

**WHERE PARTICIPATION AND TOKENISM MEET:  
AN ANALYSIS OF “MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION” IN PEACE AND  
SECURITY**

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## List of Abbreviations

LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and Intersex (plus other identities)
QPS	Queering Peace and Security
UN	United Nations
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
YPS	Youth, Peace and Security

## **Chapter 1: Introduction – Rethinking Meaningful Participation in Peace and Security**

### **1.1. Background of the Problem**

Participation has become a central normative commitment in contemporary peace and security policy. Across global agendas, inclusion is repeatedly framed as both a moral imperative and a practical necessity for sustainable peace. The United Nations (UN) Security Council adopted two suites of thematic resolutions—ten on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and four on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS)—which insist that the meaningful participation of women and young people is essential to conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and post-conflict recovery (UNSCR, 2000; 2015). Yet despite this insistence, participation remains unevenly defined, inconsistently practiced, and rarely theorized beyond procedural terms. This dissertation emerges from sustained engagement with the gap between participation as a policy demand and participation as a lived, relational experience. The gap is identified by practitioners as a lack of understanding of every day lived realities, and policies that are developed in silos under specific bureaucratic constraints. In turn, the intention of the policies may serve a purpose with greater proximity to the daily realities of peacebuilders, but their application continue to fall flat in practice.

The impetus for this research is grounded in more than a decade of professional engagement in peacebuilding, gender, and youth policy. Through work as a practitioner, consultant, and researcher, I have been immersed in WPS and YPS processes across diverse political and cultural contexts. This includes extensive experience supporting the development of national action plans, facilitating consultations, advising institutions, and engaging with civil society actors at the local, national, regional, and international levels.

These experiences were not peripheral to the research question; they were formative. They revealed recurring patterns in how participation was operationalized, celebrated, and constrained, which cut across contexts and institutions.

My experience working within global governance structures also generated an ongoing tension between complicity and critique. On the one hand, participation processes—consultations, dialogues, advisory roles—were often presented as evidence of progress. On the other, the outcomes of these processes rarely reflected the depth, diversity, or political urgency of the contributions made, particularly by young women. Over time, a pattern became difficult to ignore: participation was repeatedly invoked, yet its meaningfulness was assumed rather than examined. It means that participation is treated as a good practice, but there are few to no parameters for examining its success. The question was no longer whether participation was occurring, but what participation actually did, and for whom.

This tension was further sharpened through my decade with the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, which involved engagement in more than thirty countries and close collaboration with women and young peacebuilders navigating WPS and YPS spaces in their respective communities. This time provided a vantage point into how participation is experienced across contexts marked by different political regimes, donor environments, and social norms. Despite these differences, similar frustrations surfaced. Peacebuilders<sup>1</sup> described being invited into processes without influence, consulted

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, the terms peacebuilder and activist are used interchangeably to reflect the overlapping roles many individuals occupy in practice. The term peacebuilder is used broadly to refer to individuals and collectives engaged in efforts to prevent violence, address structural and direct harms, and transform conflict through advocacy, community organizing, dialogue, policy engagement, and other non-violent strategies, whether formally or informally, and at local, national, or transnational levels.

without feedback, and celebrated for visibility without authority. Participation, while omnipresent in discourse, was frequently experienced as extractive, conditional, or symbolic.

At the same time, these experiences also revealed the analytical limits of existing policy frameworks. Policy documents and institutional guidance frequently emphasize how to increase participation—through quotas, consultations, or capacity-building—without interrogating what makes participation meaningful from the perspective of those participating. In practice, participation was treated as a technical problem with technical solutions, rather than as a political relationship shaped by power, legitimacy, and accountability. This gap between policy ambition and lived experience constitutes the core problem I seek to address in this dissertation.

The absence of a clear, shared definition of “meaningful participation” is particularly striking given its centrality to both WPS and YPS agendas. Participation is repeatedly characterized as “meaningful,” yet rarely conceptualized beyond access, representation, or presence (UNSCR, 2000; 2015). As a result, participation risks becoming an empty signifier, invoked to legitimize processes without altering underlying power relations. This dissertation takes that absence seriously, asking not how participation should be implemented, but how it is understood, evaluated, and experienced by those most frequently positioned as its subjects.

Importantly, this research is situated within an ongoing academic engagement with these questions. The dissertation builds on and extends my prior and concurrent scholarly work on youth, gender, peacebuilding, and participation. Rather than treating academic inquiry and practice as separate domains, this research recognizes their

entanglement. Professional experience informed the framing of the research problem and the formulation of research questions, while the empirical analysis presented in this dissertation is grounded in systematically collected interview data and analyzed through an explicit methodological framework. This reflexive positioning does not claim neutrality; instead, it acknowledges that knowledge about participation is always produced from within particular institutional and political locations.

The decision to centre young women peacebuilders reflects both empirical realities and theoretical commitments. Young women occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of WPS and YPS policies, yet their experiences are often fragmented across these agendas. They are frequently called upon to participate—as women, as youth, as representatives of communities—while simultaneously encountering gendered, generational, linguistic, and institutional barriers to influence. Their perspectives, therefore, offer a critical vantage point for examining how participation operates in practice, where it fails, and where alternative possibilities emerge.

