

The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding in Duhok

Dr. Maamoon A. Mohammed
University of Duhok
Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution Studies

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The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding in Duhok

By Dr. Maamoon A. Mohammed¹

Abstract

In any post-conflict situation like Kurdistan region, the youth contribution to peace is especially important since rebuilding a state needs to be an inclusive process. Not only is social exclusion recognized as a widespread cause of escalation of violence, but young people's participation has great potential, not least for ensuring sustainability. However, while youth are widely recognized as agents of disruption, little is known about their contribution to peacebuilding, nor how to encourage and maximize their potential. Using a theoretical framework based on current theories of violence, human needs and agency, this study discusses the role of young people in community peacebuilding in Duhok Governorate.

¹ Associate Professor at the University of Duhok, Department of Peace and Human Rights Studies.

Using questionnaires and interviews with a range of stakeholders, the paper focuses on the question: what are young peoples' priorities and what do they need to develop their potential for peacebuilding in the community? It identifies practical opportunities for youth to realize community peacebuilding activities and discusses how effective their existing initiatives are. It then focuses on the challenges that youth face in seeking to contribute, including demographic issues, corruption, lack of suitable space and activities, and lack of appropriate support from donor and government institutions, noting how ethnicity, gender and youth issues can compound challenges.

The outcomes demonstrate that, while young people recognize the need for social cohesion among different ethnic groups and community peacebuilding, they face many deeply embedded cultural and structural challenges. In particular, young females face more resistance than males, regarding both how they are perceived and their more restrictive circumstances.

Contents

1 .Introduction	7
2. Theoretical Framework	12
2.1 Cultural and structural violence	12
2.2 Human needs theory	13
2.3 Agency	13
3. Young people in peacebuilding literature	15
4. Definitions	21
4.1 Youth	21
4.2 Peace	23
4.3 Peacebuilding	24
4.4 Gendered definitions of peacebuilding	26
5. Methodology	27
6. Research results	29
6.1 Current projects	30
6.2 The Context	31
6.2.1 Intergenerational power	32
6.2.2 The gendered context	34
6.2.3 The educational context	37
6.3 Inclusivity	38
6.4 Beliefs and abilities	40
6.4 Participants' knowledge of peace, peacebuilding and related policy	43
6.5 Spaces and Opportunities	46
6.6 Factors inhibiting the participation of young people	47
6.6.1 Lack of organizational support	48
6.6.2 Effects of intergenerational gap	50

6.6.3 Gender issues.....	51
6.6.4 Time constraints	52
6.6.5 Minority issues	53
6.6.6 Legal and policy restrictions	53
6.7 Youth participation in Iraqi Kurdistan	53
7. Conclusion	60
8. Recommendations	64
9. References	66

1. Introduction

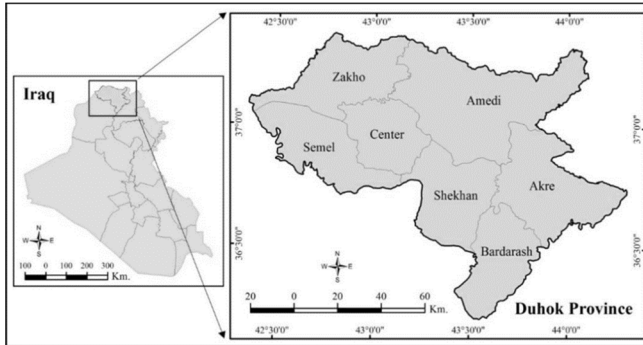
Investigating the contribution of youth to peace in any post-conflict situation like Kurdistan is particularly important as, while there is a lot of literature on their involvement in violence and terrorism there is considerably less on their contribution to peacebuilding. Moreover, it is important to raise awareness among youth, themselves, that their efforts and concerns are recognized, and they have the capability to help promote peace. Furthermore, such research is essential as a basis for policies supporting youth participation. This paper argues that youth have great potential for peacebuilding but this needs to be nurtured. They are generally enthusiastic regarding actively changing their own context. However, while many youths currently volunteer and there are an increasing number of opportunities for developing peacebuilding skills, with several NGOs providing training and opportunities to help youth design and implement initiatives, compared to the high number of youths, these are few.

The integrated international response to youth issues has a short history: until the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2250 in December 2015, there was no international framework to support analysis or responses to issues of youth, peace and security. The Resolution has gone some way to remedy this by attaching importance to researching and analyzing the role of youth in peacebuilding. The document obliges members to take youth' involvement, interests and needs into consideration when designing peacebuilding programs. It also calls for research on the progress of youth' contribution to peace, including study of the context and of resilience policies in place to sustain it. In line with this, this research seeks to facilitate the inclusion and participation of youth in peacebuilding. Arguments supporting this range from those citing their unique stage of development – the need to keep them from becoming troublemakers, their disproportionate demographic size, that they are the leaders/adults of tomorrow – to those respecting their human and children's rights, and the simple fact that they are members of society.

The following sections first give an overview of the geographical and cultural context, then present the theoretical framework underpinning the research. Following this, after a brief discussion of background issues, relevant definitions and methodology used, the results of the field research are presented and discussed.

Duhok Governate is tribal, multi-ethnic and religiously diverse, the majority being Sunni Muslims while the main minorities are Shia Muslims, Christians, Yesidiz and Turkmen. It has a long history of displacement and waves of returnees, the most recent being from Mosul in 2014 after the ISIS occupation and from Syria. Those who fled ISIS do not share the same ethnic/religious background as the host community. Figures from IOM and UNHCR indicate that the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees has exceeded 800,000; with 18 IDP camps and 4 refugees camps. Notably, the IDPs who fled from ISIS do not share the same ethnic religious background as the host community in Duhok, being Yesidiz, Arabs, and Turkmen (mostly Shia). Although many IDPs returned home after

the liberation of Mosul, according to the last IOM update (15/10/2018), 348,198 IDPs still reside in Duhok.



