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Slipping Through the Cracks: Young Women's Exclusion from Peace and Security Processes

Katrina Leclerc, Nikki Stoumen, Alonna Despain, and Sara Zabihi

Abstract

Young people have been central to peacebuilding efforts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region but have often been ignored or sidelined in conflict resolution and stabilization efforts. In 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 2250 which paved the way for the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda. However, within the broad category of "youth," young women have experienced an even deeper exclusion because of patriarchal biases domestically and internationally. This article analyzes results of a study conducted in 2021 of youth peacebuilders in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Jordan, and Tunisia. We set out to document the perspectives of young people, particularly young women, in national-level peacebuilding planning.

We found that young people, particularly young women, feel excluded from most national-level policymaking on security and peacebuilding. It seems that young women are alienated from YPS processes by virtue of being women. Young women also say they are pushed aside in the most logical alternative spaces of Women, Peace and Security (WPS). This experience is echoed by young women peacebuilders across the world. What is particularly unique about the MENA region, are the ways in which the sidelining of young women intersects with religion, paternalism, elitism, digital capability, and obstacles to accessing opportunities of economic advancement and political inclusion.

Our analysis is based on mixed-methods research including informal interviews with young people across the MENA region, as well as an in-depth review of literature and existing policy frameworks developed by Iraq (and KRI), Jordan, and Tunisia. This paper highlights the realities of young people, particularly young women, in these countries, in terms of what their meaningful

inclusion looks like in peace and security. This research is part of an ongoing partnership between the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and New York University's Center for Global Affairs.

Keywords: Young people; violence of exclusion; Youth, Peace and Security; Women, Peace and Security; Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

Introduction

In December 2015, the world saw the introduction of UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 2250 which paved the way for what we now know as the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda (Security Council, 2015). Far before Resolution 2250 was adopted, young people were at the forefront of community peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Yet, they remain among the more marginalized and sidelined demographics in peace and security spaces (Berents, 2022). Of the 1.85 billion young people in the world,[1] very few have been included in peace negotiations, have signed peace agreements, or are in significant decision-making positions within governmental bodies, even though they are engaged in fighting, casualties, conflict resolution, and peacemaking in many contemporary wars (Berents & Prelis, 2020; Altiok & Grizelj, 2019).

With the increasing attention to issues affecting young people, due largely to youth-led civil society advocacy, the YPS agenda has continued to shift in its priorities and approaches. It has, in the last seven years, grown from a somewhat securitized “preventing violent extremism” agenda to a more wholesome framework combatting narratives of young women as victims of sexualized abuse and young men as perpetrators of violence. Hence, the third YPS resolution, number 2535, adopted in July 2020, makes a direct link to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) framework that was established twenty years prior with UNSCR 1325 (Security Council, 2020; Security Council, 2000). In fact, the WPS agenda has long been seen by many as the “big sister” to the YPS agenda—WPS has inspired a number of YPS implementation methods, including the adoption of National Action Plans (NAPs).

The reason for the close links between the policy frameworks largely stem from the priorities they both outline. The WPS resolutions outline four main pillars: participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery. The YPS resolutions cluster their concerns into

similar themes and add a few: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration. Both policy frameworks are a set of thematic resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council (UNSC)—making them international law under Article 25 of the UN Charter—and recognize the role of their demographic in the maintenance and promotion of peace and security (United Nations, 1945). They also seek to address the particular impacts of conflict and post-conflict situations on their distinct demographics.

Since the adoption of the first resolution on WPS, resolution 1325, Member States have struggled to actualize the policies and to take them out of New York and into local communities. A core implementation approach common to both is the development of NAPs. As of 2023, over 104 Member States have adopted NAPs on WPS, but only four have developed a NAP on YPS[2] so far (Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, 2022). The study we conducted, in partnership with the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders and New York University's Center for Global Affairs, focused on the inclusion (or lack thereof) of young people, particularly young women, in these national-level policy planning processes.[3] Our paper presents findings from a literature review and from interviews conducted in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Jordan, and Tunisia with the goal of better understanding the experiences of young people in official national-level peace and security planning processes.

Methodology

The research study encompassed three methodologies: interviews with regional and national peace activists, analysis of official YPS and WPS documents, and a literature review. First, a comprehensive review of YPS and WPS policies and existing literature was conducted. The three countries in focus have each taken different approaches to operationalizing the YPS and WPS agendas, respectively, and it was imperative to gain a firm understanding of the overarching frameworks in each country. Further, it was critical to determine to what extent existing national peace policies, policy-making processes, and literature reflect young women's concerns.

After completing the literature review, virtual interviews were conducted with fifteen activists in Iraq's Kurdistan region, Jordan, and Tunisia over a period of three months. During these interviews, activists were asked to provide their perspectives on the value and credibility of official processes and mechanisms designed to engage youth in peace processes, including planning and

sustainability. Specifically, they were asked about the youth and peacebuilding contexts in their respective countries, and how their organizations face challenges with peace, youth, and the formulation of processes like that of National Action Plans. Interviewees were also asked to explain how their organizations are involved in informal peacebuilding processes and how they address the inclusion of marginalized youth, especially young women, as well as their distinct needs. For further context, interviewees were also asked to expand upon funding challenges, voting outcomes, government efforts to support youth and peace, and the impacts of COVID-19 as it relates to youth participation. It is important to note that most interviewees identified as young women between the ages of 18 to 30, given that a primary research goal was to understand this demographic's view on the existing mechanisms.

