Fostering Meaningful Youth Participation in International Peacebuilding

Ali Altiok

Doctoral Student, Peace Studies and Political Science, University of Notre Dame

Paula Porras

Youth, Peace, and Security Interim Team Leader, United States Institute of Peace

Paul Lee

MPhil Candidate, Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, Trinity College Dublin

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Young people bring valuable contributions to peacebuilding because of their unique roles in harnessing and sustaining peace on the ground. However, few opportunities exist for youth to actively participate in leadership and decision-making processes. Commissioned by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), this evidence review used multiple sources of information to identify the limiting factors that keep current power dynamics in place and prevent meaningful youth participation. The sources included policy documents and nascent scholarly literature, as well as interviews with young peacebuilders. Despite signs of progress since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250, the review found that for young people, meaningful participation in peacebuilding remains elusive and requires shifting unjust and oppressive power dynamics hardwired into the social, political, economic, gendered, and educational inequalities and cultural practices that exclude, marginalize, and alienate them from society.[1]

Introduction

On December 9, 2015, the United States Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS), with five action-oriented, crosscutting pillars: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disarmament and reintegration. The resolution's adoption ushered young people into a new era by recognizing their untapped power and potential in the peacebuilding field.[2] The resolution places youth for the first time at the center of policies on peace and security, countering the narrative that depicts young people as victims and/or perpetrators of violent conflict. It focuses on the important role youth play in promoting a sustainable and long-lasting peace. The UNSC's recognition of this role steered unprecedented political attention to the peace and security needs and priorities of young people.

Subsequent resolutions have made significant efforts to promote the participation of youth in peacebuilding. Resolution 2419 (2018) stresses the importance of young people participating in the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements and conflict prevention. Resolution 2535 (2020) affirms the two previous YPS resolutions and reasserts the centrality of youth in building and sustaining peace while acknowledging the structural barriers that limit the participation and capacity of youth.

But despite the advances made under these resolutions, youth remain on the margins of peacebuilding efforts. Involvement in peacebuilding is often risky and requires facing systemic and structural barriers.[3] Even experienced young leaders who are not facing common barriers—such as illiteracy or lack of motivation when participating in social processes—face structural challenges when trying to move from participating in informal decision-making spaces to formal ones.[4] For young people, meaningful participation in peacebuilding requires

shifting unjust and oppressive power dynamics hardwired into the social, political, economic, gendered, and educational inequalities and cultural practices that exclude, marginalize, and alienate them from society.[5] Appreciating and harnessing the power and potential of young people in peacebuilding processes demands countering the violence of exclusion they experience in their daily struggles and interactions with systems and structures.[6]

Deeply rooted power structures at the community, national, and international levels prevent historically minoritized and marginalized groups like youth from participating in critical decision-making processes. Practitioners in the YPS field typically use the following framings to challenge power relations: "power over," which involves hierarchical domination over subordinates; and "power with," which refers to collaborative, collective action or agency.[7] Practitioners aim to shift the power relations in decision-making spaces in peacebuilding from power-over to power-with marginalized and excluded youth groups. However, they struggle to understand how power dynamics operate and to identify the barriers to creating dynamics conducive for meaningful forms of youth participation. Understanding these constraints fully could help YPS stakeholders support, design, and implement projects and programs that increase youth participation in critical decision-making processes.

Commissioned by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), this evidence review paper focused on the following question: What are the limiting factors that keep the current power dynamics in place and prevent the meaningful participation of youth in leadership and decision-making spaces in peacebuilding? The review included interviews with youth leaders and an analysis of policy documents, program reports, and scholarly literature.

This resulting paper first explains the methodological considerations and conceptual challenges in analyzing the political participation of youth in the YPS field. The identity of youth, unlike other identities, is transitory, and the understanding attached to the identity is highly dependent on context, culture, and ideology.[8] The paper then outlines how the global YPS agenda specifically addresses barriers to youth participation in peace processes or decision-making spaces; how young peacebuilders and practitioners perceive and experience power dynamics in peacebuilding processes; and what scholarship suggests for addressing obstacles to youth participation. The paper's conclusion offers recommendations for policymakers, donors, and YPS practitioners.

Methodical and Conceptual Considerations in Assessing Barriers to Youth Participation in the YPS Field

This evidence review included interviews with youth and an analysis of policy documents, reports by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and scholarly literature to examine barriers to the meaningful participation of youth in peacebuilding processes.

The following subquestions guided the research:

1. Who has leadership and decision-making power over peacebuilding in communities affected by conflict, and what type of power relationships do they have with youth?
2. What are the types of structural/systemic power imbalances oppressing young people and impeding their transformative capacities in leading social change and participation in decision-making processes?
3. How would a shift to "power with" youth influence the meaningful participation of youth in leadership and decision-making spaces in peacebuilding?
4. How do young people
    a. contest oppressive power relations for peace?
    b. engage in strategic peacebuilding for fair distribution of power?
    c. challenge youth exclusion from decision-making processes?
    d. use their collective mobilization (youth power) in building civic trust (with government and other stakeholders) and social cohesion (within the community) for reconciliation?
5. Beyond track 1 diplomacy, what other channels can youth participate in as a way to influence peace processes?

The literature review included scholarly articles, cases studies, and reports that explicitly discuss or assess youth participation. However, because there is limited available literature focused on youth participation in peacebuilding, specifically in decision-making spaces, the review also drew on relevant literature in the international education and security sector fields, among others.

In conducting this review on barriers to youth participation in peacebuilding and security efforts, the primary methodological considerations were (1) what counts as evidence and (2) whose views and what forms of knowledge are considered evidence for review. Relying exclusively on scholarly literature would have overlooked young people's knowledge and experiences and would not have examined unjust power relations as experienced by youth. This evidence review prioritized the lived experiences of young people and practitioners in challenging power relations and forging alternative routes to accessing power within and outside formal decision-making processes.