From a policy perspective, the WPS and YPS agendas provide an essential backdrop for this study. WPS, grounded in a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions first introduced in October 2000, seeks to advance women’s participation in peace and security decision-making (UNSCR, 2000). YPS, emerging fifteen years later, emphasizes the role of young people as agents of peace rather than as threats or passive beneficiaries (UNSCR, 2015). Together, these agendas have reshaped global discourse on inclusion. Yet as this dissertation demonstrates, their implementation often reproduces procedural approaches that prioritize visibility over power-sharing. Understanding this

disjuncture requires moving beyond policy texts to examine how participation is enacted, negotiated, and resisted in practice.

This dissertation, therefore, begins from a deceptively simple observation: participation is everywhere, yet its meaning remains elusive. The insistence on participation has outpaced its conceptualization. By grounding analysis in the experiences and reflections of young women peacebuilders, the study seeks to address this imbalance. It asks not only how participation is structured, but how it is lived, contested, and understood by those navigating its promises and limits. In doing so, it positions meaningful participation not as a technical endpoint, but as a relational and political problem at the heart of contemporary peace and security practice.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

Despite the centrality of participation in contemporary peace and security discourse, there remains a significant conceptual and analytical gap in how participation is understood, evaluated, and operationalized. Within WPS and YPS policies, participation is repeatedly invoked as a normative good and a policy objective, yet its meaning is rarely interrogated beyond procedural terms. Participation is assumed to be self-evidently positive, measurable through access or presence, and achievable through technical interventions (Goetz & Jenkins, 2016). This assumption obscures the relational, political, and power dynamics through which participation is actually experienced.

At the policy level, participation is frequently equated with inclusion in formal processes: attendance at consultations, representation on panels, or involvement in advisory mechanisms. These approaches reflect an implicit understanding of participation as a discrete event rather than as an ongoing relationship. As a result, participation is

often assessed through indicators that capture visibility but not influence, access but not authority, recognition but not accountability (Nesterova, Amaglo-Mensah & Berents, 2025). This procedural framing creates the appearance of progress while leaving underlying hierarchies of power largely intact.

From an academic perspective, conflict studies and related fields have contributed to this gap by treating participation as a secondary or derivative concern. While critical peacebuilding scholarship (see Autesserre, 2014; 2021; Mac Guinty, 2011; Richmond, 2011a) has expanded attention to local agency, hybridity, and everyday peace, participation itself has often remained theorized in a limited capacity, focusing on institutional dynamics rather than lived realities. Where participation is addressed, it is frequently subsumed within broader discussions of legitimacy, governance, or inclusion, rather than examined as a concept requiring its own analytic clarity. This has resulted in a proliferation of participation-focused practices without a corresponding refinement of how participation is defined or evaluated.

The problem is not the absence of participation, but the absence of agreement on what makes participation meaningful. Across WPS and YPS policy documents, participation is routinely qualified as “meaningful,” yet the criteria for meaningfulness remain vague, inconsistent, or implicit. Guidance often focuses on how to increase participation—for example, through capacity-building, quotas, or consultations—without specifying how to assess whether participation enables agency, redistributes power, or sustains accountability (GCYPS, 2022). In practice, this leaves institutions with significant discretion to claim meaningful participation without altering how decisions are made.

This conceptual ambiguity has material consequences. When participation is defined procedurally, it becomes possible for institutions to fulfil participation requirements without engaging substantively with the knowledge, priorities, or critiques of those participating. Participation risks becoming extractive: drawing on lived experience, testimony, or symbolic representation without translating these contributions into influence or change. For participants—particularly young women—this can generate frustration, fatigue, and disengagement, undermining the very objectives participation is meant to advance.

The absence of a clear conceptual framework for meaningful participation is particularly consequential for young women peacebuilders. Positioned at the intersection of gender and age, young women are frequently targeted by participation initiatives while simultaneously encountering structural barriers to influence (Leclerc, 2025a). They are invited to speak, consulted for their perspectives, and showcased as evidence of inclusivity, yet their authority is often constrained by institutional hierarchies, linguistic expectations, and professional norms. Without a robust understanding of meaningful participation, these dynamics remain normalized rather than problematized.

Moreover, the fragmentation between WPS and YPS frameworks compounds the problem. While both agendas emphasize participation, they do so through different institutional pathways and assumptions. Young women often fall between these frameworks, recognized as youth but marginalized as women, or included in women's activist spaces while dismissed as inexperienced (Leclerc et al., 2023; Berents & Mollica, 2021). This fragmentation further obscures how participation is experienced in practice and limits the capacity of either framework to address intersecting exclusions.

This dissertation identifies a critical gap at the intersection of policy, practice, and theory: the lack of an empirically grounded, analytically rigorous account of what meaningful participation entails from the perspective of those most frequently positioned as its subjects. Existing scholarship offers important critiques of inclusion, tokenism, and power (see Shepherd, 2017; Cornwall, 2008; Fraser, 2007), yet rarely synthesizes these insights into a framework that captures how participation is lived over time. Similarly, policy agendas emphasize participation as an objective but do not articulate how meaningfulness should be understood or assessed.

The problem, then, is not simply one of implementation, but of conceptual clarity. Without a shared understanding of meaningful participation, efforts to enhance inclusion risk reproducing the very exclusions they seek to address. Participation becomes a moving target, invoked rhetorically, operationalized procedurally, and evaluated superficially. This disconnect limits the transformative potential of the WPS and YPS policies and constrains conflict studies' ability to engage critically with participation as a political practice.