The researchers also sought to assess which mechanisms and modalities were most effective in garnering youth participation and engagement in peace policy planning. Unfortunately, lack of consistent data across countries hindered the ability to fully explore and assess this. Other limiting factors included the number and types of public consultations, available data, and lack of data disaggregated by age, gender, and ethnicity.

Further, lack of consistent indicators made it challenging to measure the impact of the YPS resolutions and define what constitutes effective or meaningful youth engagement. This can be attributed to the fact that the YPS agenda is relatively new (2015) and official mechanisms are evolving. It is also important to note that Iraq's Kurdistan region, Jordan, and Tunisia differ significantly in terms of the types and stages of conflict they are experiencing, the nature of their governance systems and democratic or undemocratic processes, and the strength of their civil society sector—all of which affect youth engagement. This made it challenging to conduct a strict comparative analysis or to draw conclusions that would be relevant to all three contexts.

Framing Peace and Security Policies by Country

Iraq has a NAP on WPS that was adopted in 2014; the country recently adopted the second iteration of its NAP, covering 2021-2024, which is not reviewed in this paper. The original NAP made no reference to young women, except including the term "young girls" in reference to needing to prohibit child marriage. There are few references to "girls" when discussing spreading awareness of UNSCR 1325 (Government of Iraq, 2014). Aside from recommending outlawing child

marriage these references to "girls" are made only in conjunction with women and therefore do not acknowledge the social objectification and discrimination young women face. While Iraq does not have a NAP on YPS, they do have a National Coalition on YPS. The Coalition, primarily led by the Government of Iraq (GoI), seeks to amplify the voices of grassroots Iraqi youth peacebuilders through inclusion in formal decision-making (Arab Reform Initiative, 2022).

Jordan's NAP on WPS was adopted in 2018 and is based on the pillars of Resolution 1325 (Jordanian National Commission for Women, 2017). While Jordan has no clear plans for a standalone NAP on YPS, the Program Board for Jordan's NAP on Security Council Resolution 1325 (JONAP), has stated that Jordan's next NAP on WPS will extend its reach to include the YPS agenda, as well as an emphasis on gender and climate (United Nations in Jordan, 2022).[4] Young women are mentioned eighteen times throughout the NAP but seemingly as an afterthought—with "and young women" added as part of the social category targeted in the NAP's goals. Jordan does not have a formal NAP on YPS but adopted the Amman Youth Declaration in 2015 (Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth [OSGEY], 2015). The country also has a YPS Resolution 2250 National Coalition housed under the Ministry of Youth. Interviewees reported that the Declaration is considered by many to be a guiding framework in place of a NAP for youth peace planning processes. One of the four sections of the Amman Youth Declaration refers to gender equality and the need to address gender-specific hardships in peacebuilding and countering violence. However, the Declaration does not detail what these hardships are and fails to explicitly address young women in the other three sections.

Tunisia adopted a NAP on WPS in 2018, focusing on prevention, protection, participation, relief, and the media (Republic of Tunisia, 2018). The NAP does not make specific reference to youth or young women, using only the terms "women" and "girls," the latter referring to children and young adolescents. The NAP is primarily concerned with gender-based violence and women's participation, specifically through initiatives targeting gender parity in public office. With respect to the YPS agenda, Tunisia differs from the aforementioned countries in that it does not have a NAP nor any formal mechanism. Despite this, youth still maintain a level of activity and agency in local peacebuilding work (Rouhshahbaz, 2021).

In addition to an overview by country, it should be noted that on the regional level the League of Arab States announced the drafting of a regional strategy on YPS expected to be launched in the first quarter of 2023 (Qatar News Agency, 2022). Details on the precise contents of the strategy are not currently public, however, the League has held at least one youth consultation, selecting two youth representatives from each Arab State to join a virtual meeting to discuss their priorities that should be included in the approach (Naser Al Deen & Aziz, 2022). Recommendations made by youth leaders during the consultations included the creation of national youth councils, the creation of an Arab League Fund for YPS, the creation of a regional youth coalition, increased attention to mental health, prevention of hate speech, economic support and opportunities for young people, disengagement and reintegration in conflict situations or from extremist organizations, and education (including peace education), among others (Naser al Deen & Aziz, 2022).While a regional strategy on YPS would be a positive step forward, it is worth noting that according to Article VIII of the Charter of the Arab League, only unanimous decisions taken by the League are binding upon member states, and majority decisions are binding only upon those states that accept the decision (League of Arab States, 2004). Consequently, depending on how the Strategy is decided upon and adopted, states may not be obligated to implement the strategy nationally, nor to financially support it at the regional level. Furthermore, there is no formal mechanism to enforce decisions taken by the League of Arab States; thus, the regional strategy on YPS would likely only serve as recommendation for best practices (Masters & Sergie, 2020).