Map of Duhok ¹

The host communities and local authorities, with the help of international NGOs, have managed the last four years with patience. But, with the lasting economic crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan (IK), resentments due to extra electricity consumption and use of other services such as education and healthcare, as well as increasing unemployment have greatly exacerbated tensions, and compounded by the belief that remaining IDPs will stay forever.

¹ Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Location-map-of-Duhok-Province_fig1_343233017

Research Objectives

To explore the role of young people for peacebuilding in Duhok.

- 1) To identify the opportunities available to youth to contribute to peacebuilding.
- 2) To discuss the challenges that youth face when contributing.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on a threefold understanding of violence and peace – Galtung’s theories of cultural and structural violence, human needs theory, and the notion of agency.

2.1 Cultural and structural violence

As argued by Galtung, cultural, symbolic and structural forms of violence – whether as limiting narratives, beliefs, stereotyping, or social and institutional structures – are used to exclude, neglect, and marginalize groups from satisfying their basic needs, even when direct violence is not apparent (Galtung, 1996).

Youths – both male and female – are often victims, and sometimes perpetrators of these various forms of violence; for instance, discrimination, crime, victimization and sexual abuse. Sustainable peace requires resolution of structural inequities and cultural beliefs that legitimize discrimination and direct forms of violence (Galtung, 1990). Thus, achieving peace involves transforming a

complex range of social structures, cultural patterns and beliefs, and the relationships that underlie any conflict situation (Galtung, 1996).

2.2 Human needs theory

Many scholars have explained the importance of human needs, including the need to be respected, understood and consulted. Notably, Maslow (1970) and Burton (1990b) argue that conflict is caused by unmet human needs. Thus, peacebuilding activities and initiatives are undermined when young people see violence as their only means to get their needs met. Otherwise, they are liable to rebel or leave the country.

2.3 Agency

Agency means the ability of a person to think and act independently, make choices and enact them in the real world. White and Wyn (1998) articulate three dimensions of agency: “consciousness of the potential to take action, the willingness to take collective action and the knowledge and wiliness to change social structures.”

The concept of agency makes our understanding of helplessness and victimhood clearer, indicating the capability to rise above restrictions of social structure and so become a catalyst of change. Thus, while being ‘unheard’ results from powerlessness and indicates the systematic lack of recognition, respect and ownership, participation in peacebuilding leads to a sense of being ‘heard’ and ultimately to agency.

This study understands young people, not as the passive bystanders of social change, but as potentially creative agents of socio-political process. Therefore, it seeks to generate understanding of the actual contributions and limitations on youth activities in Duhok, by considering Galtung’s three forms of violence, and so to increase their agency and fulfill the needs of themselves and others in their community.

3. Young people in peacebuilding literature

Young people have been variously discussed in literature – as threats and troublemakers more often than as creative peacemakers. More recently, scholars and policymakers have become aware of the problematic consequences of the omission of youth in peacebuilding literature. After giving an overview of existing literature on youth' relationship with peacebuilding and violence, both as victims and aggressors, this paper seeks to fill this gap regarding the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan (McEvoy-Levy, 2007).

McEnvy-Levy (2001) stresses the importance of including young people in peace processes and giving them ownership of these activities. Therefore, peacebuilding activities need to be in the interests of youth and to recognize their needs. Moreover, she makes clear that, in order to feel ownership, the youth themselves need to be consulted regarding how they can work together to achieve their goals, so they feel that they own the project.

Then youth empowerment can arise. Being heard implies both the ability to speak and the opportunity to be heard. As O’Kane et al. (2009) demonstrate: “When children are recognized as civil society actors, when they feel that their views are being listened to and taken into account, when they feel their concerns and aspirations are being addressed, only then will their rights be realised, and their full potential as active agents within society be recognized.”

Meanwhile, several scholars focus on the causes of youth violence. Urdal et al., cited in Kemper (2005), argue that youth violence is caused by greed, grievances, lack of promotion prospects, inequality and poverty. Others cite the high demographic percentage of the population, referred to as ‘the youth bulge,’ as a major contributory factor. Thus, Barakat et al. argue that societies with a high percentage of youth who do not see a bright future are more likely to fall into conflict. This is exacerbated by the negative role played by the media, alongside other variables such as economic stress associated with lack of employment, lack of access to quality education, limited

resources and high levels of inequality between ethnic groups¹.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the situation is especially difficult due to violent conflicts and inadequate state infrastructures, compounded by increasing unemployment, making youth more at risk of violence and problems arising from this. The pessimism and demoralization that youth experience, their general environment and the displacement of many makes them especially vulnerable to exploitation by armed groups. As discussed in a USAID (2005) study, youths have been cited as triggers/perpetrators of conflict and spoilers to peace: “when young people are uprooted, jobless, intolerant, alienated, and have few opportunities for positive engagement, they represent a ready pool of recruits for groups seeking to mobilize violence.” The sensitivity of the situation in northern Iraq, with its current and long history of displacements and ethnic resentments,

¹ See, for example, E. Sciolino, “Radicalism: Is the devil in the demographics,” *New York Times*, 9 December 2001. Available from <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/09/weekinreview/radicalism-is-the-devil-in-the-demographics.html>

makes it an especially useful case study to complement further work, here, and in other regions.

In other areas of literature, youth are seen as victims, which also has negative effects. As Drummond-Mundal and Cave (2007:72) explain: “Focusing only on the vulnerabilities of young people is a limiting perspective that denies them the opportunity to influence their own lives and futures, and overlooks their insights, their rights to participate and their potential to contribute to peacebuilding.” Similarly, by drawing on stereotypes of youth’ victimhood and passivity in the face of violence, aid NGOs entrench such stereotypes as accepted ‘truths,’ making it harder to contradict (Hart and Tyrer, 2005). Conversely, other scholars focus on youth as active individuals, possessing assets such as resilience, curiosity, intellectual agility, innovativeness, and vision of the possibility and capacity to help others (Apfel and Simon, 1996).

