



12 Gender and Youth: Changing Perspective

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“Youth [and women] should not be on the table, but around the table.”

UN Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security

Thinking in images is a useful exercise to understand how deeply gendered our associations with war and peace are and how none of us can escape “doing gender”, and indeed, “doing stereotypes”, as part of our everyday thinking and actions. Because habitual thoughts are the ones we question least, gender studies are a helpful tool in making us aware of how individual identities are shaped. They also help to critically analyse the social

GENDER | the fact of being male or female, especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences, not differences in biology

YOUTH | a transitional phase from childhood to adolescence

Both can be seen as socially constructed categories that are associated with assigned roles, statuses, duties and responsibilities. Transformative approaches broaden our view to acknowledge the positive contributions by all, but also highlight the constricting consequences of certain roles and ascriptions.

construction of “masculinities” and “femininities” and the gendered organisation of public and private life in war- and peacetime, as Cordula Reimann has pointed out. In contrast to gender, which continuously shapes individuals’ (self-)perception, youth is a transitional phase from childhood to adolescence. It is associated with certain milestones within socio-economic and cultural contexts and, therefore, does not allow for a universally agreed numerical definition.

Turning to the numerous commonalities between gender and youth, both can be seen as socially constructed categories that are associated with assigned roles, statuses, duties and responsibilities. It is commonly acknowledged that both women and youth are disproportionately affected by violence and conflict. However, both groups are often overlooked and marginalised in peace processes. The international women, peace, and security and the youth, peace, and security communities therefore have complementary agendas, which seek to shed light on women and youth not only as victims of violence during times of conflict, but also as positive change agents in transforming conflicts. Ultimately, it is essential to look at (young) women’s and young men’s unique experiences of conflict and violence in order to meaningfully include their voices and change perspectives.

Imagine ...

When you close your eyes and think about “war”, what do you see? If you see a person, is it a man or a woman, and is she old or young? Do you see a raped man lying dead on the ground with his crying children around him? Do you see a young girl with a grimy face pointing her AK-47 at you? What about the people at the conference shaking hands as they sign a peace agreement? Do you imagine them as women or men, young or old?

Conflict transformation through a gender and youth lens

While often neglected, gender- and youth-sensitive perspectives constitute important analytical dimensions of conflict transformation, both in terms of understanding causes and effects of (violent) conflict and in identifying means for their transformation.

On a macro level, such perspectives consider patriarchal and gerontocratic structures and the resulting (in)equalities to be root causes of conflict. Women and young people tend to be excluded from formal and informal socio-political and economic spaces. Often, traditional and cultural norms lend (advanced) age and (male) gender power and authority, thereby establishing hierarchies that prevent youth or women from entering political spheres and decision-making arenas.

This structural exclusion is most vivid in formal peace processes, which tend to be the preserve of older males. Prevailing simplistic stereotypes – such as the youth-bulge-violence nexus, conflating young male populations with violence, or viewing women as passive victims – further hinder their active engagement in peace processes. In turn, this violence of exclusion fosters the very negative stereotypes that lead to their marginalisation in the first place, which risks certain groups resorting to violence as a means of resolving conflict.

On a micro level, the perspectives on women and youth in contexts of violent conflict have long focused on the role of women as victims and young men as perpetrators of violence and spoilers of peace. These stereotypical views may be internalised and projected onto peers, further strengthening negative perspectives and fuelling destructive spirals of violence. Certainly, young men represent the majority of fighters and consequently the majority of casualties in armed violence and young women suffer most from gender-based violence (UNFPA 2015, 21). Yet these tendencies mask multifaceted experiences. Men too become victims of gender-based violence. The role of female combatants is increasingly being explored, with the Berghof Foundation at the forefront of action research on female ex-combatants' post-war leadership roles.

Finally, it is essential not to overlook the fact that the vast majority of young people are *not* involved in violence. For a long time, the predominance of stereotypical victim and perpetrator perspectives neglected the key roles of women and young people in preventing violence, transforming conflict and sustaining peace. In recent years, interest has slowly turned towards these missing pieces and more differentiated analysis, by highlighting the various ways in which these actors have exerted their positive agency in formal and informal peace processes. Although their full potential remains poorly understood, recent studies indicate the positive contributions of women's participation in peace processes, especially when they influence decision-making (O'Reilly 2015). Likewise, anecdotal evidence of young people's activities in peace processes – ranging from raising awareness of peace and justice to facilitating dialogue or even negotiations with armed groups on behalf of their communities – sketch a promising youth space of conflict transformation, which has been overlooked for too long.

The practitioner's perspective

Emphasising the moral and pragmatic imperative of taking women and youth into account, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security and then Resolution 2250 on youth, peace, and security have boosted the production of policy guidelines, planning toolboxes and lessons learned reports. Gender and youth mainstreaming are increasingly understood as important instruments for planning and implementing inclusive and effective peacebuilding interventions. However, there are still many conceptual and methodological challenges to address in order to make conflict transformation a truly gender-sensitive and youth-inclusive endeavour. These range from the conception of gender analysis as primarily concerned with “women’s issues” and gender experts as necessarily being women, to the perception of gender and youth mainstreaming as an annoying “must” and additional workload instead of a helpful tool to improve planning and enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions. Despite it being an obviously heterogeneous group, definitions of youth tend to be overly simplistic and gender-equal, missing the specific needs, interests and positions of young people in peace processes and therefore hampering efforts aimed at meaningful inclusion. Even when they are included in peace processes, this inclusion is very restricted, tokenistic and limited to “youth issues” such as education or employment, instead of providing or strengthening existing spaces where they interact and engage with other stakeholders, perhaps eventually transforming existing power hierarchies.

Changing perspectives ... but a long way to go

The peacebuilding field in general has come a long way in developing policy frameworks that reflect a mature perspective on actors, processes, causes and transformation of conflicts (→ Building and Sustaining Peace; → Transforming Conflict). The United Nations Secretary-General’s prevention and sustaining peace agendas and the associated women, peace, and security and youth, peace, and security agendas are prominent examples

in this respect that emphasise the important role that traditionally marginalised actors like women and young people play in conflict transformation. However, in order to translate these norms into practices that would foster genuine, context-specific and therefore meaningful inclusion of women and young people in formal and informal peace processes, interventions need to be based on a complex understanding about their unique roles and qualities to shape peace processes as well as the specific challenges to their inclusion. Applying a gender and youth lens unveils spaces of the everyday where these actors work for peace – as explored, for example, by Mir Mubashir and Irena Grizelj. Strengthening these efforts and encouraging others to engage will help in overcoming prevailing negative stereotypes and render the positive agency of women and young people more visible, doing justice to the multitude of roles they can play – so that one day we might close our eyes and think about war as something that women and men, young and old together are able to prevent.

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