Peace and Security at the National Level: A Review of Scholarship and Theoretical Frameworks

The creation of the WPS agenda brought on many new theories of peacebuilding within conflict studies. In Willett's (2010) introductory analysis of UNSCR 1325, she alludes to gender mainstreaming, claiming it "has been grafted onto existing power structures that are circumscribed by the essentialist nature of binary opposites in which gender has been interpreted as woman, and women remain differentiated from men" (p. 143). Sandole and Staroste (2015) expand on gender mainstreaming by defining it as a standalone peacebuilding process. They insist on gender mainstreaming as an explicit consideration of gendered experiences throughout each stage of conflict, including giving significant attention to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV),

which is experienced disproportionately by women and girls in war times (Sandole & Staroste, 2015; Leatherman, 2011; Leatherman & Griffin, 2009). They claim that to achieve and sustain peaceful solutions to conflict, gender-responsive approaches must be built in at all levels of leadership within conflict prevention, conflict management, conflict resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction (Sandole & Staroste, 2011; Sandole-Staroste, 2009; True, 2013). Other scholars, such as Harrington (2011), argue that gender mainstreaming is a new contemporary form of technical solution to the peacekeeping *faux pas* of the past, that is, the exclusion of women and girls. Pratt and Richter-Devroe (2011) add that gender mainstreaming is legitimized by UNSCR 1325, thus supporting analysis and considerations of root causes of conflict and increasing the likelihood of peace.

Over twenty years after the establishment of UNSCR 1325, there is now growing research on WPS and its application. An emerging question among WPS scholarship surrounds the epistemology and governance of WPS research (Shepherd, 2020). Some scholars have begun to question who has the authority to decide "what" is WPS research and what is not. In earlier decades, WPS research was primarily centered around conflict-related SGBV (Leatherman, 2011), and then on women's political participation (Conway, 2001). Now scholars are conducting discourse analysis (Waller-Carr, 2020; Martín de Almagro, 2018), and even focusing on the expansion of gender as a continuum (Hagen, 2016) in relation to WPS. Alongside the rise of social justice movements, greater emphasis has been placed on intersectionality, including the convergence of issues such as race, colonialism, women's agency, and climate justice (Kabeer, 1999; Bouka, 2020). Despite the growing research and policy framework, including over ten Security Council resolutions on WPS, the question remains for many: What is WPS research? There is no consensus on the answer to this question. However, Shepherd (2020) claims that "there is no essential WPS agenda, nor narrow delineation possible of what counts as a WPS topic" (p. 627), arguing that the ever-changing policy framework opens the door for continual expansion of theoretical and research-based contributions.

Both the WPS and YPS agendas also call for a shift in understanding of what constitutes "security." This has been championed by feminist scholars and activists for many decades, and further supported by some YPS actors in more recent years. Questions of feminist security

(Shepherd, 2009; 2020), the concept of human security (Reardon & Hans, 2018) and other larger understandings of peace and security are critical to the advancement of both the WPS and YPS agendas. The narrow understanding of security is in fact what restricts, in many ways, the full implementation of the agendas on a grassroots level. Women, young women, and youth all suffer disproportionately from the impacts of conflicts and war—but they are equally subjected to injustices and structural violence (Galtung, 1969). Empowerment models and other programming priorities by international actors have attempted to address these wider security issues. For example, with the increasingly more robust NAPs on WPS, institutional mechanisms on YPS and other policies have been developed to address domestic systemic inequalities. However, even these models are found to be problematic and limiting as evidenced by our three country examples.

Country Case Studies

Iraq

Iraq (and Iraqi Kurdistan) Country Context

Plagued with cycles of violence and instability, which were exacerbated by the 2003 United States-led invasion, Iraq continues to face the challenges of being at the forefront of international conflict through to present day. Recent civil wars (2006–2007) and the presence of the Islamic State (IS) (2014–2017) fostered and accompanied a rise in violent extremism, increased protests against corruption, interreligious and territorial conflict, and further discrimination against women and other minority groups (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2020). Disputes over socio-political and resource control between the KRI government and the federal Government of Iraq persist, stemming in part from tensions created by the semi-autonomous status of the KRI, which began in 1970 (Bartolini, 2020). Two social groups particularly marginalized in society are women and youth, at the intersection of which are young women who experience overlapping exclusions due to a number of factors, including religious restrictions, lack of safety, and an absence of opportunities for socio-political participation. The exclusion of young women and young people in general from political participation is most evident in the way Iraqi governance continues to be dominated by an elite class and fails to include youth in political representation, policy consultation, and formal decision-making spaces (Al-Aloosy, 2022). This is

especially concerning for a country with one of the youngest populations in the world: Youth under 25 years old make up 60 percent of the population, and there are an estimated seven million people between the ages of 14-29 (Alami, 2022).

Aside from direct exclusion, young women have also been indirectly sidelined because of societal setbacks induced from development shifts during and after the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) (Human Rights Watch, 2003). In the 1980s women expanded the social roles they occupied while men were in combat, but the 1990s saw a switch back to conservative dynamics (Human Rights Watch, 2003). In continuation of conservative policies, the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 reinforced patriarchal tendencies and brought about widespread violence, particularly violence against women (Human Rights Watch, 2003). While a number of women's rights are codified into Iraqi legislation, such as through the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ratified by Iraq in 1986, and the inclusion of equal rights in the country's 2005 Constitution, they are sometimes interpreted and realized in ways that are more discriminatory than not (CEDAW, 2014). For example, "personal status laws" derive from Islamic scripture which, depending on how it is interpreted and by whom, can have disproportionate impacts, for example, limiting women's rights regarding marriage, divorce, domestic violence, custody, and adultery (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] et al., 2018). The increased prominence of IS deepened existing discriminatory practices and heightened vulnerabilities, resulting in the escape of women and girls.