While the literature provides little on the positive role of youth in peacebuilding (Keating and Knight, 2004), there is evidence to demonstrate this and their capacities for it (Fisher, cited in Lederach, 1997). Indeed, scholars

emphasize the importance of engaging youth in post-conflict peacebuilding, as well as enabling them to have positive roles in civil life and reintegrate into communities after joining armed groups. As McEvoy-Levy (2006b, p. 213) makes clear, they are capable of filling roles “as leaders, advocates and activists, and as agents of social change, as well as peacebuilding” (McEvoy-Levy, 2006a). In post-conflict societies, this is especially important as there is a particular need for qualities that youth possess such as being future-oriented, open to changes, and responsive with and to feedback and learning.

When, in December 2015, the UNSC unanimously adopted the historic Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, it represented a recognition of the role that youth can play in peacebuilding and outlined a legal framework that requires UN agencies, NGOs and government to introduce policies including youth in peacebuilding programs.

The inclusion of all is the overall aim of participation. However, there is little use in discussing youth participation without supporting it with a plan and mechanism. This might not be an easy step to do due to the challenge it presents to older generations, and that the

older generation must approve young people's participation and work together. The UN Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peacebuilding asserts the need to support participation based on a human rights/economic approach that identifies young people as central to the economic development of their country. This requires a socio-political approach that connects/engages youth in public life and a socio-cultural approach that analyses the roles of young people in existing structures and supports dialogue – including intergenerational dialogue – about these structures¹.

¹UN Guiding Principles on Young People Participation in Peacebuilding (UN-IANYD).
https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2016-10/Guiding%20Principles%20on%20Young%20People%E2%80%99s%20Participation%20in%20Peacebuilding_1.pdf

4. Definitions

4.1 Youth

Among the many challenges to researching youth issues is the cultural dependence of the term, youth. In the literature, the concept has been redefined by various social and demographic changes; some scholars favor biological markers, by stating that youth is the period between puberty and parenthood, while others use cultural markers to define youth as a distinct social status with accompanying roles, rituals, and relationships. Meanwhile, policies and regulations regarding their contribution to peacebuilding are based on a Western definition of youth. As explained by McEvoy-Levy (2013), *youth* are defined “as those people who are customarily considered ‘not yet adults’ by their societies” (p.296); in terms of policy, this can leave them in a hiatus between child- and adult-orientated policies.

Furthermore, in Kurdistan, as elsewhere, the definition of youth often varies according to the needs of the time. For instance, when there is a need for youth to

fight in conflicts, they are considered relatively invulnerable – courageous, energetic and able to bear suffering. Meanwhile, in peacetime, they are seen as inexperienced, liable to make ill-informed decisions, and unreliable. This supports intergenerational conflict over authority whereby, culturally, youth are manipulated to fit the context/needs of elders.

Since Kurdistan is culturally diverse and encompasses several different ethnic and religious groups, here, youth constitute a heterogeneous group involving different religions, ability, power, social position, race, and ethnicity (Felice and Wisler, 2007:7).

Therefore, one major challenge for youth inclusion is the term itself, representing a vague and fluid stage of life (Muthee, 2010). For example, one specific human rights convention focuses on adults and another on children, but youth are lost in between without specific protection, despite their demographic majority and documented participation in violent activities (Ensor, 2012). This means young people remain invisible, caught between childhood and adulthood. Thus, varying political,

historical, and cultural contexts make it essential to understand the specific context youth live in.

4.2 Peace

Peace is also contextually defined with numerous definitions depending on many factors: individuals' specific situation, cultural norms and priorities, whether individuals are living in peace within themselves, how people perceive one another, level of community engagement, and relationships. Moreover, people's experiences impact whether peace is negative or positive.

Some scholars, such as Paul Lederach, relate it to communities and people having good relationships, arguing that "relationship is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution" (Lederach, 1997). Since relationships are static neither is peace; the maintenance of peace requires engagement between disputants whereby they get to know one another and work together to achieve mutual benefit and goals.

Notably, Galtung (1996) distinguished negative peace, that is the absence of war (direct violence), and

positive peace, which involves cooperation, kindness, equality, fairness and understanding.

Galtung considered conflict to be a natural process, part of life and relationships, and he stresses that peace is “the ability to handle conflict with empathy, non-violence and creativity.” He even considered conflict to have positive benefits by providing opportunities for change and growth. Thus, it is essential that peace is understood, not as the absence of violence, but as a positive state (Galtung, 2000).

4.3 Peacebuilding

As used in this research, the term ‘peacebuilding’ is very broad but essentially it implies sustainability in that it is context-based and focused on the role of youth, which needs to be systematized into the process. As a future-oriented approach, peacebuilding needs generations that are capable of handling conflicts and building a culture of peace, therefore it is essential that youth play a significant part.

Therefore, the research takes an elective (rather than prescriptive) approach, as introduced by Lederach,

considering especially the process of peacebuilding from below. This requires drawing the main resources of peacebuilding from the local context, combined with – not instead of – external peace knowledge and expertise developed in different settings. Meanwhile, local people have natural knowledge of implicit meanings and practical ways of handling conflicts that may be more useful to develop than dismiss; this knowledge can be the basis for identifying needs, being creative and legitimating conflict transformation processes (Lederach, 1996).

Thus, the elective model relies on the role of insider and focuses on how to empower them to handle their conflict nonviolently. In most cases, the internal/local people are not aware of existing mechanisms that may help or hinder in peacebuilding. Thus, peacebuilding activities help local people to conscientize their context, and to develop mechanisms that suit their context for transforming the existing conflicts. It supports peace at all levels - structural, cultural, political, economic, personal – while also seeking to fulfill human needs and strengthen agency.

4.4 Gendered definitions of peacebuilding

Despite the recognition of women's different roles in peace and security evidenced in the UNSC Resolution 1325, sparse attention is given specifically to young women in current conceptualizations (Becker, 2012:8). There remains a lack of interest in structural inequalities that limit young women's participation (McKay, 2004), and a tendency to devalue young women's agency in contributing to peacebuilding (Pruitt, 2011). Moreover, as they are not perceived as a threat, issues challenging them (such as unemployment) tend to be ignored (Hilker and Fraser, 2009); (Becker, 2012:8). This research seeks to remedy this by specifically focusing on women's situation.