This dissertation responds to this problem by centring the experiences and analyses of young women peacebuilders. Rather than treating meaningful participation as a predefined goal, it asks how participation is understood, negotiated, and evaluated by those navigating political dynamics of peace and security. By grounding analysis in lived experience, the study seeks to clarify what meaningful participation requires, why it so often fails, and how alternative understandings might be articulated.

In doing so, the dissertation challenges both policy and scholarship to move beyond procedural framings of participation. It argues that meaningful participation

cannot be assumed, mandated, or measured through access alone. Instead, it must be understood as a relational process shaped by power, legitimacy, and accountability. Addressing this problem is essential not only for improving participatory practice but for advancing theoretical debates about agency, inclusion, and knowledge production within peace and conflict studies.

### **1.3. Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this dissertation is to critically examine how meaningful participation is understood, experienced, and negotiated by young women peacebuilders operating within WPS and YPS policy spaces. Rather than assuming participation as an unproblematic good or a self-evident outcome of inclusion, the study seeks to interrogate participation as a relational and political process shaped by power, legitimacy, and accountability.

This research emerges from a sustained engagement with peace and security policymaking and practice. Over more than a decade of professional involvement in this field—including work as an international consultant, policy advisor, and researcher—I have repeatedly encountered participation framed as both a solution and a benchmark of success. Participation is expected, encouraged, and often required, yet rarely defined with precision. As an author, consultant, and advisor on the development of several national action plans on WPS and YPS, donor-funded consultations, and international policy forums, I have observed participation simultaneously as a promise of transformation and as a site of exclusion, frustration, and fatigue.

This positionality informs the purpose of the study in two ways. First, it situates the research within ongoing scholarly debates on participation, legitimacy, and inclusion, contributing empirically grounded insights to fields that have often treated participation

abstractly or procedurally. Second, it reflects a reflexive awareness of my own proximity to power within peace and security institutions. Having participated in and supported participatory processes, the study acknowledges both complicity and critique. This dual position—being embedded within the system while interrogating its limits—shapes the research aim: not to reject participation outright, but to clarify the conditions under which it becomes meaningful.

At its core, this dissertation seeks to address a central analytical question that remains insufficiently explored in both policy and scholarship: what makes participation meaningful, and for whom? While WPS and YPS policy frameworks consistently invoke meaningful participation as a goal, they offer limited guidance on how meaningfulness should be understood beyond procedural inclusion. This study therefore shifts the analytic focus from how participation is organized to how participation is experienced and evaluated by those most frequently positioned as its subjects.

### *1.3.1. Primary Research Question*

The central research question guiding this dissertation is:

How do young women peacebuilders understand, experience, and define meaningful participation within Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) spaces?

This question is deliberately framed to foreground lived experience and interpretation rather than institutional intent. Rather than asking whether participation is meaningful according to predefined indicators, the research asks how meaningfulness is constructed from the perspective of young women navigating peace and security environments. The

emphasis on understanding, experience, and definition reflects an epistemological commitment to treating participants not merely as respondents, but as theorists of participation in their own right.

The research question also deliberately situates meaningful participation within the specific policy architectures of WPS and YPS. These frameworks shape access to resources, platforms, and legitimacy, yet they operate through different assumptions about age, gender, authority, and expertise. By examining participation at the intersection of these agendas, the study captures dynamics that are often obscured when WPS and YPS are analyzed in isolation.

### *1.3.2. Analytical Orientation*

The research questions are grounded in an interpretive and feminist epistemological approach (Shepherd 2021; 2017). Rather than seeking to measure participation against external benchmarks, the study prioritizes participants' own evaluative frameworks. Meaningful participation is treated not as a static condition but as a dynamic process that unfolds over time, across relationships, and within institutional constraints.

This orientation aligns with the broader aims of the dissertation: to contribute to conflict studies by clarifying how participation operates in practice, and to WPS and YPS debates by offering an empirically grounded account of meaningfulness. By centring young women's voices, the study challenges dominant assumptions about expertise and authority, recognizing participants as knowledge producers rather than merely data sources.

Importantly, the research question is not designed to produce prescriptive solutions. Instead, it aims to surface the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities inherent

in participatory practice. This approach reflects an understanding that meaningful participation cannot be reduced to a checklist or best-practice model. Rather, it requires ongoing negotiation, reflexivity, and attention to power.

#### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

This dissertation makes a substantive contribution to scholarship, policy, and practice by addressing a persistent gap in how participation is conceptualized, evaluated, and operationalized within peace and security frameworks. While participation has become a central normative commitment across WPS and YPS policies, its meaning has remained largely implicit. This study responds to that gap by offering an empirically grounded and analytically rigorous account of meaningful participation as understood and experienced by young women peacebuilders themselves.

The significance of the study lies not in proposing participation as a novel concept, but in interrogating the assumptions that have allowed participation to be treated as self-evident. By centring lived experience, the dissertation challenges procedural and metric-driven approaches that dominate both policy and scholarly discourse. It demonstrates that participation cannot be assessed solely through access, representation, or numerical inclusion, and that doing so risks reproducing the very exclusions participation is meant to address. At the same time, the study advances a broader conceptual contribution by developing a Triangle of Meaningful Participation, which emerged from the empirical data and analysis. The Triangle reconceptualizes participation as a relational and dynamic process constituted through interlinked dimensions of shared agenda-setting, influence, and accountability. While grounded in the experiences of young women peacebuilders, this framework offers a transferable

analytical lens for examining participation across diverse policy and governance contexts, thereby extending its relevance beyond WPS and YPS and contributing to wider debates on inclusion, power, and knowledge production.