Legislation addressing violence in the public sphere also impacts efforts to address violence in the private sphere. This becomes especially difficult in conflict-affected contexts. With fewer resources and options, women and girls are forced to remain in unsafe situations at home (Bracco, 2021). The legal response to domestic violence continues to be weak and largely ineffectual. It is codified for example in the Kurdish Law on Combating Domestic Violence (2011), but has failed in application, specifically in terms of implementing the criminalization of these acts (Rudaw, 2022). There is a lack of enforcement—female genital mutilation and honor killings continue despite their illegality—and this contributes to the sense that women's protection laws are mainly symbolic or performative (medica mondiale, 2021). The neglect of women's legal inclusion and safety is also reflected in the fact that Iraq ranks second in the size of the economic and social gap between

women and men, according to the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2019). Prospects for gender equality policy action in the country are constrained by a recent reduction in the national girls' education budget, labour market contraction, and low levels of political participation despite federal quotas for women's representation in parliament (CEDAW, 2014; Government of Iraq [GoI], 2019). Given these realities, addressing issues impacting women and girls has proven performative and not reflective of actual needs.

Youth in National Planning on WPS and YPS in Iraq

Advocacy from Iraq's women's movement resulted in the 2014 adoption of a WPS NAP. Iraq and the KRI made significant advances in the drafting of the NAP on WPS by focusing on what has been lacking in national peace efforts, namely, preventing violence against women, ensuring security, and enabling women's participation in decision-making processes. Multiple government bodies were tasked with collaborating on the agenda, including the General Directorate for Combatting Violence Against Women (Bracco, 2021). However, the credibility of the consultations for creating the NAP was undermined by elitism. "According to activists they were 'Only trying to serve women without sitting with women and asking what we should do for you as Iraqi women'. The WPS processes were reportedly not reflecting the actual security concerns of local women but rather ones projected by [government] elites" (Aveta et al., 2022). In response to the criticism of its biased approach, the development of a second Iraqi NAP (2021–2024) has focused on engaging women in peace and security processes (UN Women Iraq, n.d.).

Activists from youth organizations working in peace and security shared their experiences on how the first WPS NAP not only favored the opinion of political elites, but reflected the gerontocracy present in women's advocacy, since young women were not sufficiently prioritized. There was no mention of young women as a particularly affected group except for the provision of preventing marriage under the age of 18 for girls. Unaddressed were also issues of gender biases in Iraqi child custody laws and birth registration systems. As these legally fall under the authority of the father, the lack of mention in the NAP could be interpreted to imply that young women are seen as men's property, either under a father or spousal figure, and not as individuals with rights.

Youth peacebuilders also shared the lack of awareness surrounding the WPS framework. While interviewees felt that the YPS resolutions had succeeded in terms of building increased public awareness, there was disillusionment from the first WPS NAP process, as participants were exhausted from attending trainings that did not lead to any tangible results. This contributed to a general cynicism surrounding the agenda. While there is no official YPS NAP yet, the Ministry of Culture and Youth and the YPS coalition, with various youth-led networks, composed of civil society working groups, are in the process of developing one as they are tasked with raising youth concerns in national policymaking. Activists reported a lack of a true youth perspective in the goals of the YPS resolutions and an inability to achieve consensus among youth in Iraq and the KRI. Efforts to move forward on YPS concerns have been corrupted by political groups pushing their own agendas and further deepening the mistrust between youth and the public sector. “The mistrust comes from a gap in the narrative surrounding youth, especially in the KRI,” one activist said. “The government is blaming youth for not developing themselves, and the youth are accusing the government and non-governmental organizations (NGO) that no one is supporting them.” Youth peacebuilders also attributed this mistrust to a lack of investment in capacity-building, which contributes to their unwillingness to engage in official peace processes.

As stated above, women holding political leadership remain marginal (as they are often harassed or threatened in their campaigns), but women have a larger presence in the civil society space, as both members and as leaders. This is a result of a gradual shift in public opinion perceptions about women’s socially acceptable roles, as prior, it was unaccepted and deemed unsafe for women to hold public office. An interviewee described this gradual process by saying that “women are looked down on if they work in the private sector, but it is now considered good to work for the government or NGO.” Even with the changing perspective, older Kurdish men still make up most of the government in the KRI, for example, representing a sexist gerontocracy and generational disconnect in national planning processes.

Challenges for Young People’s Inclusion in Iraq

In our interviews, young women reported having the same priority concerns about acquiring work (or being unemployed) and quality education as their male counterparts but face varied and additional obstacles. Youth peacebuilders said that if women were asked about their

biggest struggle, they would say there is a lack of opportunity for them in the private sector. As mentioned above, this is linked to issues of sexism and discrimination. Due to social restrictions, a young male civil society activist interviewed explained that "men can find any kind of job, but women cannot come home late or work in the private sector because it could damage their reputation, so the only options are government or NGO jobs."

A combined economic and security issue for women is obtaining employment in the private sector, as they run the heightened risk of harassment. Interviewees explained how women are not supported to report abuse—a protection issue that is not addressed in either YPS or WPS planning spaces. Even engaging with civil society about the YPS or WPS agenda posed security risks for women, as the trainings and opportunities for participation were not organized in a way that incorporated their specific security concerns. For example, holding trainings in the capital city—which requires women to travel to be in attendance—is a freedom they are restricted from culturally, as it is generally not accepted for women to travel or stay alone. In this way, concerns of young women in Iraq are not only left out of legislation and national peace and security plans, but young women themselves are blocked from engaging in the processes meant to advocate for them.

Jordan

Jordan Country Context

Though surrounded by conflict in a volatile region, Jordan does not face armed conflict within its borders. It is, however, involved in armed conflicts against IS in Iraq and Syria, as part of the international coalition led by the United States (RULAC, 2022). In 2015, Jordan joined the Saudi-led coalition against Houthi rebels in Yemen, sparking criticism and frustration among some Jordanians. The country's former media minister defended the move, telling the *Jordan Times* joining the coalition stemmed from "pan-Arab obligations" to defend the national security of Arab States (Ghazal & Omari, 2015).