5. Methodology

The study focused on Duhok city where the dearth of previous research on young people's contribution to peacebuilding required both quantitative and qualitative approaches: randomly (online and manually) distributed questionnaires, and structured interviews with selected individuals.

The 15 formal interviewees included respondents from leading civil society institutions, youth activists, and youth working with NGOs, often through contacts made during many years working with youth in the area. Different age categories were targeted, as all age groups impact the youth context, and a good gender balance (8 women to 7 men) was maintained despite difficulties due to the significantly smaller number of female youth workers and activists. The author conducted 15 formal interviews, 8 with women: a leader of a local NGO, 2 women working with local NGOs, a female youth lawyer, 2 female activists, and 2 women working for INGOs. The 7 male interviewees included 4 directors of youth centers,

a leader of a local NGO, an activist and a youth who had recently opened a local NGO. I also conducted many informal interviews with members of government youth centers.

6. Research results

In this study, the majority of young informants identified structural constraints and patriarchal cultural norms that limit their roles and opportunities and, consequently, restrict their agency to participate in peacebuilding. Interviewees and questionnaire respondents were asked about the context in which youth participate in peacebuilding activities, the extent of their participation, their willingness, their beliefs, their capacities, their knowledge on activities of peacebuilding, whether youth voices/interests are taken into consideration when planning, monitoring and implementing peacebuilding activities. Issues relating to appropriate spaces and opportunities were also considered. About 80% of questionnaire respondents indicated that they had no knowledge regarding relevant policies and regulations, because they are not generally available, unless one needs to undertake an activity and asks for the relevant regulations. Regarding participation, 32% said they participate in one way or another in peacebuilding

activities. On how they found out about activities, 48% said through NGOs and 39% said through social media, while 52% said they were selected by NGOs.

6.1 Current projects

There are a number of projects in Duhok where young people's voices are listened to; if they have ideas, there are places that can make implementation possible, generally NGOs supporting youth initiatives. For instance, RAWANGAH, a local NGO supported by people from the government, announces a Call for Proposals every year and works to support and implement chosen projects.

Now there are youth councils, which have good support from international NGOs and the government and meet irregularly; the majority of participating youth are either not political party-affiliated or they are from small political parties. They discuss issues related to youth and they give their feedback to the government and to the international and local NGOs.

The University of Duhok has a center for volunteering with more than 500 youth volunteers and, in an informal interview, a staff member of UPP said that they have 40

volunteer translators on their list. The University also ran a project facilitating students in designing and implementing eight community peacebuilding activities, these included a peace library and bookfair, seminars and videos.

6.2 The Context

For young men in Kurdistan, the cultural context is the one that assumes male youth are strong and able to bear much suffering. However, in decision-making, they are considered to be reckless, thoughtless, impulsive, careless. Not only do youth lack awareness of the existence of peacebuilding programs, but activities are not designed with youth participation in mind; indeed, often the training is designed prior to knowing the participants' context, needs and interests. Some have especially little opportunity to participate because of their different educational levels.

Another issue that often came up during interviews was the problems caused by the *youth bulge*. Many interviewees discussed the consequent danger of the underemployment of youth. One informant said “*there are*

high numbers of youth that hang out in the street till late, they are spending all their times in cafes, they have no money in their pockets, they are a great danger for the society, they are the booby trap that may explode at any time".¹ Another said that "*there are lots of unemployed youth in society, they have nothing to do, and they don't have money, hence they will commit crimes*". There is also a lot of talk in the media about the increasing number of youths leaving Kurdistan for Europe. Interviewees emphasized the potential of peacebuilding activities for counteracting this as, otherwise, youth find no alternative but to leave or rebel.

6.2.1 Intergenerational power

Age-related socio-cultural norms consistent and continuous hierarchical views that youth do not have the capability, experience or ability to lead. These norms assign an inferior position to youth to support roles in public decision. Youth' contribution to everyday peace is undervalued, erased and overlooked. The majority of the

¹ Interview with a male youth leading a local NGO 13/11/2020.

interviewed people felt that their work is undervalued. Many youth informants argued that youth are more capable of running programs and institutions than they are given credit for. One youth director said: *“those who have power want incapable people to get places and be in the decision making, they are afraid of giving to capable youth, so they replace them”*.¹ But, despite all that, youth are still the energy of the society. One informant said that *“who fought ISIS not the elders, youth were in the frontline and most of the martyrs were youth”*.²

Youth are more open to living with others, and better run institutions peacefully. One youth center director said, *“the elders who destroy the minds of youth with hating the other, the youth are better accepting diversity than elders, youth might accept a Yezidi to sell yogurts in Duhok Market more than elders, we have organized many summer tents camping with hundreds of different religious groups for 5 days, different religious youth were living together”*.³

¹ Interview with a director of youth center Duhok 27/12/2020

² Interview with a youth activist 23/12/2020 Duhok

³ Interview with a director of youth center Duhok 2/2/2021

The whole environment is not helpful to youth to transcend their restrictive situation. Another youth activist said that “*we all felt responsible, the media, the religious leaders, the social media helping in one way or another to transmit knowledge that are pro violence, and the youth themselves are very naïve, they are easily deceived*”. Another youth activist said that “*elders are the role models and the guidelines for youth*”. Moreover, many youth argued during the interviews “*they sometimes confronted with heavy opposition within their communities, which discourages them*”.