#### *1.4.1. Scholarly Significance*

From a scholarly perspective, this dissertation contributes to conflict studies by clarifying participation as a distinct analytical problem rather than a secondary or instrumental concern. Although participation is frequently invoked within the field—particularly in relation to legitimacy, local ownership, and inclusion—it is rarely theorized with conceptual precision. As a result, participation often appears as an unquestioned good or a technical input, rather than as a relational process shaped by power, hierarchy, and epistemic authority.

By foregrounding young women’s interpretations of meaningful participation, the study advances feminist and critical approaches that treat marginalized actors as theorists rather than merely as subjects of analysis. The findings challenge dominant assumptions within conflict studies regarding where knowledge is produced and whose insights are considered authoritative (Shepherd, 2017; Puechguirbal, 2010). In doing so, the dissertation contributes to ongoing debates about epistemology, legitimacy, and the limits of State-centric and institutional framings.

The study also bridges gaps between feminist peace and security scholarship and youth-focused analyses that are often treated as parallel rather than intersecting fields (Berents & Mollica, 2021). By examining participation at the intersection of WPS and YPS, the dissertation highlights how analytical silos obscure the experiences of young women who navigate both policy agendas simultaneously. This intersectional focus

deepens scholarly understanding of how age and gender co-constitute participation, rather than functioning as additive categories.

#### *1.4.2. Policy Significance*

The policy significance of this study is particularly salient given the prominence of participation within international peace and security agendas. WPS and YPS policies consistently emphasize meaningful participation as a core objective, yet they offer limited guidance on how meaningfulness should be understood or evaluated. This ambiguity creates space for inconsistent implementation and superficial compliance.

By articulating meaningful participation from the perspective of young women peacebuilders, the dissertation provides policy-relevant insights into why participation initiatives often fall short of their stated goals. The findings demonstrate that participation can be formally inclusive while substantively exclusionary, particularly when it prioritizes visibility over influence and consultation over co-creation. This has direct implications for how participation is designed, resourced, and evaluated within national action plans, donor programs, and multilateral processes.

The study also speaks to the fragmentation between WPS and YPS policy architectures. Young women frequently fall between these frameworks, encountering contradictory expectations and limited pathways for sustained engagement (see Leclerc, 2025a; Leclerc et al., 2023). By highlighting these dynamics, the dissertation underscores the need for greater coherence between WPS and YPS approaches to participation, particularly in relation to age thresholds, intergenerational dynamics, and accountability mechanisms.

### *1.4.3. Significance for Practice*

For practitioners working in peacebuilding, advocacy, and policy implementation, this study offers a grounded reflection on the everyday realities of participation. Many practitioners are tasked with facilitating participation while operating within institutional constraints related to funding, reporting, and donor expectations. This dissertation does not dismiss these constraints, but it does illuminate their effects on those invited to participate.

By documenting how young women experience participation as extractive, conditional, or burdensome, the study invites practitioners to reflect critically on their own roles in participatory processes. It highlights the emotional and epistemic labour often required of participants, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, and questions whether existing practices adequately recognize or compensate this labour.

### **1.5. Definition of Key Terms**

Given the conceptual ambiguity surrounding participation in peace and security discourse, it is important to clarify how key terms are used in this dissertation. These definitions do not claim universality; rather, they reflect the analytical and empirical grounding of the study and are informed by the ways participants themselves understood and used these concepts. Where relevant, definitions deliberately move beyond policy shorthand to foreground relational and power-conscious meanings.

Participation: In this dissertation, participation refers to engagement in peace and security processes, spaces, or initiatives, including but not limited to consultations, policymaking forums, advocacy platforms, research processes, and community-based peacebuilding

efforts. Participation is not treated as synonymous with presence or access alone. Instead, it is understood as a political and relational practice shaped by power, authority, and institutional norms.

Participation may be formal or informal, institutional or community-based, invited or claimed. Importantly, participation can occur without being meaningful, and its mere existence does not imply influence, legitimacy, or accountability.

Power: The term power refers to the relational and negotiated capacity of young women to influence outcomes, challenge dominant structures, and reconfigure whose voices count within policymaking.

Legitimacy: The term legitimacy refers to the recognition (or denial) of young women as credible political actors and knowledge producers within peace and security institutions and discourses.

Young Women Peacebuilders: The term young women peacebuilders refers to individuals who identify as women and as young people, and who are engaged in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, or peace and security-related work at local, national, regional, or international levels. This includes activists, advocates, practitioners, researchers, and policy actors operating within and beyond formal institutions.

The dissertation recognizes that “youth” is a socially and institutionally constructed category, often defined through age thresholds that vary across contexts. Rather than imposing a rigid age definition, the study reflects participants’ self-

identification and their positioning within YPS spaces, while at the same time acknowledging that even though no universal definition of “youth” is accepted by YPS, most YPS policies define the age category as 18 to 30 or 35.

Women, Peace and Security (WPS): Women, Peace and Security (WPS) refers to the international policy agenda established through UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions (UNSCR, 2000). The WPS agenda emphasizes women’s participation in peace and security decision-making, the protection of women and girls in conflict, and the integration of gender perspectives into peace and security policies and institutions. It established four pillars of intervention: participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery.