The country has recently been facing increased scrutiny of its domestic affairs. In early 2021, reports began circulating about a possible coup, though no military or security personnel have been arrested to date (Krasna, 2021). In April 2021, several prominent Jordanians, including a former chief of the Royal Court and Finance Minister, were arrested on accusations of conspiracy

and sedition, and the King's half-brother was suddenly ostracized from the family. This chain of events has been described as extremely rare, and unparalleled over the last several decades (Krasna, 2021).

Jordan's major challenges are socioeconomic, with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of only 5,000 U.S. dollars and a staggering youth unemployment rate of 40.5 percent in 2021 (O'Neill, 2023), compared to the MENA region's 27.2 percent average (Karasapan, 2022). Since 2011, Jordan's GDP and growth have averaged 2.4 percent annually, which is insufficient to sustain its youthful workforce (World Bank, 2022). The country's shares a 200-mile border with Syria and has seen a large influx of refugees as violence across the border rages on. Though it has historically accepted refugees in large numbers, particularly Iraqis and Palestinians, the country's economy has struggled to keep pace. Jordan currently has 760,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers, of which 670,000 are Syrian (United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated socioeconomic issues in the country and significantly impacted peace planning and implementation of the YPS agenda. The country's National Coalition on YPS met in November 2021 for the first time in two years. Jordanian youth peacebuilders with whom we spoke stated that most of their work is centered around familiarizing youth with the YPS agenda and motivating youth through opportunities for engagement (UNFPA Jordan, 2020). The interviewees reported that in-person events and open group dialogue have proven to be the most effective way to carry out this mission, but such gatherings were not realizable throughout the pandemic.

Youth in National Planning on WPS and YPS in Jordan

Jordan is internationally recognized as a leader in YPS. The UN Secretary-General's first Envoy on Youth was Jordanian, and the country sponsored UNSCR 2250 while it served on the Security Council in 2015 (Berents, 2022). Prior to the adoption of the resolution, Jordan co-organized the Global Forum on YPS and sponsored a high-level thematic debate at the Security Council, signaling a strong commitment to youth participation in peace planning (Youth4Peace, 2015). Unfortunately, almost all the interviewees from Jordan stated that momentum from 2015

has stalled and they feel the government has not sustained its leadership on YPS policy implementation.

Like Iraq and Tunisia, interviewees in Jordan reported that they felt disillusioned with official processes and resented being included as token youth representatives. According to one Jordanian young woman peacebuilder, "youth feel they are being used, and I have found that does not differ between the political forms across the MENA region. Young people still do not have the opportunity to participate in the proper way [in national planning]." Another youth peacebuilder reported an instance where several of her peers were solicited to create a commercial for a political candidate, but immediately following the elections, the ideas, and visions they shared with said candidate were abandoned. These attitudes were represented by Jordanian interviewees as common and pervasive across all genders.

As previously stated, while Jordan is still in the process of drafting a new NAP on YPS, they do have an overarching framework to guide its YPS agenda in the Amman Youth Declaration (OSGEY, 2015). A leading male YPS activist and government employee interviewed stated that activists at the grassroots level do not pay much attention to the Amman Declaration other than viewing it as a preliminary guide. The interviewee indicated that in their view this is because the Declaration and UNSCR 2250 was adopted with a project-focused mentality, meaning the "stakeholders involved were aiming to fulfill a specific project or achieve certain metrics rather than analyzing what peace and security looks like in everyday life for Jordanians." The country's 2250 National Coalition is housed under the Ministry of Youth.

Extremely prevalent among interviewees in Jordan was the impression that young women are excluded from official peace planning initiatives. Every young woman peacebuilder we interviewed identified gerontocracy in the leadership of the women's movement as a problem that produced the marginalization of young women seeking to engage in peacebuilding. One peacebuilder relayed her initial discouragement in engaging in peace work, stating, "it is hard for young women to get involved in peacebuilding in Jordan because of the response we get from older women who say 'this is our work we have worked hard for this' and that we should find our own thing. They do not want to collaborate with us." One reason cited for this was the historical

exclusion of all women from official policy planning, which consequently makes the few older women (the ones who do have influence and access) feel proprietorial about their work.

Another young woman activist compared the place of young Jordanian women in peace planning to statelessness, in that both the YPS and WPS agendas do not specifically reference young women, leaving them without a designated space. This is problematic, as this population faces age-specific limitations that are not considered nor addressed, further perpetuating the "violence of exclusion" as described in *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace, and Security* (Simpson, 2018).

Tunisia

Tunisia Country Context

To contextualize the current environment of YPS policy planning in Tunisia, we must first begin with the pivotal Jasmine Revolution of 2011. The revolution, triggered by the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in December 2010, was highly youth-driven, with a significant amount of participation and organization from young people aged 15 to 30 (Tung, 2020). Ultimately, the Jasmine Revolution resulted in the forced withdrawal of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali from office, and since then Tunisia has been viewed by the international community as the sole success story of the Arab Spring (Malouche, 2019).