6.2.2 The gendered context

It was notable that all the participating females chose lack of parental consent and patriarchy as the reasons for not choosing to participate in peacebuilding activities. Meanwhile, only 1.7% of males chose lack of parent consent, this hesitancy might be due to the belief that peacebuilding is the work of outsiders. A director of a youth center highlighted another issue: “*the main reason is the far distance of youth houses and because of*

economic situation they don't have the means of coming to participate in peacebuilding activities”¹

Patriarchal society – the manhood society – gives little, controlled and conditional spaces to female in general. Despite the INGOs and women’s NGOs, there is still much needed for the improvement of female participation. One female leader of an NGOs said *“I am from an unusual family and have support from my immediate family, although lots of relatives oppose my work with NGOs”²*. Another female said *“females have many obstacles working in peacebuilding activities among them talk, gossip, shaming and disgrace that female get when working with NGOs, then, if they let you work, there is struggles involved in traveling, especially to the disputed territories, and sometimes in attending workshops and training one needs to stay in Erbil at night times”³*. Another female working with an NGO said: *“When I travel I get a call or a text message from my family every hour or so, I get annoyed, they treat me like*

¹ Interview with a director of youth center Duhok 2/2/2021

² Interview with a female leader of a local NGO 2/2/2021 Duhok

³ Interview with a female working with NGO 11/12/2020

a child".¹ Another female working with an NGO said that *"peacebuilding initiatives have provided us with opportunities to participate, as many times donors require gender balance in participation, therefore they search for females to make up the balance"*.²

On the other hand, some male respondents complained about the active lobbying of INGOs and local NGOs regarding gender issues, which they believed to be exaggerated, and that more opportunities must be given to men than women. However, another female youth informant argued that *"there are opportunities of getting jobs for females, but they are exploited, I have tried to get jobs and find many opportunity but they wanted to exploit me and I had sex harassment, and they wanted females also because females bring business to them."*³ Corruption and nepotism are other obstacles that faces youth in general but for women this is compounded by their cultural positioning. A female interviewee said that employers favored beautiful women that they could

¹ Interview with a female working with INGO 17/12/2020

² Interview with a female working with an INGO 2/1/2021 Duhok

³ Interview with a female youth activist 1/2/2021 Duhok

exploit: “*or you need to have networks and people in positions to employ you*”.¹

This is in the process of changing and this did not give up many women who are creating space to participate and change their status quo. One female said, “*this is the reality, but we must work to change the status quo, speaking about myself this has not prevented me from seeking to challenge the societal expectation that face women and rising to leadership position*”.²

6.2.3 The educational context

The current education does not prepare young people to work when they finish schooling. Many youths said they believed that they will find jobs when they finish universities, but whatever jobs they apply for, they are asked for Arabic and English language and most graduates do not know either of these. The banking and memorizing education system have let to the graduation of youth that are naïve, that can easily be betrayed by elders, religious

¹ Interview with a female leader of a local NGO 2/2/2021 Duhok

² Interview with a female working with NGO 11/12/2020

leaders...etc. A youth activist said “we have been told that the belongings of Christians are not halal (lawful), Yezidi food are not permissible, we never asked ourselves where does this come from, it might be a plot from outsiders that wanted to transmit it to our regions to make us divide and not united”.¹ He further argued that “this is systematized, the ministry of education are proudly argue every year that they have graduated thousands of students, students that are graduated through memorization and banking educations”.² Another youth leader of a newly opened NGO said that “youth in Duhok are controlled by the violent ideologies that were brought by religion and education of patriotism, therefore youth creativity and engagement in peacebuilding activities are limited”.³

6.3 Inclusivity

The majority (81%) believe that the interests of youth are not considered in peacebuilding activities. About 70% of the respondents said that young people’s voices are not

¹ Interview with a director of youth center Duhok 2/2/2021

² *Ibid*

³ Interview with youth newly opened an NGO 11/2/2021

heard during the processes of planning, monitoring and implementing peacebuilding activities. And the majority (75%) of the participants believed that youth are marginalized in decision-making regarding peacebuilding activities. A director of a youth center argued that “*youth love the activities that lead them to work, youth love projects similar to cash for work*”.¹ Many youth center workers and NGO youth workers argued that youth need jobs, they urged government and INGOs to provide opportunities and open factories for youth to work in.

The study found that there are problems with selection and targeting of beneficiaries of training. Several respondents complained about corruption and nepotism with the same youth being repeatedly selected for programs. This suggests that organizers are not really working on the ground and choose people they are already familiar with. As one trainer put it, “*very often before going to the training, I don’t know who the participants are, [as they are chosen by outsiders] and many times organizers find it difficult to complete the numbers of*

¹ Interview with a director of youth center in Sumel 9/2/2021

participants [because they are unaware of other potential participants]”.¹ Coordinators or youth leadership/organizers should reach out to youth to get them more involved. On the other hand, other informants felt on the whole youth were not suitably aware to participate fully: “*youth need to be educated to be more involved*”.²

6.4 Beliefs and abilities

Concerning youth’ belief in themselves and their abilities, the majority of the questionnaire respondents (80%) said strongly or to some extent they believed that youth are not involved enough in peacebuilding activities. Regarding whether youth have the capacities needed to be involved in peacebuilding activities, 82% believed they had these to a great/some extent. A similar amount believed that for the process of peacebuilding to be successful youth must be involved in the activities to a great/some extent. Respondents were split half and half

¹ Interview with a trainer of peacebuilding Duhok 10/2/2021

² Interview with a male youth leader of a local NGO 13/11/2020

between agreeing and disagreeing that youth are involved in resolving conflicts in the society.

During the interviews, most respondents said they wanted to be a catalyst of change and change what they find wrong in society, indicating they believed in the worth of peacebuilding for society. They also mentioned different reasons that lead youth to participate in peacebuilding activities – among them the desire to change their own lives by building their capacities, as it is good for their own curriculum vitae when they apply for jobs, and the desire to be respected by people and to feel conscious of the existence of oneself and the other. Some respondents mentioned an interest in their economic betterment: “*many times NGOs provide money to do small activities, or business*”.

Significant willingness for youth involvement was also expressed in the interviews; all the interviewees agreed that youth are prepared and have the potential to be fully involved in the process of peacebuilding.

