employed on their own, these discourses perpetuate barriers to youth’s engagement, in part due to their failure to consider youth’s unique voices and experiences. Within the physiological field, biological and cognitive markers are employed to distinguish youth from children and adults. In contrast, numerical classifications reflect predetermined and static turning points in a young person’s development (Özerdem and Podder 2015, p. 6). Missing from these approaches is the recognition that cultural “rites of passage” including marriage, childbirth, and spiritual initiation often determine “youthhood” and thus transitions into and out of this phase are rarely uniform and cannot be predetermined (Hansen 2008 cited in Özerdem and Podder 2015). Durham suggests “youth are social shifters” situated in constantly evolving political contexts where knowledge, rights, power, and culture influence their identity, roles, and status (2004). As such, their experiences do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they occur in response to a range of intersecting factors including gender, ethnicity, age, class, and race (see chapter ► “Intersectionality and Peace”). Given this, our understanding of young people’s contributions to building peace should be seen through a more expansive lens that acknowledges their diverse social and political experiences.

Socially constructed classifications of youth commonly emphasize “who they are not” by situating their experiences within the broader context of the generational attributes assigned to

children, adults, and the elderly (Furlong et al. 2003; Durham 2004, p. 593; De Waal and Argenti 2002). These social constructions often perpetuate marginalizing cultural stereotypes that cast youth as passive observers and thus obscure their unique social and political contributions that are derived from their experiences *as* youth. In practice, youth are individuals whose identities are transitioning through stages of development ensuring that their capabilities are heterogeneous and responsive to external factors. These constantly evolving social representations further contribute to the contested nature of youth within the peacebuilding discourse. At any given time, youth are an age group, a social demographic, “a political group or a group in-between children and adults” (Özerdem and Podder 2015, p. 4). These shifting identities are significant obstacles to youth’s participation in formal peace practices as classifications often determine the character and extent of an individual’s engagement.

Strict adherence to numerical definitions produces barriers to youth’s participation due to the lack of consensus between institutions and among states. Illustratively, the Solomon Islands defines youth as those aged 14–29, while in Timor Leste, youth is any individual between the age of 16–30. At the institutional level, the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) defines youth as those aged between 15 and 24 years old, while the African Charter defines youth as 15–35. Reflecting the heightened visibility of young people, the ratification of Resolution 2250 (2015) introduced the age range of 18–29 into the discourse while also acknowledging that classifications might vary in different contexts. Institutional definitions that adhere to narrow classificatory boundaries lack the nuance necessary to represent the experiences of youth, which has implications for how their role as peacebuilders is conceptualized. In addition, the voices of youth are absent from these structural discourses, and thus they reflect external perceptions of youth rather than youth themselves. The 2005 World Youth Report sought to address this silence, defining youth as “an important period of physical, mental, and social maturation [where they] are actively forming identities and determining acceptable

roles for themselves.” This classification frames youth as competent social agents, whose perspectives offer valuable insights. In doing so, it recognizes that youth are a unique demographic of individuals who transition into and out of “youthhood” at different paces.

The increased visibility of youth advocates has produced limited opportunities for young people to claim these transitional spaces (Sommers 2006; McEvoy-Levy 2006). A youth representative of the Network for Empowerment and Progressive Initiatives in Liberia explains “the issue of self-identity. . . is very important. Once [youth] understand what [they] can offer society, [they] will find opportunities” (Maclay and Özerdem cited in Simpson 2018, p. 110). Despite this, widespread realization of this agency, particularly within the formal peace architecture, remains constrained by the persistence of institutional classifications. For example, despite acknowledging that “variations exist at the national and international level,” Resolution 2250 employs numerical boundaries that begin at 18. Codification of this numerical definition reflects institutional attempts to avoid definitional overlap with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, introducing a static numerical starting point for “youthhood” also perpetuates tensions between these complementary agendas and individual’s younger than 18 who may self-identify as youth, not children. While it is now increasingly acknowledged within the scholarship that uniform classifications of young people obscure the complex and fluid reality of their experiences, these issues persist and, as discussed below, are often employed to frame the relationships between youth and other actors in peacebuilding practice.