To complement the literature analysis, semistructured interviews were conducted to learn from the perspectives of young peacebuilders (13: 5 females and 8 males) and practitioners and experts (three) working directly on YPS-focused peacebuilding programs and policies at the country level. The 16 interviewees included youth from Afghanistan, Algeria, Colombia, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, the Philippines, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Tunisia, Venezuela, and Yemen. Their views and opinions are not intended to be generalizable to the experiences of all young peacebuilders and practitioners. Their insights, however, shed light on how young

people use the YPS agenda to challenge, disrupt, and transform the structural barriers preventing power sharing in peacebuilding processes.[9]

The concept of power is intertwined with peace in multiple forms and ways, but it is rarely integrated into the analyses of peacebuilding efforts.[10] This evidence review explored the notions of power, particularly from the angle of meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding processes, and examined young people's exposure to, and experience with, power structures in the YPS field.

CHALLENGES AROUND DEFINING YOUTH

Unlike many other identities, the identity of youth is transitory: one does not remain a youth forever. How, then, does one determine who is a youth and who is not? Youth is defined differently depending on the organization and the social, political, and cultural contexts. UNSCR 2250 defines youth as "persons of the age of 18–29 years old, and further noting the variations of definition of the term that may exist on the national and international levels."[11] The resolution's definition created a new challenge to fostering youth participation, as it put forward a new age-based definition that differs from the one that intergovernmental organizations use.

For the purposes of gathering statistical evidence on demography, education, employment, and health, the UN General Assembly and most UN entities define youth as people between the ages of 15 and 24.[12] However, within the UN system, several entities use definitions that differ from the one endorsed by the General Assembly. For example, the United Nations Development Programme considers 15 the minimum age of youthhood but expands the maximum age to 30 or 35 to accommodate contextual conditions and to adapt to the definitions used in regional or national policy documents.[13] The African Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations refer to all people between the ages of 15 and 35 as young people.[14] The European Union primarily defines youth as between the ages of 15 and 29,[15] and a wide range of youth definitions exist in national-level legislations.[16]

The multiplicity of age-based youth definitions creates challenges in assessing or realizing youth political participation, as it complicates the standardization of data collection and subsequent quantitative conclusions.[17] Despite the use by various institutions of chronological youth definitions for statistical purposes, their use of different age ranges in collecting data rules out the possibility of conducting comparative quantitative analyses on youth participation.[18] Additionally, political inclusion initiatives promoted by the YPS agenda engage a wide range of age groups (roughly between the ages of 15 and 35) to increase youth participation. This broad age range makes it difficult to disaggregate the varied peace and security challenges that "older" and "younger" youth experience.[19] Political participation initiatives often prioritize the peace and security concerns of "older" youth, who are experienced in implementing internationally funded peacebuilding projects.

Beyond the problems associated with the specific age range cited in UNSCR 2250, defining youth through any predetermined age bracket risks missing the nuances in diverse youth voices, given that the meaning of youth is shaped by local cultures, context, globalization, and ideology.[20] While some individuals quickly go through or even bypass youthhood by taking on adult responsibilities due to their exposure to conflict and socioeconomic distress, others get stuck in the situation of "waithood" because they do not have the means to fulfill social and cultural markers of adulthood.[21] Creating and assessing participation opportunities solely based on chronological definitions of youth treats the group as homogenous and disregards the nuanced, context-based lived experiences of young people. The interviews with youth for this evidence review surfaced some of the challenges around chronological definitions.

The YPS Agenda and Barriers to Participation

UNSCR 2250 identifies participation as the first action pillar of the YPS agenda. The participation pillar encourages member states to increase youth representation in decision-making processes at the local, national, and regional levels and in international institutions. The resolution also emphasizes the importance of taking youth needs and concerns into account through consultative processes in UN mission settings. In relation to peace processes, UNSCR 2250 asks member states to enhance youth participation in repatriation, resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and reconstruction processes and in the implementation of peace agreements and indigenous conflict-resolution processes.

The subsequent YPS resolutions UNSCR 2419 (2018) and 2535 (2020) advance the council's normative commitment to youth participation. UNSCR 2419 asks the United Nations Security-General and special envoys to facilitate the participation of youth, particularly young females, in decision-making processes at all levels. UNSCR 2535 introduces the most progressive language yet by urging member states to protect civic and political spaces for the participation of young people. In addition, it asks states to develop YPS local, national, and regional road maps through youth participatory processes and asks the UN to appoint youth focal points in UN mission settings.

The participation pillar cuts across all pillars of the YPS agenda. For example, the protection and participation pillars interact because resolutions suggest that the protection of civic spaces enhances the participation of young people. The partnership pillar encourages UN entities and member states to work with young people. The disengagement and reintegration pillar demands enhanced participation of youth in planning disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs. The prevention and participation pillars are also tightly connected because the YPS resolution demands that member states create employment and education opportunities to enhance young people's civic and political engagements. While the participation pillar cuts across all pillars of the YPS agenda, the following subsection specifically examines

peace processes to understand forms of youth participation in decision-making spaces and to explore barriers to meaningful youth engagement.

PEACE PROCESSES

The YPS field identified peace processes as the primary site to foster youth participation. However, despite the existence of YPS resolutions and UNSC efforts that urge member states "to consider establishing integrated mechanisms for meaningful participation of youth in peace processes and dispute resolution," youth participation in peace processes has remained scarce over the years.[22] A 2019 policy paper, which presented the majority of evidence available on youth participation in peace processes,[23] found that when young people are proactively engaged in peace processes and agreements in, around, and outside of negotiation rooms, youth peacebuilding agency organically traverses isolated tracks of peace processes and challenges hierarchical approaches to political power sharing.[24]

Inside formal negotiation rooms, mediators or negotiators determine whether youth are present in negotiating teams, and when they are, their role is often limited to providing technical or logistical support. In the exceptional cases when young people represent youth as a constituency, they help improve the effectiveness of security sector reform; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration efforts; and criminal justice reform processes. They also enhance the accountability and transparency of negotiations. Unfortunately, a desire to minimize short-term security concerns is most often the reason why young people are present in negotiation rooms (due to their engagement in armed conflicts, political violence, or petty crime).[25] Although this reason may be rational from a security standpoint, it often results in the marginalization of young people involved in peacebuilding and implies that engagement in violence is a main vehicle for young people to access political power.[26]

Outside of peace negotiation rooms, youth are offered more innovative and creative opportunities to enhance durability, legitimacy, and public ownership of peace processes. Over the last decade, conflict parties and mediators have agreed to establish youth committees or advisory boards or have appointed young people as civil society representatives to speak in larger political platforms on behalf of youth groups. The downsides of these types of youth participation mechanisms are that they raise public concerns around selection processes and the legitimacy of youth representatives because they tend to overlook the participation of marginalized young people.[27] These types also treat young people as passive information providers, which may instrumentalize or manipulate youth participation.