Concerning the impact that the peacebuilding activities has on young people, most of the questionnaire respondents chose all the reasons that were mentioned: forgiveness, social cohesion, resolving conflicts, awareness of gender.

Moreover, there is great demand on the part of the high number of youth that want to participate in peacebuilding activities. In interview, a director of a youth center said that *“when youth are encouraged to participate, they are very active in participating, whenever we have a workshop or training, we get double numbered of the participants”*.¹

On the other hand, all interviewees felt there is significant lack of interest and belief in youth capacities by donors . As one leader of a youth NGO said, *“I have proposed many ideas and made many proposals to NGOs*

¹ Interview with a director of youth center Duhok 2/2/2021

*and government for youth peace activities but nobody took these ideas seriously”.*¹

Many respondents argued that youth in Duhok need to have better institutional capacity to be able to participate and they thought attitudes needed to change. Therefore, most peacebuilding activities carried out by the various NGOs should aim to build youth capacities and change their attitudes.

6.4 Participants’ knowledge of peace, peacebuilding and related policy

The first questions were about participants understanding of the meaning of peace and peacebuilding. On the first, most participants’ answers in the questionnaires referred to negative peace with the most repeated bring “*the absence of violence and the existence of equality and justice*”, “*forgiving one another and stop fighting one another*”, “*the absence of discrimination*”, “*the absence of terrorism and violent conflicts*”, “*peace is*

¹ Interview with a male youth leading a local NGO 13/11/2020.

having no violent conflict”, and, sadly, *“peace is a dream and an illusion”*.

Then, the term peacebuilding was introduced, however most of the participants skipped the questions on this or said they didn’t know. Respondents were half and half regarding knowledge of peacebuilding activities. Those that responded mentioned *“peace in the society”*, *“providing basic services to the citizens”*, *“forgiveness”*, *“trust”*, *“recovery”*, *“reconciliation and dialogue”*, *“providing job opportunity to the youth”*. In particular, youth connected peacebuilding per se to the help and aid offered by international NGOs, as well as the workshops and the trainings they provide. One female interviewed said that *“peacebuilding initiatives lead to peace in society and, for women, peace is very important as it provides us with an opportunity to demand our rights, there is increased opportunity to women and women can participate in politics”*.¹ Another youth leader at an NGO said that peacebuilding *“is a process, projects that build*

¹ Interview with a female youth activist, Duhok, 8/12/2020

peace".¹ Another female said that "*peacebuilding is important as it changes the attitudes and behavior of the community*".² Another replied that "*people consider peacebuilding as the male domain, they think the males have to be in the process of doing activities, they think that women are too soft for such things*".³

Regarding the question of who organizes peacebuilding activities, 87% of the respondents chose NGOs, second most cited were youth groups, while only 7% believed political parties were involved, and 3% government institutions. The same number of responses were given to the question of who they believed were carrying out peacebuilding activities.

Regarding the question referring to knowledge of 2250 UNSC Resolution, the most frequent answer was having no idea, there was not a single correct answer.

Regarding the benefits of being involved in peacebuilding activities, participants selected a variety of reasons on the questionnaires. Most (56%) said that

¹ Interview with a leader of a local NGO, 13/12/2020

² Interview with a female working in an INGO, Duhok, 20/11/2020

³ Interview with a female leader of a local NGO, Duhok, 2/2/2021

building their capacities was the main reason for participating in peacebuilding activities, then the importance and belief in peacebuilding came a close second (51%). However, many participants chose all the reasons that were mentioned in the questionnaire which included “to pass time” and “to avoid being bored”. Least popular was to get extra money.

6.5 Spaces and Opportunities

Most (64%) believed that youth do not have enough spaces and opportunities to participate in peacebuilding activities. During the interviews, people mentioned different reasons for this, including nepotism and corruption. One respondent said people working for NGOs give opportunities to their own people.

There are big demands and little support compared to the high percentage of young people that need support. Many youth complained about the way international NGOs work in regard to selecting participants. One trainer said that *“the NGOs select the same participants over and*

over again".¹ When the author followed this up with someone working for an INGOs, he confirmed this, saying: *"that's often true because those people who are targeted will work later with local NGOs, so they are chosen based on some criteria"*.²

6.6 Factors inhibiting the participation of young people

The study found that a number of factors contribute, in single or overlapping ways, to the low levels of youth participation and inclusion in peacebuilding – and in public decision-making more broadly. Participants confirmed different reasons for not participating; not knowing how to participate, lack of knowledge of relevant activities and parental consent all came up in their responses and during the interviews. In the questionnaires, 64% of respondents cited lack of support from the organizer of the activities, 31% lack of parental support,

¹ Interview a trainer of peacebuilding at the center for peace and conflict resolutions studies 11/2/2021

² Interview with a female working with an INGO 2/1/2021 Duhok.

all of which were reflected in the interviews. Participants also mentioned lack of intergenerational understanding and, to a lesser degree, lack of time, official restrictions, education and minority issues. The study also highlighted the effects of cultural norms and institutional/societal structures – as indicated above, females cited lack of parental support and the effects of the patriarchal society as the main struggle in their participation.

6.6.1 Lack of organizational support

This was the most prevalent issue in questionnaire responses; similarly, interviewees talked about the need for youth inclusion and the importance of it but there is no action on the part of decision makers. The current social structure makes inclusion of youth especially difficult. Most interviewees were aware that youth inclusion needs to be systematized into the system, through quota, consultation, delegation. There is much talk about youth inclusion and spaces being provided through organizations. Mainly this is only possible through volunteering, which creates challenges for sustainability

and creativity. The other help is through political parties' organization which is conditional and not independent.

Further challenges along these lines that came up during some interviews related to lack of institutional capacity to include youth. Youth organizations do not always help effectively regarding contributing to social cohesion. The stronger youth organizations are more politicized and there are divisions between youth organizations and networks, and they do little to build trust among youth from different ethnic, tribes and religious groups.