## Understanding Youth in Literature and Practice

While there has been growing recognition of the complexity of youth’s experiences and capacities, attention to “youth” has long often been marginal and limited in both academic and policy contexts. Where young people, and issues of concern to youth, have been engaged these engagements

have often reiterated binaries of victim/delinquent (often in profoundly gendered ways) and have been narrowed by adherence to ideas of the limitations of young people's capacity and understanding. Such characterizations have been challenged and resisted for decades, with scholars and practitioners arguing for recognition of the complex lives youth live in conflict-affected contexts and their capacity to contribute to positive peacebuilding efforts. More recently, growing attention on youth, as evidenced by the establishment of the YPS agenda in 2015, has further expanded and formalized considerations of youth as positive actors in peacebuilding.

Understandings of young people's involvement in peace and conflict have always been informed by multidisciplinary perspectives, including scholarship from sociology, international relations, anthropology, and peace studies. These diverse perspectives shed light on the complexity of youth experiences of conflict and peace. Because of the diversity of work on youth, it is difficult to succinctly characterize research and practice. Organized as two broadly chronological phases, this non-exhaustive overview provides a guide to some of the key arguments and developments.

### **Children and Youth as Categories of Concern**

In the 1990s, "child soldiers" became a prominent category of concern to the international community. With the emergence of "new wars" and attention on intrastate conflicts, children associated with armed groups were highlighted as a feature of conflict but also a problem to be solved in the process of building peace. Anxiety about children participating in armed conflicts sensationalized media coverage, particularly in Africa and Eastern Europe. This sometimes sensational coverage was challenged by scholars, often working in anthropology and sociology. Groundbreaking reports such as the Machel Report "The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children" commissioned by the UN and presented to the General Assembly in 1996 and the work of Brett and McCallin (1998) and Cohn and Goodwin-Gill (1994) brought comprehensive attention to the experiences of child soldiers. The work of Boyden (1994) and Boyden

and de Berry (2004) expands recognition of diverse social experiences of young people in conflict and their varied capacities for responding to violence. In Uganda, for example, young women who were victims of conflict-related sexual violence responded to the "consequences" of this experience in ways that challenge the dominant perceptions of vulnerability traditionally assigned to them (de Berry 2004, p. 61). De Berry concludes that the ability of these women to rebuild their lives in constructive ways, through the creation of business opportunities and safe social spaces, challenges homogenous victim narratives and suggests that young peoples' responses to the trauma of conflict are nuanced and multifaceted. Other literature in the late 1990s drew on established work in previous decades in sociology and psychology to young people affected by conflict (see Cairns 1996).

In practice, the normative framework for children and youth in peacebuilding was being established, as evidenced by key UN documents from the late 1980s onward (Lee-Koo 2018). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified in 1989, placed an emphasis on victimization and protection, rather than active agency. However, as Holzscheiter observes, "the CRC enshrined for the first time in international law, the right of the child to express his or her own views" (2010, p. 2). Building upon the norms established in the CRC (1989), the Machel Report (1996), and the Paris Principles (2007) recognized the diversity of children's experience in conflict and provided a foundation for the inclusion and recognition of children's voices in post-conflict practices.

Children's experiences occupy a central (but limited) place in peacebuilding, while recognition of youth as a distinct demographic remains sporadic. In international policy spaces, the UN General Assembly established the "World Programme of Action for Youth for the Year 2000" in 1995 (WPAY). Youth, in the WPAY, are largely seen within social and economic development frames, rather than having a stake in peace and security. Although focused attention on young people in peace and conflict was a welcome development in the 1990s, including critical attention from

scholars on young people's experiences, adherence to notions of victim/delinquent and passive recipients of peacebuilding dominated.

### Participation and Partnership

The second broad phase of attention emerged in the late 1990s and into the 2000s, characterized by increased recognition of young people's participation and the complexity of young people's experiences of conflict and peace. Broader recognition of young people's capacity has been limited, and youth continue to be marginal in peacebuilding. Despite this, informed by developments in the sociologically oriented "youth studies" more broadly, scholarship reflects a more nuanced understanding of young people's agency and lifeworld in conflict and peace. This work demonstrates the value of inclusive approaches to youth, as McEvoy-Levy (2001) argues: "a neglect of adolescents and older young people is shortsighted and counterproductive in terms of peace building particularly in the crucial post-accord phase with its twin challenges of violence prevention/accord maintenance and societal reconciliation and reconstruction."