Yet, arguably, young people's participation outside negotiation rooms is most impactful (in a positive sense).[28] Through mass mobilizations, street protests, and peaceful dissent, young people across diverse constituencies contribute to the durability and implementation of peace processes. Their contributions build connections between the demands of the masses and elite-level political negotiations and thereby increase the effectiveness of mediation efforts. However,

youth political agency outside of the peace negotiation room is often portrayed as a risk to be managed or controlled. Because formal political authorities have less or no control over the peacebuilding activities of young people outside the room, they often tend to ignore, avoid, or (worse) demonize and criminalize the voices and views shared by young people in civic spaces.

Barriers to Participation: Youth Perspectives

To learn from youth experiences with, and perspectives on, barriers to youth participation in peacebuilding processes, this evidence review included 16 interviews of youth peacebuilders and practitioners. The themes that emerged from these conversations were then analyzed, using a power lens.

Scholarly writings define and use the term *power* in various ways. Flor Avelino illustrates some of the many framings and understandings of power tied to social change.[29] The analysis of the interviews with youth leaders draws on several of these framings and the questions that inform them, specifically: How is power exercised? Who is included and excluded? How and by whom is the agenda of change decided? Who/what is enabled and/or constrained by change, and how? Which actors are exercising more/less power, and how? Who has more/less access to which resources? Which knowledge, discourses, and ideologies underlie the process of change?

YOUTH UNDERSTANDINGS OF POWER

The interviewees broadly framed the concept of power as a means to influence social relations and decision-making processes. For example, a young person from Somalia shared, "One way or another, power for me means influence. Whether it's hard or soft, power always means influence." A young male peacebuilder from Kenya reinforced this notion by stating that "power is a form of currency to influence relationships, social life, and outcome." Another young female peacebuilder from Sri Lanka connected her experience of feeling powerful to her concerns around security: "For me, power is about freedom to move and be in places I would like to be. It is about freedom to represent myself, participate as a person in decision-making processes. Power is also about my security, especially when I express myself in public."

Power Is Context Dependent

While all the interviewees emphasized the centrality of political participation in sharing power with young people, they noted that the discussion about power within peacebuilding processes must be context dependent and that particular forms of power should be analyzed within each context. For young peacebuilders, broad generalizations about the meanings of power are not helpful in increasing their influence over peacebuilding processes. A young male from Afghanistan stated, "Power means different things in different contexts. Maybe

young people do not have formal powers, as states or governments have, but young people do have power to influence community and initiate change."

Power Is Defined by Social Norms

A young male from South Sudan explained that power in his context is connected to age-based social dynamics and access to military power:

> In South Sudan, there are two ways to have power. The first is to be an old person. The second is to own a gun. So, elders or the military hold the power. There is a simple political economy behind power relations in the context of ethnic conflict. Get the gun, steal money, get rich, and buy more guns. South Sudanese people know the power of guns. You can see that government has some power through the military and police. They are very good at silencing any form of youth dissent.

Similarly, young males from Somalia and Afghanistan explained that clan or tribe-based political systems favoring elders over others are the most critical factors influencing their contexts' power dynamics. However, a young female from South Sudan added that these age-based power dynamics are also gendered, and without addressing the gendered dimension of injustices, one cannot talk about power sharing with young people in any meaningful way.

Power Is about Resource Distribution

Power is also conceptualized in relation to resources. A young male peacebuilder from Venezuela talked about power in close connection to resource distribution. He said that "power is about decision-making, but it is also about resources, both financial and nonfinancial. Who makes the decision about how much money is invested for peacebuilding? How much money will be invested in [the conflict-] affected population? Who decides who will be involved in the process?"

Whether they are financial or nonfinancial, resources are investments that have the potential to shape the outcome of youth-led peacebuilding work that often takes place at the grassroots level. As the young male from Venezuela shared, one must understand the power associated with decision-making if the aim is to raise awareness about the potential exclusion young people experience during peacebuilding processes.

Power Is Contestable

> In peacebuilding processes, the actor who holds power is communities. People hold power in such a way that they decide what happens.
> —Young male, Kenya

Young peacebuilders also underscored that power dynamics play out differently at different levels. For example, young peacebuilders often lack access to formal decision-making

processes or sufficient authority to be decisive over formal decisions at the national or international levels; however, they may have power at the community level in some contexts. A young Afghan male peacebuilder shared, "Maybe young people do not have formal powers as states or governments have, but young people do have the power to influence community and initiate change." In this respect, young peacebuilders see and experience power as a layered concept that unfolds differently at different levels. This, however, does not mean that young people cannot or do not raise their voice against unjust power relations embedded in systems and structures. For example, a young male from Yemen recounted that youth were not shy to raise their voices to disrupt formal political gatherings that were tokenizing and instrumentalizing their agency, and the youth were therefore able to subvert power dynamics by influencing the outcome of a peacebuilding meeting (see box).

A few months ago, I was in a meeting in Amman with young peacebuilders from Yemen and members of the international peacebuilding community, mainly from Europe. Something interesting that happened in this meeting very much speaks to the discussion about power in the YPS and peacebuilding fields. One of the young people in the meeting took the floor and said:

We met you several times in the past year. I traveled to Geneva, London, Amman just to meet with you. You came with your suits, perfume and sat down with us. You just posted a tweet that you met with Yemeni youth and then left the meeting. But did you care about the living conditions of Yemeni youth? When we wake, we have no bread, no gas. It is real hell! And we know what is really driving this violence. You continue selling weapons to warlords in the background while meeting with us, peacebuilders. What you are doing is not less violent than militias on the ground. In Yemen, everyone felt betrayed by the international community. We see the practices on the ground. All this violence is orchestrated and managed by internationals. Most of us would need to go to the battlefield to survive because there is no way to earn our bread. We lost trust in the international community. Your support for peacebuilding is just a cover for your arms trade. We are the opportunity, not you.