In this dissertation, WPS is analyzed not only as a policy framework but as a set of institutional practices that shape participation, power, and legitimacy, as defined in this section. The study critically examines how WPS commitments to participation (pillar one of Resolution 1325) are implemented and experienced in practice, particularly among young women.

Youth, Peace and Security (YPS): Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) refers to the international policy agenda established through UN Security Council Resolution 2250 and subsequent resolutions (UNSCR, 2015). The YPS agenda recognizes young people as agents of peace and emphasizes their participation in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and decision-making processes. It established five pillars of intervention: participation, prevention, protection, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration.

This dissertation examines YPS as both an opportunity and a constraint for participation (pillar one of Resolution 2250). While YPS frameworks create space for youth inclusion, they also introduce age-based boundaries and institutional dynamics that shape who is recognized as a participant and for how long. The study pays particular attention to how young women navigate YPS spaces in relation to WPS policies.

### **1.6. Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

This dissertation is grounded in a set of analytical assumptions and is shaped by both practical and conceptual boundaries. Making these explicit at the outset clarifies the scope of the study and situates its findings appropriately, while reserving detailed methodological discussion for Chapter 3.

The study proceeds from the assumption that young women peacebuilders are not only participants in peace and security processes, but capable analysts of participation itself. Their reflections are treated as interpretive and analytical, rather than merely descriptive. A second assumption is that participation is not inherently meaningful. Although widely promoted as a normative good within WPS and YPS policies—meaning it is often treated as inherently positive, desirable, and necessary for legitimate peace processes, regardless of its form or effects—participation is understood here as contingent, relational, and shaped by power. Meaningfulness is therefore treated as an empirical and analytical question, not a presumed outcome.

The research also assumes that experiences of participation are shaped by intersecting forms of power, including age, gender, language, education, sexuality, and institutional positioning. These factors do not operate independently, but interact to shape access, legitimacy, and influence in peace and security spaces. Finally, the study

acknowledges the significance of my researcher positionality. My long-standing professional engagement in peace and security policy informs both the research questions and the analysis. This positionality is treated reflexively, recognizing both proximity to power and the responsibility to interrogate its effects.

Several limitations follow from the study's design. The research draws on a limited number of in-depth interviews, prioritizing depth of analysis over breadth or representativeness. As such, the findings are not intended to be generalizable across all peace and security contexts, but to illuminate recurring patterns and dynamics in how participation is experienced. The study also reflects the perspectives of young women who have, to varying degrees, navigated access to peace and security spaces; it does not capture the experiences of those who are entirely excluded or who disengage before accessing participatory forums. This has important implications for how meaningful participation is understood in this thesis, as the analysis is necessarily shaped by those who have been able to engage—however unevenly—with these spaces, rather than those for whom participation remains inaccessible.

The dissertation is further delimited by a number of intentional analytical choices. It focuses specifically on young women, rather than treating youth or women as separate categories, in order to examine how age and gender intersect in peace and security participation. It is also delimited to participation within WPS and YPS policy architectures, recognizing that participation may take different forms in other domains. Finally, the study does not aim to evaluate specific programs or to produce prescriptive models of best practice. Instead, it seeks to clarify how meaningful participation is

understood and negotiated in practice, and what this reveals about power, legitimacy, and inclusion.

### **1.7. Conclusion**

This dissertation begins from a simple but under-examined question: what does meaningful participation actually entail in peace and security spaces, and how is it experienced by those most frequently positioned as its subjects? While participation has become a central normative commitment within WPS and YPS policies, it has rarely been defined with analytical clarity or grounded in the lived experiences of young women peacebuilders. As this introduction has argued, participation is too often treated as a procedural requirement rather than as a relational practice shaped by power, legitimacy, and accountability. This matters because when participation is reduced to a procedural checkbox, it risks reproducing the very exclusions it seeks to address—granting presence without influence, and visibility without decision-making power—thereby limiting both the transformative potential of these agendas and the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts more broadly.

Drawing on over a decade of professional engagement in peace and security policymaking, alongside sustained academic inquiry, this dissertation positions itself at the intersection of practice and theory. It reflects both proximity to and critical distance from the institutional spaces in which participation is promoted, implemented, and evaluated. This dual positioning informs the study's central concern: not whether participation should occur, but under what conditions it becomes meaningful.

The chapters that follow develop this argument through a layered and cumulative analysis. Each chapter contributes to clarifying how meaningful participation is

understood, constrained, and reimagined within peace and security contexts, with particular attention to the experiences of young women navigating WPS and YPS policy debates.

Chapter 2, the literature review, situates the study within existing scholarship on participation, peacebuilding, and inclusion. It traces how participation has been conceptualized across conflict studies, feminist peace and security scholarship, and youth-focused frameworks. While recognizing important critical contributions, the chapter identifies a persistent gap: participation is frequently invoked but rarely theorized as a relational process. The review highlights the dominance of procedural, State-centric, and metric-driven approaches, setting the stage for the dissertation's empirical intervention.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and research design. It explains the qualitative, interview-based approach used to centre young women's experiences and interpretive frameworks. The chapter details the research process, ethical considerations, and reflexive positioning of the researcher, while clarifying how the study prioritizes depth, relationality, and contextual analysis over generalizability. This methodological approach aligns with the dissertation's commitment to treating participants as knowledge producers rather than as data sources alone.