However, the framing of Tunisia as the rare democratic success story in the region is a perception that is not entirely accurate. After the first elections were held in 2011 and the Islamist Party came into the majority, the country has faced a multitude of challenges around creating the new constitution (Bourhrous & Smith, 2017). The following years were marred by political turmoil, including the assassination of two secularist politicians and the regular exchange of power between Islamist and Secularist parties (Abouaoun, 2021). Notably, very little was accomplished in the government during this time. In 2014, the Islamist Party decided to form a coalition with the other primary political parties in an attempt to obtain consensus, but the government remained plagued by inaction, a failure to stimulate economic growth, and corruption.

These trends resulted in intense feelings of distrust and disillusionment in the government and overall political system by youth, and it created the environment that enabled the rise of President Kais Saied and right-wing populism in 2019. President Saied campaigned on the idea that

because he was neither a career politician nor based in a corrupt political party, he was a more trustworthy individual that could come into the Tunisian government and change things for the better (Grewal, 2021). However, upon assuming power Saied oversaw a "constitutional coup," freezing parliament and dismissing members of the legislature who he saw as corrupt, and removing the Prime Minister. One young man civil society representative stated that many welcomed his power-grab due to exasperation with the incompetence and corruption of post Arab Spring governments, and in the hopes that he will be able to permanently dismantle corruption, overcome the ongoing political stalemate, and create a better environment of social services for citizens.

Official Mechanisms for YPS in Tunisia

Tunisia does not yet have official institutionalized YPS mechanisms: It does not have a NAP on YPS or any other official government efforts, nor does it have a formal YPS coalition. However, this fact should not be misconstrued to argue that youth in Tunisia are not actively engaging in various peacebuilding activities across multiple levels. Throughout the interviews, youth peacebuilders described a blossoming of civil society in the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution, and youth were the main group flocking to the grassroots to develop avenues and opportunities for change.

In the immediate aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution, many donors sent funding to civil society groups. There seemed to be no limit to the kind of work you could engage in, and "you [would not] find a young person who doesn't care about civil society activism" said one young woman interviewee. However, despite the vibrancy of civil society, the centrality of youth to the Jasmine Revolution, and even youth being mentioned in the Constitution, YPS is not an official national policy priority in Tunisia. The interviewees reported that they did not feel like there was any political will to make YPS a priority in the coming months or years. Additionally, civil society has failed to come together in a systematic and coordinated national effort, exemplified by the lack of bodies such as a YPS Coalition or a Youth Council specific to YPS. When interviewees were asked to explain this lack of coordinated YPS work, the main answer was a lack of awareness about the YPS framework itself.

Tunisia: No Awareness, No Action

The lack of awareness about YPS work was the most surprising finding throughout the interview process with Tunisian youth: Four out of the six individuals interviewed who were all working on youth-focused peace and security issues were not aware of UNSCR 2250 or the YPS agenda in general. One young woman civil society activist who participated in the UNDP Arab Youth Forum shared that “the theme in 2018 was apparently youth, peace, and security, but I didn’t know. They didn’t mention the recent agenda or Resolution 2250 [at the forum] at all.” She went on to note that when they would attend workshops focused on peacebuilding or security, they would ask their friends “if they had heard of the YPS resolutions or if they know about the agenda, and they don’t.”

One reason for this lack of awareness amongst youth may stem from the structure of the United Nations itself. There is no dedicated mechanism at the UN that is responsible for localizing[5] the YPS framework, comparable to how UN Women is the primary organization with some dedicated funding to implement the WPS resolutions.[6] Instead, mandates for carrying out work on the YPS agenda are shared between multiple UN agencies, making operationalization efforts much more inconsistent. One woman interviewee who has worked for UN Women stressed that,

> The UN doesn’t have a great localization strategy on YPS and WPS. At UN Women I work with many country offices who have WPS focal points but now that we are taking stock of data for the YPS Secretary-General report I see very few countries actually have a youth focal point within their agency. So, when you’re not spreading the word on the ground about your own agenda, you can’t just be expecting young people to automatically discover the agenda existing somewhere on the street.

This lack of awareness and knowledge speaks to the strong need to intensify localization efforts on the YPS agenda in Tunisia.

Nevertheless, interviewees who were unaware of the agenda were doing related work in LGBTQIA+[7] rights, women’s political participation, safety from violence, and other areas that directly relate to the YPS framework. Exemplifying this, one young man shared that “a lot of what we do is linked to YPS and peacebuilding without us necessarily using the term. As an organization we are not super familiar with the term itself…but elements of peacebuilding—seeking justice, equality, fairness—are things that we work on every day.”

Lack of awareness was not the only challenge creating a barrier for youth to be more involved in YPS implementation in Tunisia. Interviewees pointed to many other areas such as lack of political participation for women, ageism in peacebuilding, and distrust in the government. YPS concerns in Tunisia primarily fall under the broader theoretical concept of human security (Reardon & Hans, 2018), with economic security, political security, food, and community security being the most predominant concerns. Some of these themes will all be explored in greater detail in the following section.

Common Themes of Exclusion and Marginalization

In Iraq, Jordan, and Tunisia, there are several common and intersecting themes of exclusion that young people, and especially young women, face in terms of becoming active participants in peacebuilding initiatives, the most significant of which are distrust in the government and other official processes, tokenism, ageism, and gerontocracy.