After this intervention, the facilitator could not bring the agenda back. The state of frustration was the only subject spoken about in the room. All the other Yemeni activists took the floor and shared similar stories. To me, this was the moment where I could witness the power of young people.

BARRIERS TO POWER SHARING WITH YOUTH

> Young people are seen as the decision-makers of tomorrow—[but] we do not know when the sun will rise for that tomorrow to arrive.
> —Young male, Somalia

Across different conflict contexts, interviewees said that the problem is not that young people do not have power. From their perspectives, young people have power in peacebuilding processes because of their tight connection to communities, their creative engagement with institutions, and their resilience in the wake of conflict and violence. While there is a tendency among young peacebuilders to acquire power through their engagement with formal politics, most young peacebuilders interviewed for this evidence review consider working directly with communities at the grassroots level as a more effective route to creating and exercising power:

> I can say that we [as young peacebuilders] serve for the community, change people's lives. We have an impact. Our strategy has always been very simple. We never had those flamboyant words. People ask us what our methodology or strategy is. . . . We just keep listening to the people and understand the solution through listening to the community.
> —Young female, Morocco

> What made me powerful in peacebuilding processes is my ability to build bridges between people who disagree.
> —Young male, South Sudan

The interviewees also expressed that the youth representatives selected for participation may not necessarily be the best candidates to represent youth concerns, and that one challenge is the lack of information and awareness about their youth representatives in the communities.

> Young people who are representing youth constituencies at the national or international level need to be linked to youth at the grassroots level, because there is a very big gap. If you ask youth at the grassroots level who their president is, then they would definitely tell you the name of the president. But once you asked them who their youth representative in Juba is, it would be difficult for them to answer correctly because there is not any connection between youth at the grassroots level and their youth representatives. There is not any information sharing or exchange visits between youth at the grassroots level and youth at the urban areas.
> —Young female, South Sudan

Most young peacebuilders interviewed voiced concern that their power, in terms of contributions to peacebuilding processes, is not recognized and favored by formal systems and procedures, and their voices are not listened to in shaping policy priorities.

Trapped at the Community Level

> We have laws that may enable youth to be in parliament through quotas, but we are not empowered to challenge the system. We [as youth] might be able to do things in that controlled space. There are very severe restrictions that we need to be mindful of in building peace.
> —Young female, Sri Lanka

The young peacebuilders interviewed shared that their peacebuilding work rarely and barely influences high-level peacebuilding or peacemaking processes. They believe that their impactful peacebuilding work is trapped at the community level, although their work can prevent a bottom-up escalation of local conflicts and violence. As a young male from Afghanistan stated:

> Peacebuilding in the context of diplomacy is a totally different thing than what young people are doing on the ground. Youth do not have power in the context of diplomacy. Young people are not involved in the diplomatic part of the peace processes taking place in Doha, Qatar. Youth have some representatives, but these representatives do not really represent young people. One of them is a very young person, a warlord himself. So you cannot really see that power is given to young people at the diplomatic level. But when it comes to young people at the grassroots level, you can see mostly young people who are engaged in peacebuilding processes at the grassroots level.

Their analysis of the problem is straightforward. They shared that there are no bottom-up mechanisms for young people to influence higher-level decision-making processes. This harms the legitimacy of youth representatives, especially when they lack connections to young people at the grassroots level. The interviewees shared how they are disempowered through technocratic methods put in place by the system that already has the power.

> Youth age in South Sudan is not clear. The age limit of youth in South Sudan is up to forty. This tells you that the elderly are trying to remain in power and exclude youth. For example, during peace negotiations, youth want to have a 20 percent share to be part of the system, and it was written in the peace agreement that the Ministry of Youth is supposed to be led by a youth. The position ended up being given to someone who is 40 years old. I do not consider him a youth, considering the age range used by the African Union. People in South Sudan manipulate the constitution just to make sure that youth are not decision-makers or policymakers.
> —Young female, South Sudan

Limitations of Youth-Focused Programs

The interviewees consistently underlined the limitations of youth empowerment programs. From their perspectives, the theory of "youth empowerment" relies on a long chain of causal

effects to transform power relations in decision-making processes. For example, youth will be empowered through water sanitation and hygiene projects or with skills projects, employment, and vocational education or protection projects. And once they receive these services, they will have the sufficient conditions for being empowered.

> Most youth empowerment projects in Somalia are about water sanitation and hygiene projects, skills projects, employment, and vocational education or protection projects. But then there are not a lot of projects that are empowering young people to challenge the oppression, to challenge the system, to demand their rights as citizens. I haven't been to or seen any workshop, forum, or training telling young people what their rights as citizens are.
> —Young male, Somalia

The interviewees emphasized that youth empowerment programs rarely support young peacebuilders to challenge systemic problems. They stressed that youth need support to strengthen their abilities to hold their governments and the international community accountable to their promises.

> People who have political power—they do not care about accountability. Youth activism won't have any positive impact if youth cannot hold political authorities accountable. Mass youth movements won't bring any change until movements are empowered to challenge the accountability of corrupt political leaders. Youth empowerment programs do not support youth in this respect. These programs might be useful to bring some change, but the change we want is much more than what youth empowerment programs currently do.
> —Young female, Sri Lanka

Social and Cultural Exclusion

> The status of being young makes us powerless. . . . Culture in Somalia does not see young people as morally respectful until they reach a certain age—things that matter from the perspective of society. 70 percent of society under the age of 30 years old are neither eligible nor entitled to change their lives and livelihoods.
> —Young male, Somalia

Cultural elements and traditional values also impede young people's ability to engage in social change in more meaningful ways. From the perspective of young peacebuilders, the manifestation of community culture is the most central and deeply rooted issue related to their inability to participate in decision-making processes. These power dynamics start at the micro level within families, and these micro dynamics are deeply connected to broader structural problems that keep young people away from formal decision-making processes. While young

people may be economically empowered through job-creation programs, employment does not necessarily enable them to have power over or within decision-making processes. Their economic power may be ignored because of a hierarchical family structure, the masculinity of father figures, and age-based perceptions of young people's roles in society.