Scholarship reveals that youth occupy a broad range of identities in post-conflict communities and demonstrate agency in ways that challenge traditional notions of youth as passive subjects. Contributions to the edited volume *Troublemakers or Peacemakers?* (McEvoy-Levy 2006) demonstrate across a variety of contexts how young people respond to insecurity and contribute to peacebuilding, including the challenges of reintegrating child soldiers in Sierra Leone (Wessels and Jonah 2006), the social and cultural difficulties facing young people in post-genocide Rwanda (Sommers 2006), and young people's role in transforming education systems in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina (Cilliers 2006). Attention to young people's capacities and agency characterize work by Borer et al. (2007), Schwartz (2010), Del Felice and Wisler (2007), Schnabel and Tabyshalieva (2013), Berents (2015), and Özerdem and Podder (2015) among others. Contributors to the edited volume *Makers & Breakers: Children & Youth in Postcolonial Africa* explored childhood and youthhood in the contexts of

postcolonial Africa (Honwana and de Boeck 2005). Work has also focused on the importance of including youth in formal peace and justice processes (see chapter ► "Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding"), including Mollica's work with youth in the Solomon Islands (2017). The UN-supported research policy paper *We Are Here: An integrated approach to youth inclusive peace processes* proposed understanding youth engagement with formal peace negotiations as "at the table," "in the room," "around the room," and "outside the room" to more fully map the diverse ways youth participation already takes place and how it can be productively engaged (Altiok and Grizelj 2019). Attention to youth within the "everyday turn" of peace studies (see chapter ► "Everyday Peace") has shown the value of local-focused or ethnographic approaches that uncover youth's political agency in peacebuilding (Berents 2018; Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015; Turner 2015). Illustratively, in Supingstad, rural black South African youth mobilized collectively to achieve better provision of basic services from the state, more economic opportunities, and participation in civic life (Turner 2015). The intersections of age and gender have also revealed important sites to consider young people's role in peacebuilding including the exclusion faced by girls and young women in peacebuilding programs (Pruitt 2013, 2015) and the ways in which socially constructed expectations of masculinity intersect with peace efforts (Kent and Barnett 2011). In practice, youth's engagement with current global political challenges, including the 2010–2011 Arab Spring (see Honwana 2013), the 2019 political actions in Chile and Hong Kong, and the global movement for climate justice, demonstrates their social and political capital and their ability to mobilize for substantive change.

In the early 2000s, civil society, the UN, and policy think tanks turned their attention to how young people could be supported in times of transition (e.g., see Ackermann et al. 2003, Bidwell et al. 2008, and UNICEF 2001). Simultaneously, the "War on Terror" saw certain youth repositioned as "threats" (see Maira 2016). Youth, particularly young men in the Global South, became identified

in policy and discourse as indicators of potential civil unrest through the wide adoption of the problematic “youth bulge theory” (Urdal 2004). These racialized and gendered frames (see Pruitt et al. 2018), underpinned by biologically essentialist assumptions (Pruitt 2020), have had a pervasive negative effect on efforts to institutionalize and meaningfully include youth in positive peacebuilding practices. Issues with the securitization of youth in peacebuilding are discussed below in more details. While academic and practitioner work had expanded recognition of young people’s capacities in peacebuilding, continued tensions in portrayals of youth persisted.

Until recently, recognition of the contributions of youth to peace existed almost exclusively in informal spaces on the margins of post-conflict states. Today, however, there is greater recognition of the importance of creating inclusive formal structures to support their peacebuilding initiatives and amplify their voices (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015). Broadly speaking, current attempts to create sustainable peace emphasize the importance of the youth demographic and thus prioritize as a critical imperative the need to “invest in young people’s capacities” in ways that “prioritize partnerships and collaborative actions” and recognize the diverse experiences of youth (Simpson 2018, p. xiii). While this growing attention includes establishing formal mechanisms and roles such as youth envoys to organizations such as the UN or the African Union (OSGEY n.d.; OAUSEY n.d.), youth participation in parliamentary processes (Spark 2014), or peak representative bodies such as the European Youth Forum (EYF n.d.), fundamentally, these practices need to support and develop already-existing youth efforts for peacebuilding that may not be connected to institutional processes. Youth in conflict and peace are political actors, advocates, agents of resistance, negotiators, mediators, combatants, and victims, yet despite this, formal structures often fail to provide substantive and diverse opportunities for engagement.