It became clear that significant youth inclusion with the existing system and policies in place cannot be possible, without deconstruction of existing systems and, instead, utilizing a bottom-up approach that includes participatory approach. In the interviews, it was noted that to be able to tackle these systems effectively and nonviolently, youth need to be conscious of their own condition.

6.6.2 Effects of intergenerational gap

The intergenerational power gap was identified as a main reason that spaces are not given to youth in many informal interviews conducted by the author with members of government youth centers. Elders know better and Duhok in general is hierarchical and culturally-bound. As one respondent said, *“We cannot just approach older people because many won’t listen to us. Many think that because they are older, they know more”*.¹ A director of a youth center argued that *“youth would simply fill their places, that’s why they are not giving them”*.²

Lack of intergenerational understanding also came up in the interviews; one youth activist said: *“Elders or those who hold power do not yet understand youth. There is a big gap, elders cannot understand youth, they cannot give youth 10 percent share in decision making”*.³

One respondent said that *“through cultural norms, youth have made themselves little and showed themselves*

¹ Interview with a youth activist 23/12/2020 Duhok

² Interview with a director of youth center Duhok 13/1/2020

³ Interview with a director of youth center Duhok 2/2/2021

*to the elders that they are incapable and have no knowledge for leadership role”.*¹

6.6.3 Gender issues

The interviewed females mentioned many challenges faced by both male and female youth but there are more that face females than males. One female said: “*Culture does not have mercy on women. Females in my society, women are considered imperfect (awrah عورة), hence, their preferred place of working is inside the house*”.² The lack of freedom in decision-making was another challenge that was mentioned by many interviewees. One young woman pointed out that “*females are not free inside their houses, how they can be free outside their houses*”.³

For the interviewed females, patriarchy was the main obstacles toward their involvement in peacebuilding. The culture and religion are not the supportive of female’s participation in formal and non-formal peacebuilding initiatives and decisions making. Yet they are an important

¹ Interview with a director of youth center Duhok 2/2/2021

² Interview with a female youth solicitor 6/2/2021

³ Interview with a female youth activist 2/2/2021

part, one female stated that *“I believe in my myself and I feel I am capable in becoming a leader, but if I join I cannot because culture says I am not capable”*.¹ Females were more talkative and responsive than male’s interviews.

Young men argued that they face similar challenges that their female counterpart and they see women as equal. This led to our argument that people see the cultural violence and see it as normal, they live with it they can differentiate it.

6.6.4 Time constraints

Lack of time was mentioned by many interviews – because of the difficult economic situation youth have to work long hours and so are not able to participate. A youth informant said: *“it’s difficult to invite or tell youth who work to feed their family to come and participate in peacebuilding activities that are mostly unpaid (volunteer)”*.²

¹ Interview with a female working with NGO 11/12/2020

² Interview with a youth in Duhok 23/12/2020

6.6.5 Minority issues

Age was interest with other identities of religion, place, gender and ethnicity. These were more severe to youth and other ethnic than are not making the majority groups. One female of an ethnic minority groups said, “*I am marginalized and viewed as female, minority ethnic groups and then youth*”.¹

6.6.6 Legal and policy restrictions

Most questionnaire respondents (59%) believe that policies and laws are hampering peacebuilding events and activities. This was also mentioned by some interviewees. One youth NGO leader explained: “*for an NGO to conduct activities, they need to have permission, and this take time and effort*”.²

6.7 Youth participation in Iraqi Kurdistan

Rebuilding a state is an inclusive process. The role of youth in Iraqi Kurdistan has been limited in the past but is

¹ Interview with a female activist 3/2/2021

² Interview with a male leader of a local youth NGO 13/11/2020

gaining more recognition recently. As Galtung argues, a main goal of post-conflict reconstruction should be to eliminate social exclusion – because social exclusion is a reason for escalation or relapse into violence (Galtung, 1996). When youth feel they are part of the project, of society, they gain a sense of ownership – they become committed and less likely to attempt to destroy its structure.

Despite the everyday work and contribution of youth in peacebuilding, it has not recognized. This might be due to the cultural norm that gives respect only to elders. For instance, when elder people come to a meeting or are seen by youth, the youth are required to bow. This superiority is also reflected in the language, in the use of superior and inferior pronouns, and in terms such as ‘teacher’, ‘uncle’, ‘aunt’, ‘I am your servant’. Thus, respect is only given to elders, to the extent that speaking roles in meetings are reserved for elders – it is always elders who talk while youth listen. All these hierarchical restrictions on youths’ agency are normalized and reinforced through everyday interactions.

In Kurdistan, people imitate one another, young people want to follow in their elders' and ancestors' footsteps. Whether an individual has easy access to means and goals or not, they all conform to these norms. This conformity means that youth accept only culturally defined goals and the means of achieving them.

Traditionally, young people in Kurdistan are dependent on their father, if their father is not alive then their mother and their elder brother take on his authority. Thus, youth cannot live their own lives – if they work, they work for their father and family. They are dependent on their family until they get married, and most stay with their parents even after they get married. Therefore, they are not free to make their own choices.

These cultural norms that discourage youth from thinking for themselves are also reflected and reinforced in the education system. Through primary school to the end of university they hardly get to work together and educational methods rely on memorization. Hence, they are never able to develop themselves although it is natural

for young people to do so. This exactly reflects Galtung: "Young people are searching for new ideas and open to new challenges while adults have already formed their dogmatic discourse" (quoted in Felice and Wisler, 2007). As Felice and Wisler (2007) note: "From our experience as youth workers and educators, we observed that youth are eager to try new strategies and are not 'married' to any specific truth." The limitations imposed on them are liable to lead youth to join existing armed groups/insurgencies and terrorist organizations in the area as they provide ways for youth to gain power and recognition. Armed groups target unemployed and angry youth. Many youths are joining the Peshmergah because of unemployment while IDPs in Nineveh Plain are joining other armed groups for the same reason (Mohammed, 2019).