> Elders are highly respected in Afghan society. You see this structure in the ordinary Afghan society. I am educated. I have a bachelor's degree. I think very differently than what my parents think. I have a different worldview, modern lifestyle. When it comes to decision-making in the family, I do not have a say in the family, despite the fact that I am making a living for the family. I pay for the family expenses, not my father, but it is still my father who makes the final decision in the family. All these family relationships are interdependent in Afghanistan; and you can generalize it to broader society, to the larger community, to the whole Afghan society. Despite that, Afghan youth are educated and think differently compared to their parents, they [young people] are not seeing themselves in the position of decision-making. This structure prevails and has not changed in the past 20 years.
> —Young male, Afghanistan

Importantly, as young peacebuilders emphasized, these cultural elements that exclude young people do not change through youth empowerment programs. Young peacebuilders think that these cultural elements should be considered when developing youth engagement programs and that the timeline for youth programs should be expanded over a longer time frame. International YPS practitioners also voiced a similar sentiment: "Local norms basically do not comply with our understanding of youth empowerment. We train young people in a way that has no influence over changing the elder-driven system. This issue becomes an even bigger problem from a conflict sensitivity perspective."[30]

> Power is in the hands of old people. In Africa, there is a saying: 'What an old man sees sitting on the floor will not be seen by a young man even from a treetop.' Elders intimidate young people by saying things like this. Elders claim that young people are inexperienced in delivering. These relations are deeply rooted in African traditions and culture. Young people respect older people. And old people use [young people] opportunistically.
> —Young male, South Sudan

YPS practitioners suggested that programmatic engagement would need to take a holistic approach to transform these broader social and cultural practices that disempower young people. More precisely, to be effective in sharing power with young people, experts suggested that YPS programs need to focus on building the capacities of community-based and international peacebuilding organizations and individuals, including UN staff and government officials, on the YPS agenda.

Physical Security Risks

> We are asked to have power in a limited space. You can think of this as a 'cage.' Within the cage, we, as youth, are allowed to empower each other, or we are empowered to speak out. But when we try to break the cage, we are threatened.
> —Young female, Sri Lanka

The dangers and security risks associated with young peacebuilders' engagement in peacebuilding also limit their ability to influence peacebuilding processes. Many of the young peacebuilders interviewed shared that they are afraid of publicly articulating their views and opinions because of being monitored or threatened by their governments.

Young peacebuilders face threats on the internet and social media as well. For example, a young female peacebuilder from Tunisia said that she cannot use her email account or teleconferencing apps, as she is afraid of being surveilled.[31] She also added that once state authorities follow and identify young peacebuilders on the internet, those peacebuilders face physical threats from the state's security agencies. These negative treatments silence young peacebuilders and discourage them from engaging in peacebuilding, while hurting the sustainability of youth-led peacebuilding work.

> In peacebuilding processes, when you as a young person are seen as vibrant and pushing for change, then you are labeled as a rebel by authorities. You become a marked person. No young person wants to be in peacebuilding work and put their lives in danger. I witnessed many young people that are marked by their governments as people who radicalize other young people against the government just because they engage in peacebuilding.
> —Young male, Kenya

A young female peacebuilder from Sri Lanka similarly shared that young people, especially young males, are treated as suspects in areas affected by conflict. In her experience, even when young peacebuilders have permission from local authorities to organize peacebuilding activities in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka, security agencies track the young people, enter workshops to question participants, and kidnap them from their homes. She added, "Sometimes journalists are kidnapped if they report these incidents. This is why kidnappings are not reported very often, but we [as youth] know that kidnapping frequently happens in those areas."

> UNSCR 2250 is good, but it does not take into consideration that governments are aggressive in the way they treat young people and exercise violence against young people.
> —Young female, Tunisia

Young peacebuilders shared that the underlying cause of their physical insecurity is primarily related to their lack of access to justice mechanisms to hold their governments

accountable for their wrongdoings, violations, and corruption. Although the young peacebuilders interviewed have some doubts about the effectiveness of mass protest movements, they see their participation in movements as the only way to hold governments accountable under the current circumstances.

> Most of the time, young people go into the streets asking for revolution, but they are shortchanged. Someone is nominated to talk on behalf of these young people. This is where the problem emerges. We protest, then we are asked to nominate someone else to represent us. We do not need to nominate anyone. We just need to nominate someone among ourselves to push for our agenda.
> —Young male, Kenya

Financial Constraints

> International organizations talk about the empowerment of youth, and there are many resources . . . but they do not have enough resources to support youth. International organizations expect youth to give their time for free and contribute to the work that is changing lives without a budget. There is always some budget for other programs. There is a budget for emergencies, dealing with crises, for trainings, but there is never a budget to financially strengthen youth capacities and pay for their time. It is time to invest in youth financially and create a budget line for youth participation.
> —Young female, South Sudan

Young peacebuilders also shared specific economic concerns related to their political peacebuilding work. Many of them expressed that they are not paid for this work, which limits their capacity to sustain their engagement. Their discomfort is also closely related to how peacebuilding funds are distributed. As a young male peacebuilder from Yemen expressed, "The funding for peacebuilding is manipulated. It does not reach the pockets of young people. Most funding goes for the logistics that are arranged in Europe and the US. Only a small portion is given to people implementing programs." One of the YPS experts reinforced this observation:

> The YPS agenda does not shake power dynamics. The YPS agenda is somehow about where grants go. Those who have the skills and knowledge to receive grants are not peacebuilders. They are bureaucrats/administrators who know how to run an organization. YPS needs to go beyond creating opportunities for those who are part of formal youth organizations.

A young female peacebuilder from Morocco shared her similar concerns, but framed it as a governance problem:

> You hear that those national initiatives receive millions of dollars for youth empowerment or development. But who receives money is the Ministry of Interior? Although people do

not trust the Ministry of Interior, this institution is responsible for allocating money for projects. It is really challenging for NGOs or youth-led organizations to trust these funds because they are afraid of being controlled by the government through these funds. These programs or funds for governments mean "empowerment." For NGOs, it means "control."

Young peacebuilders also spoke about the ineffectiveness of short-term funding cycles. From their perspective, funding cycles are too short for a young person to gain the necessary skills to challenge or disrupt power dynamics within the peacebuilding field.