Within the formal peacebuilding discourse, interactions with youth often reinforce the idea that “youth” as a category is static and their needs and interests are homogenous (Aguilar

2007; Özerdem and Podder 2015, p. 5). Challenges of meaningful participation of youth in formal and informal processes are discussed further below. Yet, as youth peacebuilders slowly penetrate institutionalized peacebuilding structures, these classifications are increasingly challenged. Given this, young people’s engagement with peacebuilding reflects an inherent tension between old classifications derived from collective, external perceptions of who youth are and new, responsive representations, which reflect their lived experiences and capabilities. Our understanding of youth and peacebuilding today is informed by how “young people creatively seek ways to prevent violence and consolidate peace across the globe” despite persistent rhetoric which cast their experiences as a “problem” to be managed or solved (Simpson 2018). The inclusion of youth’s voices in the development and implementation of peacebuilding practice is “pragmatic and constructive” as it encourages ownership and buy-in (Drummond-Mundal and Cave 2007, p. 67).

Engagement with youth in peacebuilding has matured and expanded in recent decades. Careful academic work and thoughtful policy efforts have seen the space of recognition for young people’s capacity and participation expand dramatically. Despite this, youth remain peripheral to many considerations in peace and conflict studies or invoked only in limited and problematic binaries of delinquent or victim, resulting in scholarship and practice overlooking the positive potential of younger generations to contribute to building lasting peace in conflict-affected contexts around the world.

### **Thematic Consideration for Youth in Peacebuilding**

For those willing to take youth seriously as both a category of analysis and a demographic to meaningfully engage with, there are several key issues that need careful consideration: first, attention to the gendered dynamics of youth in peace and security practices; second, consideration of the (re)securitization of youth through discourses that reaffirm their status as risky and potentially

dangerous; and, third, the significant challenges of ensuring meaningful participation for youth in formal and informal peacebuilding efforts.

### Gendered Challenges

Gender norms inform the character and extent of young people's participation in peacebuilding. Where girls are concerned, socially constructed conflict identities often result in the development of peacebuilding programs that misrepresent their needs or exclude them entirely from the process. Young women are traditionally cast through a narrow lens as the "super-victim": an inherently peaceful, vulnerable group that the international community is obligated to protect (Park 2006, p. 316). This framing becomes problematic when it is relied upon to inform how they engage with peacebuilding practices and other actors following conflict. For example, in Sierra Leone, all young women were assigned "follower" status by the international community, despite occupying a wide range of roles, including combat positions (McKay and Mazurana 2004). Formal peacebuilding practices rarely account for the "gender differences" in participation or acknowledge the agency of girls, instead of relying on old tropes which cast girls as apolitical (Pruitt 2015; Harris 2004). These representations present a significant challenge to young women's participation as they tell only part of the story of how they participate in both conflict and its aftermath.

The homogenization of "youth" within the peace and security discourse creates practices which overlook the gendered dimension of conflict participation and thus fail to pursue the substantive engagement of young women. Youth as a category is typically employed to represent the "boys and young men" that the formal systems must manage to avoid spoiling the peace process (Pruitt 2015, p. 161). Discussions of child soldiers, for example, perpetuate gender stereotypes of deviance and violence as they are dominated by depictions of young African or, more recently, Middle Eastern boys (Lee-Koo 2011, p. 726). Missing from this portrayal of the child soldier are young girls who join rebel groups in conflicts around the world (Mazurana and McKay 2001, p. 33). Despite occupying active roles in conflicts,

young girls are often excluded from decision-making and the implementation of peacebuilding practices, including demobilization, demilitarization, and reintegration efforts, as narrow ideas about who fights render their experiences invisible (Coulter 2005; see chapter ► "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration"). In practice, girls are excluded from institutionalized peacebuilding programs more than any other demographic as the intersection of age and gender produces marginalizing conditions that perpetuate a cycle of exclusion (Sommers 2006; Pruitt 2015). At the same time, representations of "youth" that assume young men are combatants driven by deviance also neglect their potential victim status, as evident in Liberia and Uganda where boys were often forced to participate in sexual acts (Mazurana and McKay 2001, p. 33). Broadly speaking, narrowly constructed gender representations present a significant challenge for the development of meaningful peacebuilding practices, particularly when employed to predict the roles youth occupy in these contexts. Moreover, they perpetuate inaccurate assumptions about why youth choose to engage in conflict and pursue peace.