Distrust and Disillusionment

Across Iraq and Tunisia especially, distrust in the government was one of the most widely reported factors for youth not being active in YPS activities. In Iraq and the KRI, one interviewee noted that youth "don't even trust NGOs [let alone the government], that there is hope in the future, that they can build themselves, that's why they are trying to migrate out of the country." Similarly, in Tunisia interviewees reported that the levels of corruption in the Tunisian State, as well as the stalled political system which has failed to make progress on relevant social issues, has led to youth wanting to emigrate from the country and to dismiss the value of engaging in political processes. As noted above, some interviewees shared that the coming to power of President Kais Saied, despite the disturbing authoritarian methods of this de facto coup, was celebrated by youth across the country, because they were cynical about the former government's capability and utterly contemptuous of the corruption exhibited by political elites. A youth peacebuilder interviewed from Tunisia, speaking to the view of Tunisian youth, emphasized that "the whole idea of politics for youth is ambiguous and fluid and you cannot trust it… the one thing they know is the parties didn't do anything, there is no more jobs, there is more corruption, there are less opportunities, and that's all." This sense of alienation from formal public debate and problem-solving can shed light on why some youth in Iraq are disinclined to engage in the official YPS

processes that are present, and in Tunisia why there is a lack of will to create an official political process at all. Additionally, the high level of disillusionment seems to be one of the factors that drive youth towards being more active in civil society spaces, rather than in the governmental sphere.

In Jordan, youth also expressed feelings of cynicism towards the government's efforts to include young people. One interviewee drew a comparison to Jordan's historically open acceptance of refugees stating: "On all of our borders there are armed conflicts [...] and any refugee can come to Jordan despite the challenges we have economically. We respect our country for this role but don't the open doors apply to ideas and youth as well?" The sentiment of the Jordanian government failing to prioritize its own people was echoed in other interviews as well. An interviewee referenced Jordan's international reputation as a leader in YPS, and stated that this reputation is not recognized at the local level. They explained that progress on local implementation of the YPS agenda has been stagnant at best and there has been little effort on the part of the government to familiarize young people with the agenda.

Tokenism

Across all three countries, interviewees asserted that they largely feel that their government does not genuinely care about youth concerns and priorities, and instead exploits young people's engagement in ways that benefit those in power. Interviewees in Jordan stated that youth feel disillusioned about the YPS agenda because political leaders only seem to care about youth issues or give youth a voice when the election cycle rolls around. They added that they have felt abandoned since government officials hold press conferences, meetings, and create commercials with youth during election season, giving the impression that they are truly invested in young people's priorities, but once the elections are over these officials no longer pay attention to their concerns.

These feelings of tokenism were similarly expressed in Tunisia, where youth shared that the government attempts to point to youth and their importance in relation to the Revolution, but that recognition usually ends there. In Iraq, interviewees expressed feeling that their inclusion in official YPS processes was performative, explaining that "on social media and in the public,

government says they are engaging them in processes, but they aren't." This tokenistic inclusion of youth does not serve to advance the YPS agenda in a meaningful way, instead resulting in additional barriers by creating further disillusionment in government and official processes (Leclerc, 2021).

Gerontocratic Leadership

Youth interviewees expressed that a key barrier to overcome in the realms of YPS, WPS, and peacebuilding more broadly is that of ageism. Interviewees in Iraq reported that there is an intergenerational disconnect and problems of gerontocratic leadership; this includes both older women and men in positions of leadership blocking these spaces from young women and men. It is also vital to note that while there is a quota system in place in both Iraq and the KRI, the quota is performative: The women in parliament have faced obstacles and are not seen to genuinely influence decision-making processes. The interviewees claimed that young women, particularly in women's rights groups and WPS spaces, find that the voices of older activists are privileged, giving the sense that young women must wait their turn. When asked about this barrier, a young woman from Jordan relayed that "the response we get from older women [is that] 'this is our work, we have worked hard for this' and we [youth] should find our own thing. They do not want to collaborate with us."

In addition to being excluded within civil society, ageism was also brought up as a substantial factor exacerbating youth alienation from government processes, due to feelings of being under-represented and ignored. This was also the case when it came to youth trying to run for political positions or even simply to exercise their right to participate in elections. A Tunisian youth peacebuilder explained that:

> Voter registration for youth in Tunisia is pretty low. Even if they register, they don't always go to vote, or they weren't even interested in politics in general. Because it's a very older generation dominated environment. Youth don't see themselves as well represented or listened to.

Interviews also showed that this ageism can manifest in funding structures, with young people oftentimes being overlooked in favor of "more experienced" applicants. Notably, it was reported that in some cases across the MENA region, there is very little motivation to overcome

gerontocratic structures, because having young people well-represented in political and peacebuilding dialogues is simply not a central concern. One interviewee in Tunisia illustrated this point, saying that:

> For the MENA region, the priority of involving young people or gender is secondary to basic survival priorities. We have lots of conflicts and wars causing so many side disasters, economic crisis, loans that governments are trying to pay back. With all of these, people don't care if [they] have a young parliamentarian [representing them]—they care about a hot meal on the table at night.

Opportunities for Meaningful Inclusion

To effectively combat the violence of exclusion, meaning the negative effects of marginalizing impacted groups in decision-making processes, more gender-specific approaches need to be prioritized (Simpson, 2018). Analysis of the feedback from youth peacebuilders and activists in the peace and security spaces in Iraq, Jordan, and Tunisia demonstrated clear opportunities to meaningfully include young women in YPS processes in the three countries. First, further research such as this analysis regarding the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of current YPS strategies needs to be conducted. More voices need to be heard from those involved on what meaningful inclusion means to them in order to design and implement successful consultative activities. Qualitative and quantitative indicators for success should be collectively identified by involved stakeholders, and data should be aggregated for different demographics to determine specific ways to address exclusion and increase participation.