Chapter 4 introduces the core themes that emerged across the interviews. These themes include barriers to meaningful participation, intersectionality, legitimacy, power, and the limits of procedural inclusion. The chapter establishes the analytical foundation for the subsequent empirical chapters, demonstrating how participation is experienced as uneven, conditional, and often extractive, even when framed as inclusive.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine specific domains through which participation is mediated and constrained. Chapter 5 explores higher education as both a pathway to and a filter of participation, highlighting how first-generation scholars navigate legitimacy, responsibility, and guilt, particularly in Global South contexts. Chapter 6 focuses on language, examining how English dominance shapes authority, tempo, and epistemic hierarchy in peace and security spaces. Chapter 7 addresses sexuality and LGBTQI+ inclusion, analyzing how queer young women encounter both visibility and marginalization within participation frameworks that claim intersectionality but often fail to sustain it in practice.

Chapter 8 synthesizes these empirical findings, drawing connections across education, language, sexuality, and institutional access. It examines how these domains intersect to shape participation as a relational process, reinforcing the argument that inclusion without power redistribution remains insufficient. This chapter deepens the analytical move away from proceduralism and toward relational participation.

Chapter 9 situates the findings within broader debates in conflict studies, feminist theory, and decolonial scholarship. It interrogates the disciplinary limits of conflict studies, including State-centrism, quantification bias, and epistemological hierarchy. Building on the empirical chapters, it introduces the “Triangle of Meaningful Participation” as a conceptual model that captures three enabling conditions identified by research participants: co-creation, the ability to influence, and a feedback loop. Rather than offering a prescriptive solution, the triangle functions as an analytical lens for assessing when participation is meaningful and when it is merely symbolic.

The concluding chapter returns to the dissertation's central claims and reflects on their implications for scholarship, policy, and practice. It affirms that young women peacebuilders are not only participants in peacebuilding processes, but theorists of participation itself. By grounding analysis in their experiences, the dissertation contributes to reimagining participation as a dynamic, relational, and power-conscious practice rather than a procedural outcome.

Together, the chapters advance a central argument: meaningful participation cannot be reduced to access, presence, or metrics. It emerges through relationships that enable shared agenda-setting, influence over outcomes, and sustained accountability. By grounding this argument in the reflections and analyses of young women peacebuilders—as actors who not only navigate these spaces but actively interpret, contest, and reshape them—the dissertation positions them as both architects of peace processes and producers of knowledge on participation itself. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to more reflexive, just, and transformative approaches to participation in peace and security.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review – Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The concept of meaningful participation in peace and security processes has emerged as a critical area of study, yet its definition and qualification remain contested. This chapter engages with the existing literature to establish a theoretical foundation for this dissertation. It seeks to qualify and contextualize meaningful participation from the perspectives of young women involved in peace and security processes. By critically engaging with the United Nations' (UN) Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) and Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas, as well as interdisciplinary studies on participation, this chapter provides the groundwork for analyzing young women's experiences and contributions to peacebuilding.

This chapter serves three core purposes. First, it synthesizes existing academic knowledge on YPS, WPS, and participation, highlighting key debates and identifying gaps in understanding. Second, it situates this study within these broader theoretical contexts, ensuring that the analysis builds on established academic work while addressing gaps in the existing literature. Third, it frames the concept of meaningful participation as a focal point for this dissertation, establishing it as a multidimensional construct that requires contextualization through age, gender, and power dynamics.

#### *2.1.1. Scope of the Literature*

The scope of this literature review reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the research, drawing from various fields to qualify young women's perceptions of participation. Each

field offers distinct yet complementary insights into the study's central focus on young women's meaningful participation.

First, the review engages with the academic literature on YPS, which has gained momentum following the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 in 2015. This resolution marked a paradigm shift in recognizing youth as critical stakeholders and positive contributors to peace and security processes. Scholars such as Helen Berents (2018), Siobhán McEvoy-Levy (2024), and Yulia Nesterova and Asli Ozcelik (2021) have examined the roles of youth in grassroots movements, mediation processes, and digital peacebuilding. Their findings emphasize the agency and resilience of youth, while also critiquing the structural barriers that limit young people's participation in decision-making.

Second, the chapter examines the positioning of young women within the WPS agenda, as established by UN Security Council Resolution 1325. While the WPS framework has advanced the inclusion of women in peacebuilding, its focus has largely been on older adult women, with limited attention to the experiences of young women. Feminist scholars, including Fionnuala Ní Aoláin (2017) and Caitlin Mollica (2024), have advocated for an intersectional approach to address the unique challenges that young women face in navigating peacebuilding spaces. Their documentation of such experiences is crucial for understanding how age and gender overlap to shape young women's roles in peace and security processes.

Finally, the chapter incorporates insights from interdisciplinary fields on meaningful participation, drawing from development studies, international relations, gender studies, and political science. Participation has been theorized as a

multidimensional construct that encompasses representation, influence, and agency (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2006). However, its application in peace and security contexts remains inconsistent. Academics writing on the politics of young people, such as Lesley Pruitt (2020) and Ingrid Valladares (2024), have emphasized the need for context-specific approaches that consider the diverse experiences of youth, particularly those at the margins of power structures.

## **2.2. The YPS Agenda: Research and Theory**

### *2.2.1. Foundations of the YPS Agenda*

The YPS agenda represents a relatively recent but significant addition to global peace and security discourses, formally established with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 in 2015. This landmark resolution was the first to explicitly recognize youth as positive contributors in peace processes, shifting the narratives that often relegated young people to the roles of either victims or perpetrators of violence. Structured around five pillars—participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration—Resolution 2250 aims to institutionalize youth inclusion in conflict prevention and resolution. Subsequent policies, notably Resolution 2419 (2018) and Resolution 2535 (2020), aim to expand the framework, underscoring the importance of youth participation in peace agreements and emphasizing the need for monitoring mechanisms to track progress.