Similar representation challenges persist within peace and conflict around notions of the masculine identity. The belief that young men are "bad boys [who] need to be contained due to their propensity for violence" informs the character of their engagement within the international community (Burman 1994, pp. 244–245; Pruitt et al. 2018, p. 694; see chapter ► "Youth Gang Violence in Honduras"). This is evident in the dominance of young men in deradicalization programs and the emphasis on masculinity within the securitization discourse (discussed below). These classifications derive, in part, from the notion that "war is men's business," and thus presume a relationship between risky and violent behavior and masculinity (Large 1997, p. 28). Similarly, militarized rhetoric that frames vulnerability as weakness informs beliefs among boys in conflict contexts that being a man requires "the need to be tough" (Harland 2011, p. 417). This is further reinforced by the scholarship of the 1990s on youth culture and masculinity, which argued that

structural conditions, including a lack of employment opportunities, coupled with a propensity for deviance, motivated young men's participation in conflict (Large 1997, p. 27; Bradbury 1995). The complex relationship between violence and structural inequality is also evident in the Solomon Islands, where young men joined rebel groups on the promise of goods and services and the opportunity to escape the idleness of unemployment (Allen 2013).

The belief among young men that they are the providers and protectors of their communities derives from normative stereotypes that militarize the male identity. However, these perceptions often fail to reflect how ideas about young men are informed by intersecting notions of class and age. Ashe and Harland suggest that "while men as a group benefit from the social organization of gender, particular groups of men are located in socially subordinated positions" (2014, p. 750). This is particularly relevant in communities where cultural hierarchies determined by age inform the political and social roles that men occupy. Despite the emergence of critical masculinity scholarship, which seeks to challenge these linear notions of the male identity, and how they are employed to conceptualize young men's participation in violence, the perception that young men are troublemakers persists within the peacebuilding discourse and continues to inform how the international community responds to their participation (Barker 2005; Hall 2002). This is evident in the emphasis on securitization within peace and security discourses.

### **Securitization of Youth**

Despite evidence of young people's overwhelming nonparticipation in violence, characterizations of youth as a threat or a "problem to be solved" endure. These dominant discourses frame youth as risky, as potentially delinquent, and as spoilers to peace efforts, and they legitimize the exclusion of youth from peacebuilding. In the mid-1990s, claims of the dangers of "youth bulges" – that large populations of youth, particularly in African countries, increased a country's risk of violence or conflict (see Urdal 2004 and 2006) – had a significant influence on policy and public discourse.

Kaplan described youth in Africa as "loose molecules in an unstable social fluid, a fluid that was clearly on the verge of igniting" (1994). In these representations of young people, agency is acknowledged strictly in pejorative terms and assumes a causal connection between violence and a large male youth population. Like the youth-as-victim classification, they remain a social and political challenge, yet rather than protecting them, the deviance lens calls for youth to be managed. This characterization is built on both gendered and racialized assumptions of youth and the global order (Hendrixson 2004; Pruitt et al. 2018). Despite the pervasiveness of these understandings, evidence does not support claims made by adherents to the "youth bulge" theory (Pruitt 2020), yet they've had a disproportionate impact on the exclusion of youth from peacebuilding. The Global War on Terror strengthened attention on youth as a security threat (Maira 2016). This understanding of youth as a risk to be managed, rather than potential contributors to engage and include has been evident in policy responses to terrorist threats by Islamic State, Boko Haram and others.

This framing of certain youth as a risk places youth in a securitized position – youth have been positioned as a marginal group to be contained (see Pugh et al. 2013 on securitization of peacebuilding). This has occurred as development and peace programs have become more closely linked to neoliberal goals and influenced by globalizing nature of security concerns (Sukarieh and Tannock 2018; Distler 2017). The rise of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) approaches within peacebuilding architecture has often had the effect of further securitizing youth (Altiok forthcoming). Youth are targeted for surveillance, stereotyped, and offered limited ways of responding to such framings (Altiok et al. 2020). Sommers argues that CVE programs that target youth can often encourage rather than prevent violent extremism (2018). Increased focus on youth through P/CVE returns youth to securitized frames of a "problem to be solved," limiting the space for youth to be seen as positive contributors to peacebuilding.

The UN YPS agenda embodies the tensions between the securitization of youth and efforts to see them as positive peacebuilders. The resolution emphasizes young people's positive roles but also reproduces language that returns youth to a risk frame. Sukarieh and Tannock argue that the YPS agenda is neoliberal and reproduces frames of youth that are productive for the "current global economic order" (2018). Altiok argues that while youth are securitized, they resist this through local, national, and international efforts, resulting in a "squeezed youth-led peacebuilding agency" (forthcoming). While countering violent extremism is an important goal, youth peacebuilding faces challenges as it narrows the legitimate spaces they can work. With funding often tied to P/CVE approaches and projects, youth peacebuilders and adult-led organizations that work with them have to navigate these tensions carefully to deliver successful projects that meaningfully support youth peacebuilders in contexts around the world. *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*, mandated by the 2015 UNSC resolution 2250 on YPS, highlights the danger of negative understandings of youth as they can result in "policy panic" (Simpson 2018, pp. 30–31). Such panic reduces youth to reductive and harmful stereotypes and limits the space to recognize the diverse and extensive ways youth already are contributing to building peace and responding to violence.