Meanwhile, while attempts have been made internationally to move away the belief that young women are passive victims of conflict with no useful capabilities, this research found that they continue feel they lack recognition of their capabilities and aspirations. They are even more severely restricted by their elders than male

youth. This can have two outcomes. One is they are left out of integration programs (with the consequent gender stereotypical consideration that women are inherently peaceful (see Brock-Utne, 1989; Galtung, 2006) – and the other is that they are not considered important enough to be included in peace processes.

Youth in most developing countries are angry because of the injustice and lack of equal opportunities caused by their corrupt governments, trivial media, and fake policies. If their frustration is not given positive/creative outlets, it will lead to their social exclusion and making them vulnerable to targeting and recruiting by militant groups as angry and disappointed youth are more capable of committing atrocities (Qasserras, 2016).

As with all human beings, youth require the basic human needs of “security, identity, recognition” and space for development (Bannett, Karki and Nepal, 2012: p13). When they do not have opportunities for these basic needs in their life, they are liable to turn to violence. The basic

needs of youth include recognition, spaces and opportunity and participation.

Although it is tempting to be pessimistic over the lack of activities conducted by youth, it is important to recognize that change is always happening around us and that small changes can proliferate and lead to more positive and effective impact than we expect. Rather than great external and immediate overthrow or resolution of a specific situation, we need to develop ‘interactive’ or ‘integrative’ power (Boulding 1989), the power of relationships and social networks (‘power with’ rather than ‘power over’). It is the power to bring people together by respect, reciprocity, legitimacy, persuasion, cooperation and/or integration (Dugan, 2003). This ensures that the transformation achieved is sustainable and requires that peacebuilding seeks to understand the sources of conflict. As Ramsbotham et al. (2005, p.30) argue, “peacebuilding tries to overcome the contradictions which lie at the root of the conflict.”¹ Further to this, they

¹ This section presents the argument that, to build peace within a civil society, it is essential to understand communities’ needs and wants.

argue that “thinking about the complex dynamics and processes of post-conflict peacebuilding, including the idea that effective and sustainable peace-making processes must be based not merely on manipulation of peace agreements made by elites, but more importantly on the empowerment of communities damaged by war so as to build peace from below” (Ramsbotham et al., 2005, p.215).

7. Conclusion

The study demonstrated that youth have a great interest in participating in peacebuilding activities and a strong belief that this is important. It also became clear during the research that youth are open to change and believe in equality and social cohesion among different ethnic groups. However, the study found that there was little participation by youth in the process of peacebuilding activities due to lack of adequate opportunities. In relation to this, the research showed that there are gaps in understanding between decision-makers, elders and youth. Sadly, there was clearly resentment regarding the intergenerational power gap and this needs resolving through gradual and peaceful processes – which peacebuilding provides – rather than violent disruption. However, the youth themselves lack knowledge as to how to participate. It appeared that, due to corruption, nepotism and lack of activities, donor and government institutions have failed to reach the youth that most need this form of support.

Further, there were more opportunities available for males than females, while females face more cultural violence than their male counterparts. Moreover, while many female respondents were concerned about gender equality, it appeared that many young men were not. Since this marked difference between men and women regarding gender inequality is deeply entrenched across ethnicities, this is an important subject that needs to be tackled with great sensitivity and which requires more specific research.

Considering the structural and cultural barriers that young people face in participating, as highlighted in this research, possible solutions would have to deal constructively with cultural norms. On a macro scale – structurally – government institutions are systematized to exclude young people and the education system does not prepare them to work in the community. Clearly, this would require significant shifts in policy – including quotas, consultations, delegations – to remedy. Also, NGOs need support in providing more spaces and opportunities.

These challenges also need to be dealt with on a day-to-day level. The research clearly indicates that respondents felt concerned to be active in peacebuilding and were positively open to improving social cohesion, but felt they lacked relevant skills. Thus, workshops enhancing awareness and conflict transformation capacities that are relevant to participants' own communities would be a first step in programs in which participants could choose, design and implement their own projects – thus strengthening their sense of agency while also fulfilling needs they themselves identified. Such programs would empower not only participants but also their families and close communities. It is a rapidly changing world and technology is making politics move faster; it is therefore essential to facilitate youth's creative potential through peaceful and respectful processes or risk their exacerbating resentments and conflicts.

In addition, the complex structural and socioeconomic barriers relating to migration, displacement and unemployment that limit youths' capabilities need more research, both general and focused on the specifics of the context. We need to understand how these barriers

undermine the agency of youth, and how they interact with the host situation in order to create an enabling environment for youth participation.

The current situation undermines any sense of agency and, in facing so many challenges, young people see themselves as lost, without alternatives. They become despairing and, with unfulfilled needs, they learn to see themselves as victims. On the other hand, there are fears that youth will get out of control or find no alternative except to leave. If engaged constructively, however, the large population of young people could provide a means to solving issues rather than creating them.

8. Recommendations

The research findings were presented to stakeholders during a two-hour meeting. Twenty-five people (including twenty youth), from different sectors attended a meeting held by the University of Duhok Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution on 14 November 2021 with the aim to give their comments, feedback and suggestions on the research's findings. As a result, the following recommendations were incorporated into the research:

1. Youths are shy about expressing their opinions. Therefore, there is a need to incorporate listening and communication skills into the education system to facilitate children in speaking and expressing their opinions.
2. Incorporating peace education into the education system would encourage students to take a more constructive role in society.
3. Government and private sectors need to value and encourage the involvement of youth in the

processes of peacebuilding activities. They also need to provide jobs opportunities for youths. Both these changes will enable youths to feel useful rather than useless and directionless without hope. This, in turn, would help them to be useful citizens who are not interested in migrating.

4. Since the lack of jobs means that many youths are exploited and work for very little payment, it is necessary to activate the role of law that protects them.
5. Media activists/influencers, YouTubers and famous people should be encouraged to lead youth awareness campaigns about cultural norms. In particular, they need to highlight the negative effects of those that downplay youths' abilities and concerns and those that demand that young people be passively obedient to norms that undervalue them.

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