Despite its growing prominence, the YPS agenda is a relatively new subfield within the field of peace and conflict studies. The body of literature on YPS remains limited compared to the more established WPS agenda. This limitation presents both challenges and opportunities for research on young people in conflict contexts. On the

one hand, the limited academic attention surrounding the YPS agenda means that its theoretical debates are still being developed, resulting in significant gaps in the literature. On the other hand, its emergence as a subfield creates space for interdisciplinary and innovative exploration that can enrich the field, particularly through engagement with feminist, international relations, and postcolonial critiques (Mollica, 2024; Valladares, 2024).

Historically, young people have been framed as security threats or a vulnerable group, needing to be managed or protected. Resolution 2250 marked a normative shift in how youth are perceived within international policy. The policy framework challenges these reductive stereotypes, emphasizing the agency of young people and their potential to act as agents of peace. Ali Altiok and Irena Grizelj (2019) argue that Resolution 2250 repositions youth as active contributors to peacebuilding, advocating for their integration into formal and informal decision-making processes. Similarly, Berents (2018) highlights how YPS provides a platform for youth to assert their agency, particularly in grassroots and community-based peace initiatives.

The theoretical approaches underpinning YPS scholarship often focus on three interconnected themes: agency, resilience, and vulnerability of young people. Agency, defined as the capacity to act independently and make individual or collective choices, has been a central concept in YPS discourse. McEvoy-Levy (2024) argues that recognizing youth agency challenges traditional perceptions of young people as passive recipients of policy or programmatic interventions, instead framing them as proactive actors in the peacebuilding process. Similarly, Mollica (2024) emphasizes the importance

of intergenerational transitional justice, arguing that youth agency must be supported by institutional reforms that create enabling environments for young people's participation.

Resilience, often discussed in conjunction with agency, refers to an individual's or community's ability to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity. Berents (2018) examines how networks and community-based support systems facilitate young people's navigation of the challenges posed by conflict and post-conflict settings. Nesterova and Ozcelik (2021) further examine the role of education — particularly the concept of peace education — in fostering resilience among youth, highlighting its potential to support young people as peacebuilders while addressing the long-term impacts of violence and, in some cases, displacement. However, resilience is not universally distributed; it is often shaped by overlapping factors, including age, gender, socio-economic status, and access to external resources. As such, scholars and practitioners have called for greater attention to the structural inequalities that influence resilience (Simpson, 2018).

While agency and resilience emphasize the positive contributions of youth, the concept of vulnerability highlights the systemic barriers that constrain their participation. Vulnerability theory has been instrumental in understanding how youth are disproportionately affected by conflict, including displacement, economic marginalization, and exclusion from political processes (Pruitt & Jeffrey, 2020). Ingrid Valladares (2024) critiques the YPS agenda for often underestimating these structural barriers, arguing that a more intersectional approach is needed to address the diverse experiences of youth in conflict settings. This perspective aligns with calls from feminist and postcolonial scholars to consider how global power dynamics and local cultural contexts shape participation (Mohanty, 2003).

### *2.2.2. Youth Participation in Peacebuilding Discourse*

The participation of youth in peacebuilding has emerged as an essential yet complex area of study, intersecting with broader theories of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. While the YPS agenda provides a foundation for youth inclusion, the broader literature on peacebuilding offers critical insights into how young people engage with and can influence formal or informal peace processes. Foundational peacebuilding theories, such as John Paul Lederach's (1996) conflict transformation, emphasize the importance of bottom-up, inclusive approaches to building sustainable peace. Young people, as participants in conflict-affected societies, embody the potential for such transformation through their grassroots activism, peace efforts, and reintegration initiatives within community structures.

Empirical studies consistently highlight the significant contributions of youth to grassroots and community-based peacebuilding (McEvoy-Levy, 2001). Young people often mobilize to address local tensions, facilitate dialogue, and rebuild social trust in fractured societies. Altiok and Grizelj (2019) observe that youth-led initiatives frequently emerge in contexts where state or international actors are absent or ineffective, positioning young people as vital agents of change in their communities. This aligns with Lederach's (1996) argument that true peace must be rooted in the relationships and practices of local actors, since they are the ones who live and breathe the conflict dynamics daily. For example, Berents (2018) documents how youth in Colombia have organized artistic and cultural events to foster reconciliation between former combatants and conflict-affected communities. These initiatives not only address the psychosocial

impacts of conflict but also challenge societal stigmas and promote healing through the sharing of narratives.

Beyond grassroots activism, youth have also played important roles in mediation and peace processes. Mediation, as theorized by scholars such as Chester Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall (2001), involves facilitating dialogue and negotiation to resolve conflicts. While youth are often excluded from high-level mediation or peace negotiation efforts, their involvement in community-based mediation processes is well-documented (Del Felice & Wisler, 2007). Catherine Barnes (2009) and McEvoy-Levy (2001) highlight the ways youth in Kenya and Northern Ireland have served as local mediators in resolving community-based disputes. Their ability to build trust and facilitate dialogue stems from their credibility and proximity to their communities. This aligns with Johan Galtung's (1969) concept of positive peace, which prioritizes addressing the root causes of structural and cultural violence over the emphasis on ceasing overt violence.