### Meaningful Participation

The 2015 Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security in Amman, Jordan, marked a significant turning point in the character of youth participation. This international conference and the resultant Amman Youth Declaration called for a framework for the meaningful participation of youth in peace. Moreover, the visibility of the agenda facilitated by youth's advocacy within the formal systems of the UN architecture shifted the discourse on substantive participation and compelled the international community to adopt youth engagement as a key strategic priority. There are growing calls for the international

community to take youth seriously and to "tap into the peacebuilding potential of youth organizations" by providing "improved access to funding, technical support and capacity-building" (UN Secretary General 2018, p. 62). This approach to youth engagement envisages an active role for youth in the programming and implementation of peacebuilding practice, which highlights "the unique contributions of youth-led organizations" already occurring within informal peacebuilding spaces (Simpson 2018, para. 22). For example, in Uganda, the development and implementation of social cohesion programs, such as the Reformed Warriors Program, has been instrumental in mitigating ongoing violence. This program provides peer mentorship to youth "cattle raiders" and aims to "disengage" these individuals while rebuilding trust between them and the broader community. In addition, youth-led reintegration and diversion programs, which offer capacity building and training for former fighters and young offenders, have been established in Sierra Leone, Somalia, Cameroon, and parts of Central America (Simpson 2018, p. 47). Youth-led organizations have also taken a leadership role in humanitarian efforts, particularly in the absence of international programs. In Yemen, for example, youth "baked and delivered bread to more than 12,000 families in San'a" while the violence was occurring (Simpson 2018, p. 47). These youth-led initiatives, which demonstrate capacity building, mentorship, and leadership, reveal that young people have the will and capability to actively participate in community efforts to build sustainable peace.

Sustained advocacy efforts by youth and an emphasis on alliance building with civil society resulted in the institutionalization of a participatory framework within the UN architecture. Resolution 2250 establishes guidelines for the interactions between donors, institutions, states, and youth in the peace and security space. Among the key action items for the international community within this document is the creation of "measures that support local youth peace initiatives" and "empower youth" (UNSC 2015, p. 1). The importance of meaningful participation is reinforced by Resolution 2419 (2018), which

further embedded youth within the formal peacebuilding architecture. The rhetoric within these resolutions reflects broader trends within the discourse on peace and security, which cast youth as key actors whose ownership is necessary for the maintenance of peace and stability and shifts away from tokenistic engagement.

Since 2015, youth-led organizations and their allies have worked extensively on implementing the mandate set out in Resolution 2250 to varying degrees of success. As a result, there has been a noticeable shift in the nature of youth's engagement with peacebuilding. Within the international architecture, youth are increasingly sought out to engage in commentary on global challenges and to provide recommendations for how to mitigate the specific harms they face. However, the participation pillar remains one of the central challenges for the YPS agenda, due in part to the emphasis on securitization which produces narrow systems of engagement and limits the character of their participation (Altiok et al. 2020; Altiok [forthcoming](#)). Well-worn identity classifications which cast youth as vulnerable to recruitment, while important, only represent part of their conflict experience. Given this, a more nuanced framework for understanding youth's participation is needed to ensure inclusion is representative of the on-the-ground realities of how young people engage in both violence and instability (Simpson 2018; Altiok [forthcoming](#)).