Short-term, sporadic training is not going to help for any of the [peacebuilding] goals you want to achieve. What donors want is to reach out to a lot of people, but they [donors] do not care how sustainable their projects are. They just want to reach more numbers to put in their reports. This is the main problem with organizations and initiatives. They want to work with hundreds of young people from the 34 providences of Afghanistan, but they [donors] just want to hold 3 days or 1 week training for them [young people]. This is totally absurd and ineffective, because if you do not consistently work with a group of people, they are not going to change.
—Young male, Afghanistan

In sum, young people define power according to social norms, resource distribution, and context. Whether looking at gender- and age-based perspectives or at limitations over resource distribution and formal decision-making spaces, power is a major factor that prevents meaningful youth participation, leadership, and agency in peacebuilding. Young people view unequal power distribution as a leading barrier and believe that it is created by social and cultural exclusion, physical security risks, financial constraints, trapping at the community level, and the limitations of youth-focused programs. Power sharing with youth should therefore be a priority for ensuring equitable peacebuilding processes in decision-making and leadership spaces. Recognizing the existing scholarly work that focuses on these barriers is an important next step in understanding what efforts have already been made to ensure meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding.

What Can Be Learned from Existing Scholarship

The quest for youth political participation in peace and security has been built on decades of literature that presents opposing narratives on youth political agency. Two bodies of scholarly literature offer insight into youth participation in peacebuilding: One takes a quantitative approach to understanding social drivers of insecurity and frames youth as victims and/or perpetrators of conflict. The other examines youth experiences to understand the roles of young people as participants in social and economic reintegration and psychosocial rehabilitation in

postconflict peace processes. This USIP evidence review included an evaluation of how these two bodies of literature inform current barriers that prevent meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding.

QUANTITATIVE PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTH AS VICTIMS AND/OR PERPETRATORS OF CONFLICT

A number of highly influential scholarly works on demography (youth bulges),[32] civil wars (greed),[33] and security studies primarily viewed youth populations as a security threat and progenitors of violence.[34] In taking a power-over approach toward understanding the root causes of conflict, these studies tend to frame young people as victims and/or perpetrators.

Scholars studying demographic factors as instigators of conflict were among the first to portray young people through a victim/perpetrator lens. Demographers using youth bulge theories posited that a large youth population in a country has a destabilizing impact. Although the youth bulge theory dates back to the 1960s,[35] the theory was not well known in the international peace and security field until political scientists Samuel Huntington and Robert Kaplan popularized it in the post–Cold War period.[36] Huntington conceived that the majority of countries' conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century could be explained by their demographic structures. In his view, when the youth population reaches 20 percent or more of the total population in a country, the likelihood of an armed conflict increases.

Over the years, scholars—including Jack A. Goldstone,[37] Henrik Urdal,[38] and Daniel LaGraffe[39]—refined the assumptions underlying theories on youth bulges and explored the social impacts of bulges on poverty, insecurity, and unemployment. Urdal in particular noted that studies on youth bulges emphasize economic and political motives that drive youth to commit violence, especially the "youth cohorts facing institutional bottlenecks and unemployment, lack of political openness, and crowding in urban centers."[40]

Although youth bulge theories have changed over time, and have improved in some ways, they have encompassed conceptually and politically problematic top-down policy approaches. Studies inspired by youth bulge theories have contributed to dangerous stereotypes of youth, particularly in countries in the Global South. Youth bulge theories have portrayed angry young black males from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia as being susceptible to terrorism, and young females as the mothers of future terrorism.[41] To prevent demographic bottlenecks that lead youth to engage in violent conflicts, youth bulge studies have proposed that officials focus their policies on increasing opportunities for migration and decreasing rapid fertility rates. But as Anne Hendrixson has explained, policies that build links between fertility rates and violence prevention "undermine family planning and stigmatize young people trying to access services."[42] All youth bulge studies have treated states as "passive actors" by not factoring in the role of state repression. As Ragnhild Nordås and Christian Davenport's research revealed, states see youth bulges as a threat and preemptively repress

young people to maintain the status quo.[43] A study conducted twice—with 718 young people in 2017 and then with 2,100 young people in 2023[44]—found the same results: 71 percent of former extremists decided to join extremist groups because of the violent actions of their governments. Lastly, youth bulge theories, as Marc Sommers has explained, fail to explain why the majority of youth reject engaging in violence despite high levels of youth unemployment and a lack of educational opportunities.[45]

In the civil war domain, Paul Collier analyzed the structural elements that drive rebel groups to exert power and violence against nation-states and their governments.[46] Collier's research suggests that economic factors are the lead contributors to conflict and that a combination of low education and high populations of young males increase the risks associated with internal armed conflict. In underscoring the recruitment of young people, particularly young males, to join rebellions, Collier reproduces similar narratives of youth bulge theorists who frame youth as victims and perpetrators of conflict.

When youth are framed as a variable associated with increased civil war risks, they are compartmentalized into a homogenous group in policy responses. By framing youth only as a security problem, civil war studies negatively affect how the peacebuilding field traditionally approaches youth political agency. These studies in particular rely on quantitative statistical analysis rather than on asking young people themselves why they engage in or reject violence, and the studies therefore tend to characterize youth exclusively as passive victims and/or perpetrators.[47] As a result, scholarship that is uninformed about the heterogeneity of youth experiences in peace and conflict contributes to stereotypes that characterize youth political agency as a threat to stability. This approach is counterproductive to ensuring meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding and decision-making spaces. The interviews conducted for this USIP evidence review reinforce this point. The youth peacebuilders emphasized their experiences with unjust power relations that stem from unequal resource distribution, gender inequality, and a lack of youth recognition in formal systems that shape policy priorities.

Barbara Walter's research in this context provides a helpful perspective to explore the importance of governance issues.[48] According to Walter, building functional political and legal institutional structures is critical to preventing outbreaks and relapses of civil wars. The structures provide avenues to hold states and governments accountable. Although Walter's research also offers useful pathways to sustain peace, it did not incorporate youth and intergenerational approaches to building such accountability mechanisms in postconflict peacebuilding processes.