In line with documenting and collecting more sex disaggregated data on youth peace issues, young women's needs should be addressed as unique; they should not simply be lumped into the categories of "women" or "girls." This is not because they represent a homogenous group but because the category of "youth" has been defined around male youth concerns and their connection to violence, which has sidelined young women's participation in conflict and peacebuilding roles. Young women in the MENA region are a broad category differentiated by ethnic group, race, and religion, and they face significant constraints grounded in gendered social expectations, constraints that do not apply to young women from other cultural contexts, let alone to young men's efforts to build peace and engage in public decision-making. To prevent conflict, violence, and deeper stigmatization, the needs of young women specific to sexual and gender-

based violence, sexual health, and physical and psychological safety must be incorporated to achieve any degree of meaningful inclusion.

Women are not the only gender identity excluded from patriarchal decision-making national agenda spaces. Gender non-conforming, LGBTQIA+, and other sexual or gender minorities also experience layered vulnerabilities, especially with regards to security. They are often not as visible in policy discussions in religious, conservative, patriarchal societies and are therefore not welcomed into consultative spaces. To include all sexual and gender minorities, special accommodations must be made in YPS spaces to ensure vulnerable populations can arrive, participate, and depart safely and confidently.[8]

These accommodations and protections can only be effective if consulted, designed, and implemented by local youth leadership. Although this paper addresses common themes found in the MENA region, each country and each community are unique; therefore, each YPS initiative should be reflective of the youth priorities in the areas it is directly affecting. Youth leaders in those regions should have direct involvement and leadership of the processes as they possess first-hand knowledge and reach. Localization can also challenge patterns of exclusion created through elitism and gerontocracies (Fal Dutra Santos & Cabrera Balleza, 2018). Often, national consultation and policy forums require traveling to urban areas, having linguistic (and technical language) skills, maintaining digital access, and being in connected circles or networks. These limitations maintain an elite view and skew results. To localize the YPS agenda also means to make the processes more approachable to youth who are directly impacted by removing barriers to access.

As indicated, the ability to participate in YPS consultation and decision-making processes is a privilege. Most activists are not financially compensated for their advocacy work. To ensure youth peacebuilders have a voice in the YPS space, they should receive remuneration for their time and knowledge (Leclerc & Rouhshahbaz, 2021). Efforts to create more sustainable and long-term funding should be prioritized as well, because challenging social dynamics and biases is not a short-term action that can meet the goals of the standard international donor financing models. Ultimately, the ways to meaningfully include young women in these processes means listening to their needs, acting on them, and putting them in the spaces where their voices can be heard.

Conclusion

It is evident that the inclusion of young people in policy planning spaces has long been a struggle. It has been difficult for young people to access spaces of power, just as it seems to be difficult for the powerful to open said spaces to young people. In many countries, particularly in KRI, Jordan, and Tunisia, this is no different. Young people, particularly young women, have grown increasingly skeptical of government authorities and tend to choose alternative approaches to engage in peace and security. Throughout this study, we have observed that young women continue to be excluded from WPS community spaces, and yet they also do not feel entirely represented in the YPS agenda either. Some advances have been made to challenge these gaps, and the growing understanding of the concept of intersectionality is certainly pushing the policy frameworks towards more inclusivity (Crenshaw, 1989), but there is still progress to be made. Regional efforts to amplify youth experiences and mobilize partnerships to support the development and implementation of a formal regional strategy on YPS represent a positive step forward on youth inclusion in peace and security frameworks in the MENA region. However, while a consultation with young people concerning the regional strategy on YPS was held, it remains to be seen how much of their input will directly impact the Arab League’s approach and if young people’s involvement in the drafting will be singular or continuous. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the region’s mobilization around YPS were also significant. The last Youth Forum in the Arab Region, jointly organized by UNFPA, the Government of Tunisia, and other multilateral stakeholders was held in 2019.

As the world continues to grapple with instrumentalizing peace and security frameworks and attempts to develop national policies which will have a direct impact on the ground, we know that young people—particularly young women—have a role to play. However, governments must prove their good intentions through action in order to co-create initiatives that will truly impact communities. Youth-led peacebuilding activities continue despite the various barriers and often broken relationships with governmental authorities. It is the responsibility of those who hold power to collaborate, enable the space, and fulfill their commitments to ensure the implementation of the peace and security frameworks.

Notes

[1] For the purpose of this research, we define "young people" as being between the ages of 18 to 30. There is no universal determination of the age group for this demographic. Some UN agencies and countries consider young people from 18 to 35, others until 40.

[2] The four countries to have adopted NAPs on YPS are Finland (August 2021), Nigeria (November 2021), Democratic Republic of Congo (August 2022), and the Philippines (August 2022).

[3] The full research report covering six country case studies is available here: https://gnwp.org/research-report-perspectives-on-youth-engagement-in-operationalizing-peace-and-security-at-a-national-level/

[4] In July of 2022, Jordan initiated the drafting process for its second NAP on Security Council Resolution 1325.

[5] For more on Localization of WPS see: https://gnwp.org/localization-toolkit/

[6] On 12 September 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 76/306 to establish the first UN Youth Office. The Resolution can be accessed here: https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/587/26/PDF/N2258726.pdf

[7] LGBTQIA+ refers to members of the community who identify as two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, gender-diverse, gender-fluid or other sexual orientations.

[8] See the "queering peace and security" debates for more on this. Specifically, see "Queering women, peace and security" (Hagen, 2016); https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12551

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