Heightened attention on youth's role is underpinned by the growing prominence of the youth agency lens within the peace and security literature (as discussed above). This framework is informed by evidence-based research, which highlights the ability of young people to act to facilitate change, both positive and negative, independent of external actors (e.g., McEvoy-Levy 2011, p. 168, and Schwartz 2010). Drawing on data collected in Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Kosovo, Schwartz reveals that youth are important actors in the reconstruction process, who actively pursue ways to participate in peacebuilding (Schwartz 2010, p. 155). Utilizing interviews with youth, she demonstrates that predetermined ideas about their capacity, which perpetuate deviance

stereotypes, fail to reflect how programs and practices established within post-conflict communities empower youth and harness their political will (Schwartz 2010, p. 156). Similarly, citing examples from her edited volume, such as "...youth in the Colombian Peace Communities... and young activists at peace centers" in Bosnia and Herzegovina, McEvoy-Levy concludes that "youth are powerful as conflict transformers" (McEvoy-Levy 2006, p. 287). She suggests that these examples of activism and engagement highlight youth's capacity to be "creators of peaceful culture," as well as symbols of trauma and instability (McEvoy-Levy 2006, p. 287). Increased engagement with youth in peacebuilding contexts demonstrates that their participation and leadership is essential for sustainable peace as not only can they "mobilize their peers and other community members" but they also have the capacity to "understand local dynamics and priorities" that other actors may overlook (Simpson 2018, para. 24). As demonstrated throughout this chapter, including the voices of young people in the development of peacebuilding practices ensures that they are holistic, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of a wide range of conflict participants.

Inclusion and involvement are key characteristics of participation; however, the nature and extent of this engagement matters. Substantive forms of participation are informed by the notion that youth possess agency and thus their contributions are innately valuable. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, meaningful participation for young people relies on institutional recognition that they "have been and are actively involved in emergent, innovative, experimental and substantive forms of solidarity and coexistence" (Oswell 2013, p. 6).

In addition, peacebuilding practices that are meaningfully participatory must acknowledge that all youth are equal partners who inform and shape political structures, knowledge, and relationships. Recent examples of consultations with youth, including the consultative research conducted for the progress report *The Missing Peace*, mandated by Resolution 2250, demonstrate an emerging commitment toward substantive participation (Simpson 2018, p. 5). This

consultative process aligns with evolving trends that are increasingly informing the relationship between youth and the international community, which now aims to “reach out beyond easily accessible and elite youth, to young people who would not ordinarily have a say in . . . global political processes” (Simpson 2018, p. 3). Efforts to encourage youth participation and to reframe the political interactions between states and young people are also evident in the development of National Action Plans for the implementation of the YPS agenda, the renewed commitment to developing youth parliaments, as well as the appointment of a UN Special Envoy on Youth. Youth’s political participation in these spaces provides them with opportunities to reframe the narratives of engagement in ways that enhance their identity as peacebuilders and positive social agents (McEvoy-Levy 2006; Kwon 2019; Sukarieh and Tannock 2018).

Despite recognition that youth are political agents whose participation is necessary for sustainable peace, structural conditions still produce significant challenges for the nature of this engagement. Youth-led peacebuilding organizations were instrumental in shaping the public facing “youth as peacebuilders” narrative central to the YPS agenda. The impact of these interactions, however, was limited as, while the rhetoric around youth participation evolved as a result of advocacy efforts, it did not initially produce meaningful structural change within the formal peacebuilding structures (Altiok forthcoming). The absence of meaningful implementation with respect to the participation rhetoric results in part from the persistence of traditional power structures within the UN architecture, which determine political and social capital. As Altiok argues “youth . . . are neither powerful nor connected enough to shift the policy orientation of the Security Council on youth related issues” (forthcoming: 11). Kwon’s research on global youth forums echoes this sentiment, as she demonstrates that within the international architecture, “institutionalized spaces of power regulated by the politics of consensus” persist which determine the character of youth’s participation (Kwon 2019, p. 930). Although these global forums, including the

Amman Global Forum on Youth, Peace and Security in 2015, were envisaged as a way to create space for youth leadership within the international peace architecture, in practice, the agency of youth was constrained by the persistence of traditional hierarchies, which prioritize the voices of “high-level” speakers (diplomats, UN agency representatives) and state representatives (Kwon 2019, p. 930). Formal networks that engage with youth often envisage a type of interaction that is performative where youth represent the “good global citizen” fulfilling their right and duty to participate. Yet adherence to these archetypes for participation and the persistence of power hierarchies within these sites of engagement fails to reflect the diverse and innovative ways that youth engage to facilitate sustainable peace. To that end, rather than amplifying youth’s voices and contributions, these formalized spaces perpetuate an environment where the perceptions of external actors are framed as legitimate surrogates for youth voices.