In each study domain, power differentials that exclude youth from decision-making processes appear to be important factors in shaping policy recommendations and influencing the way youth are perceived in issues related to the prevention of war, postconflict reconciliation, and economic development. Some youth programs that aim to prevent youth participation in violence—whether focused on civic engagement, advocacy, or empowerment—may lead to power sharing between young people and adults. Therefore, the scholarly work that falls into

this body of literature often recommends that political inclusion programs work with broader communities, not just with the targeted program beneficiaries. Emphasizing the need for programs to engage with broader community members may in turn prevent tensions around power sharing with youth and prevent adults from losing power and control over the processes and outcomes.[49] However, at the same time, some of these engagement programs may also overpower certain youth groups and thereby increase conflict dynamics or create new tensions.[50]

As a result, demography, civil war, and security studies bring attention to youth participation in violence but rarely put forward arguments for fostering youth political participation in peace-related decision-making processes.

YOUTH AS PARTICIPANTS IN POSTCONFLICT PEACE PROCESSES

An alternate body of highly influential scholarly works is informed by the experiences of young people and provides a number of normative reasons for enhancing youth political participation in peace and political transition processes. Before the adoption of UNSCR 2250, peace studies, development studies, and international education studies started exploring the positive contributions of young people as peacebuilders.[51] These studies reveal how youth participation can increase the legitimacy and civil society ownership of peace processes and how it is strategically important to prevent postaccord violence.[52] These studies also suggest that youth participation can increase the effectiveness of security and criminal justice sector reforms and the durability of peace agreements.[53] By providing valuable insight on the transmutation of security threats in postconflict settings, young people are able to share their unique understandings and experiences of security and insecurity.[54]

In peace studies, scholars—including Helen Berents and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy—analyze the values, policies, and power dynamics that create barriers toward peace. They offer a theoretical framework, based on an analysis of youth social movements, to understand youth participation in everyday peacebuilding.[55] Their theoretical framework examines youth exclusion and resistance to political engagement and advocates increased recognition of young people's roles as knowledge producers, especially in peacebuilding settings that are gendered and socially constructed.

Unlike the studies that focus on civil war onset, demography, and security, peace studies often challenge orthodox peace theories that place "both the blame for conflict and the burden of breaking cycles of political violence on youth."[56] Instead, peace studies build on youth experiences to advocate meaningful youth engagement in everyday peace to ensure positive and long-term social changes. However, although peace studies argue in favor of the political participation of young people not engaged in violence as victims or perpetrators,[57] they primarily focus on peacebuilding in informal, local, and community settings. Everyday peace approaches, although useful for facilitating change at the community level, have offered limited practical ideas to operationalize youth participation and power sharing in politics at broader

levels. As suggested by the youth interviews conducted for this USIP evidence review, young people who are trapped at the community level tend to focus their peacebuilding work on improving social conditions like education, rather than on challenging systemic problems related to governance and politics. This barrier often prevents youth from participating in high-level leadership and decision-making spaces.

Postconflict studies have attempted to address this shortcoming. For example, Yvonne Kemper and David Nosworthy have researched intergenerational methods of youth participation in peacebuilding through local youth groups and cross-generational dialogues to explain how community-based efforts can fuel unequal power imbalances.[58] In particular, Kemper drew on Jason Hart's research about youth participation in development to explain how sociopolitical approaches toward youth engagement are counterproductive to security sector reform because they capitalize on youth marginalization to create opportunities for reconciliation.[59] Specifically, the creation of youth clubs and the integration of young people in decision-making processes can lead to outspoken criticism of political leadership, which can in turn lead to resentment, unequal power imbalances, and conflict escalation.[60] In other words, political participation in local youth councils, community governance, or similar structures may actually protect the status quo and serve the interests of the political elite.[61] In response to these negative factors, Kemper recommended the sociopolitical participation of young people in the development, planning, implementation, and evaluation of peace processes, which can increase context sensitivity and the accuracy of needs assessments in peacebuilding programs.[62]

These studies view peace education as a way to curb participation in violence and to understand the barriers preventing youth participation in peacebuilding. In particular, these studies consider how power influences identity formation and worldviews—two important factors that influence the creation and implementation of education programs.[63] According to H. B. Danesh, worldviews are impacted by issues relating to survival, security, and group identity.[64] Because these three factors emanate through education, worldviews are often manipulated by those who hold the most power in society. In response to this challenge, Danesh proposes a peace education theory that teaches participants how to promote unity and a culture of peace.[65]

The "unity-based worldview" on which his theory is founded suggests that peace can only emerge when a shift occurs from thinking in terms of self-centered human survival instincts to a more inclusive awareness of how individuals identify with all humanity.[66] Danesh's theory suggests that a unity-based worldview should be consulted when developing education-based relationships, creating a culture of healing, and producing a culture of peace based on mutual trust between schools and communities. According to his theory, power sharing and partnerships in the peace education field can be both consultative and cooperative, allowing for mutual trust and engagement to exist among all stakeholders.

An important body of literature perceives education as a measure to prevent youth from participating in violence. Education, or the lack thereof, offers insight into various social

dimensions that explain whether young people are forced to participate in conflict or whether they somehow make a voluntary choice when joining violence.[67] Perceptions of youth accountability, agency, and decision-making rationale that emerge from these studies lead this body of knowledge to predominantly focus on social and economic reintegration and psychosocial rehabilitation of young former combatants during postconflict peace processes.[68] This is noteworthy because scholarship that examines reintegration from a child protection lens tends to be more critical of reasons given for the political participation of former youth combatants.[69]

Lastly, recent literature on peace education more intimately examines how power relations can prevent youth participation in decision-making processes.[70] A framework developed by Mario Novelli, Mieke Lopes Cardozo, and Alan Smith encompasses transformative peacebuilding approaches to address social injustices generated through education in postconflict settings.[71] Their framework recognizes the identity- or culture-based disparities that education systems sometimes foster. To address these inequalities, the framework offers practical approaches to redistributing access to education and embedding peacebuilding into education systems. Reconciliation, as the central pillar, includes addressing the historical legacies of conflicts through context-sensitive reforms of education curricula. This area of research analyzes context-based unjust power relations and proposes making long-term investments in educational activities that engage young people as peacebuilders and tap into their aspirations for positive peace.[72]

HOW SCHOLARSHIP INFORMS THE UNDERSTANDING OF BARRIERS

Overall, scholarly work has yet to catch up with the current challenges and barriers impeding youth political participation in peacebuilding. With the emergence of the global YPS agenda, the focus of peacebuilding practitioners has shifted from *why* youth should be included to *how* youth should be included.[73] In other words, practitioners and young people often no longer need reasons to justify youth political participation, but rather need to translate and localize the global YPS resolutions in their own contexts. While there is larger normative support from the international community, new challenges arise in fostering meaningful participation of youth in peace processes.