While much attention has been on youth participation in formal structures, youth leadership in the peacebuilding space has also allowed for increased recognition of their contributions to sustaining peace through informal networks. Youth peacebuilders effectively utilize informal systems such as protests and harness non-traditional social and political networks, including social media, to facilitate change. Informal networks allow youth to maintain ownership of the peace process to ensure that it is responsive and representative of their interest. By engaging with peace processes through these informal spaces, they are able to maintain autonomy over their ideas and experiences. Altiok and Grizelj (2019) suggest that avoiding “programmatization” of youth political participation in peace processes ensures that all forms of youth engagement are included, even those that do not adhere to emerging ideas about what “effective” participation entails. Notions of how youth contribute to peacebuilding should acknowledge the complex interplay between these informal and formal networks and recognize that youth have the capacity to move between these networks.

The increased acknowledgment that youth participate in peacebuilding in diverse ways through a wide range of systems reflects an evolution in the discourse away from approaches that prioritize top-down decision-making and implementation and toward processes that encourage the development of practices which are widely consultative (Autesserre 2014). This shift highlights the relationship between political will, inclusivity, and durable peace. As recent empirical scholarship demonstrates, social and political stability are more likely when a wide cross section of the community has ownership over the development of peace practices as this encourages sustained participation (Autesserre 2014; Barnes 2009). This expansive approach to participation, which emphasizes collaboration and partnership, emerged largely in response to the increased complexity and scale of current global challenges. As the UN Secretary General noted in his 2018 address, “it is high time that the contributions of young people to sustaining peace were recognized and supported” (para. 28).

## Summary

Despite demonstrating agency in their communities, youth have long been marginal and marginalized within formal peacebuilding networks. Since 2015, due to concerted efforts by youth and allies, there is now growing institutional recognition of their capacity to positively contribute to build peace and respond to security challenges at the local, national, and international levels. This increased academic and policy attention does not come without practical and normative challenges. To ensure youth engagement continues to evolve, it is crucial that those working with and for youth in peacebuilding are aware of these tensions and commitments.

In practice, how youth substantively participate in peacebuilding and engage with the UN peace architecture remains a primary challenge for practitioners and scholars. Youth are often framed as holding “potential” and “power” for positive change; but as Özerdem and Podder note, there is still limited literature that analyzes

and explains the “mechanisms through which this potential can be operationalized” (2015, p. 7). This gap is not just theoretical but has practical implications. If there is limited attention to this cohort – who are known to disproportionately suffer from violent conflict and be marginalized in post-conflict contexts – this has an impact on how societies rebuild after violence. There is an opportunity for more research that pays attention to the practical, implementation-focused aspects of youth peacebuilding.

While there are many well-intentioned efforts to meaningfully include youth, these can reproduce hierarchical or tokenistic relationships between adults and young people. For youth-focused programming to be successful, actors must ensure that youth’s own identities and ownership are harnessed in ways that allow them to speak for themselves. Too often, the political will and agency of youth are silenced within formalized structures as others – often with good intention – speak for youth. As discussed, the complex relationships between formal and informal networks in youth peacebuilding are key to producing the substantive and inclusive form of participation that is widely acknowledged as essential for sustaining peace. To that end, research and practice needs to work as a mechanism for amplifying the voices and work already being done, particularly by youth-led organizations in their own communities.

As attention to youth-led dimensions of peacebuilding grows, recognition of the intersections between gendered and racialized dimensions of peacebuilding must be incorporated into analysis and practice. As the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda has highlighted, women and men experience conflict and peace differently, and thus programming that overlooks gendered dimensions will be unresponsive and ineffectual. The path paved by the WPS movement provides important lessons for YPS as age, class, race, and gender similarly intersect to create unique challenges and opportunities. Given this, recognition of young people’s own conceptions of themselves must underpin programming and engagement.

If peace is built collectively from communities and social movements (Jabri 2007) and supported

through structures and institutions, then our conceptions of peacebuilding are inadequate if a constituency is not being taken seriously. Youth are positioned as both potential risks and as potential positive contributors to peace; the liminality and temporality of youth hold in tension these contrasting positions. There is increased attention on youth leadership and advocacy. This is occurring both in noninstitutional spheres, such as the global climate justice movement and local context-specific actions by youth around the world, and in institutional spaces, such as the YPS agenda. It is evident that to think productively about peace, youth have an important role to play in peacebuilding and responding to insecurity and violence.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration](#)
- ▶ [Everyday Peace](#)
- ▶ [Gender Justice and Peacebuilding](#)
- ▶ [Intersectionality and Peace](#)
- ▶ [Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding](#)
- ▶ [Youth Gang Violence in Honduras](#)

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