Critical scholars have already argued that the participation of youth as peacebuilders in current (liberal) forms of peacebuilding practices is instrumentalized to provide ideological support for massive political and economic inequalities.[74] Political participation initiatives in the YPS field need to account for ideologies and the instrumentalization of youth agency in an unjust global world order. This lesson is particularly important because the YPS field has evolved into a state where youth engagement is largely about convincing them to trust their governments and multilateral systems. This one-sided trust-building approach that avoids

conflict with states and governments is not effective and may also be counterproductive because it asks young people to be part of corrupt, unjust, or undemocratic systems.[75]

Conclusion and Recommendations

UNSCR 2250 and the subsequent related resolutions changed the narrative on youth and mobilized high-level attention for the political participation of young people in peace and security. Progress has been made in terms of how the international peacebuilding sector fosters youth participation, partners with youth organizations in peace advocacy, allocates more resources, and engages youth in research processes. However, according to available evidence, the YPS agenda does not give enough attention to young people's experiences with power dynamics in the peacebuilding field. Only a few studies offer reports or guidelines that examine how systemic and structural issues limit youth participation in decision-making processes. And only a few reports critically review the roles of governments or examine the trustworthiness of state institutions that young people are asked to trust, work with, or support. The YPS field may not be credible in the eyes of excluded and marginalized young people because implementation processes do not fulfill commitments made in policy documents on youth political participation and do not critically assess, evaluate, and report actions or omissions of governments and states.

To close the gap between normative commitments and the realization of these commitments, the YPS field should invest in youth participatory accountability mechanisms. Since the adoption of UNSCR 2250, numerous YPS reports have put forward dozens or even hundreds of recommendations after consulting with young people. But no systems have been established to track whether states, donors, and civil society organizations are implementing these recommendations. To supplement the YPS agenda, this USIP evidence review provides a set of recommendations, drawn from the experiences of youth interviewees and from the literature analyzed.

- Do not make broad generalizations about the understanding of power, as they will not help boost young people's influence over decision-making spaces in peacebuilding. Power should be analyzed and defined according to each specific context. When implementing projects, initiatives, and peacebuilding processes, an analysis of the power dynamics specific to the context should be done to understand the following: the different kinds and levels of power each stakeholder brings into the space, the power imbalance between the stakeholders and youth, how traditional leaders' *power over* can be managed to ensure that decision-making includes the voices of youth meaningfully, and how *power with* can be developed among the different stakeholders to work more effectively in peacebuilding processes (for example, by identifying which youth capacities need to be strengthened to

increase their influence capacity). The physical and psychological safety of youth participants in this analysis should always be taken into account and prioritized to ensure youth participation.

- Continue investing in youth capacity programs. Young people mostly draw on their connections with communities because it is hard for them to reach formal politics and decision-making spaces. Programs that invest in youth capacity building to strengthen these links with communities should look deeply at which mechanisms work best. That said, youth participation and their source of power should not be limited to community engagement. Further work needs to be done to break down the barriers to meaningful youth participation in decision-making and formal spaces in peace processes.

- Prioritize young people from diverse genders as key interlocutors and stakeholders in the design and implementation of security sector, penal, and criminal justice reform processes. In particular, the role of youth should be reflected in the design and implementation of democratic policing processes, justice system reform (including juvenile justice), penal reform, and military reform. Specific attention should be given to prevention-based approaches for youth at risk and to a reduction in the incarceration of young, nonviolent offenders.

- Undertake further research on youth political participation through cross-country case studies conducted through participatory and youth-centered methods at the community level.

- Rethink what capacity building looks like. Design trainings that allow space and time for capacity building and that prioritize the creation of systemic change. Capacity-building and youth engagement programs should engage additional stakeholders that shape the cultural context, such as family members, religious leaders, and policy leaders. A rethink requires moving away from one-off trainings and instead taking a long-term approach to capacity building and change over time. Such an approach prioritizes depth over breadth.

- Consider intergenerational dialogues to surface the existing power dynamics and to create space for generations to learn from one another. Intergenerational dialogues at higher levels can increase understanding of the expertise youth bring to peace processes. Intergenerational dialogues at the community level can contribute to shifts in understanding the role of youth in society.

- Consider establishing programs for those who leave youthhood to mentor those who still identify as youth, creating a bridge between generations. A mentorship program can provide guidance to younger youth as they navigate power dynamics in their peacebuilding work.

- Because young people often distrust the government and how international organizations distribute their funding, develop programs that strengthen youth-led organization capacities to operate big peacebuilding projects and that rely on the more experienced youth-led organizations to distribute funding among smaller grassroots organizations.

- Identify creative mechanisms to fund youth projects so youth are able to support their peacebuilding work in different ways. There should also be flexibility in using the funds for both local projects and bottom-up projects that can influence the broader international peacebuilding space.

- Continue to build mechanisms for, and regularly invest in, young peacebuilders to monitor the implementation of already existing YPS recommendations and to hold those responsible accountable. Some efforts to monitor YPS program implementation have been made. For example, a young person developed the website www.ypsmonitor.com, but it needs frequent data updates for it to be useful for the overall YPS community.

- Explore the following questions to supplement existing research on youth participation:
  - How can power differences between stakeholders and young people be accounted for in the design and development of peace processes to ensure effective and meaningful youth participation?
  - How does intersectionality, or the intersection of marginalized identities, play into meaningful youth participation in leadership and decision-making in peacebuilding (for example, young females versus young males versus young LGBTQ+)?
  - How are power dynamics replicated and reinforced in decision-making spaces and peacebuilding spaces?

Acknowledgment

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