Youth participation in peacebuilding is also shaped by power dynamics and intersectional inequalities, as highlighted by Valladares (2024). While the YPS policies advocate for inclusive approaches, academics have critiqued the tendency to treat youth as a homogeneous group (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). Intentional intersectional analyses reveal that young women, young people identifying with the LGBTQI+ community, and those from rural or racialized communities often face additional unique barriers to participation, stemming from the intersection of age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and socio-economic status. These dynamics are particularly prevalent in patriarchal societies,

where young women are frequently excluded from leadership roles and decision-making spaces (Ní Aoláin, et al., 2017).

Although youth-led initiatives and grassroots activism are widely praised in the literature, critiques have also surfaced about the challenges and limitations of these approaches. Paul Richards (2005) warns against romanticizing the role of youth in peacebuilding. He highlights that without adequate institutional support, young people may unintentionally contribute to cycles of violence and exclusion within their communities. These critiques underscore the necessity of a balanced approach that integrates grassroots activism with institutional reforms to address the underlying causes of conflict.

The transformative potential of young people's participation lies in their ability to adapt and challenge existing power structures while advocating for systemic change. Based on Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence, I argue that youth-led movements often expose the inequalities and injustices that fuel conflict in their communities, mobilizing for reforms that go beyond short-term solutions. This approach resonates with broader peacebuilding theorists who emphasize the importance of structural transformation for achieving peaceful solutions to conflict (Lederach, 1996; Richmond, 2011a).

### *2.2.3. Critical Reflections on YPS Research*

While the YPS agenda has garnered substantial academic and policy attention since 2015, critical reflections on its conceptualization and implementation reveal significant limitations and areas for further inquiry. This section examines three key areas of critique: tokenistic youth participation, the underrepresentation of marginalized groups,

and the gaps in addressing gender and intersectionality. These critiques highlight the tensions between the aspirations of the YPS policies and the realities experienced by young people in conflict-affected communities, offering insights for advancing a more inclusive and transformative approach.

One of the most prominent critiques of the YPS agenda concerns the prevalence of tokenism in youth participation. Although the YPS policies emphasize inclusion and cite participation as one of five principal objectives, scholars have observed that youth are often invited to participate in peacebuilding processes without being granted substantive influence (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). In an article I co-authored with Shayne Wong (2021), we argue that youth participation in Canada and the United States, for example, frequently amounts to symbolic gestures that fail to address the structural barriers limiting young people's engagement. This critique aligns with Roger Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, which distinguishes between tokenistic and transformative engagement and is significant in that it provides a foundational analytical framework for differentiating between forms of participation that merely signal inclusion and those that enable genuine influence and decision-making power. Research by Graeme Simpson (2018) and Caitlin Mollica (2024) further documents the performative nature of many youth-focused initiatives, where young people are included in consultative efforts but excluded from decision-making roles, despite claims of their inclusion in these processes.

The structural barriers to youth participation are deeply embedded in political, cultural, and institutional systems, such as the UN and state-level governance mechanisms. Katrina Lee-Koo and Lesley Pruitt (2020) note that age-based discrimination, lack of access to resources, and exclusionary practices within

international and national institutions often marginalize young people, particularly in formal policymaking spaces. This critique is echoed in mine and Wong's (2021) analysis of the YPS agenda in Canada and the United States, which underscores the need for systemic reforms to create enabling environments for young people in civic and political decision-making. The persistence of these barriers reflects broader challenges in translating the policy's objectives and the realities young people face in conflict settings.

Another component of exclusion of young people focuses on young women and LGBTQI+ identifying youth. The marginalization of young women and gender-diverse youth within the YPS agenda is particularly concerning, given the intersection of age and gender-based marginalization. Feminist scholars argue that young women face unique barriers to participation, ranging from societal expectations to heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence (Leclerc, 2021b; Lee-Koo & Pruitt, 2020). This critique aligns with Berents and Mollica's (2021) research, which highlights the systemic challenges young women encounter in navigating peacebuilding spaces, particularly in patriarchal societies. These dynamics necessitate a rethinking of the YPS framework to better address the specific needs and contributions of young women, integrating insights from the WPS agenda.

A related critique concerns the focus of YPS research on formal mechanisms of participation, such as youth councils and advisory boards, at the expense of informal and community-based practices (Berents, 2016). While formal mechanisms are important for institutionalizing youth inclusion, they often fail to capture the dynamic and innovative ways in which youth engage with peacebuilding at the grassroots level. Altiok and Grizelj (2019) have called for greater recognition of informal practices, which are often more

accessible and impactful for marginalized youth. This critique aligns with my own (2021) analysis of grassroots youth movements, which emphasizes their role in challenging exclusionary power structures and advocating for systemic change.

### **2.3. Young Women in the WPS Framework**

#### *2.3.1. WPS: Progress and Persistent Gaps*

The WPS agenda, formalized with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, is widely recognized as a groundbreaking framework for addressing gender equality in the context of peace and security. Anchored by four pillars—participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery—it has provided a normative foundation for advancing women’s roles in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction. For more than two decades, the WPS agenda has been expanded through a series of additional resolutions; yet, significant gaps remain in its implementation, particularly in addressing the generational and intersectional dimensions of women’s experiences.

Scholars have lauded Resolution 1325 for bringing gender considerations into the traditionally male-dominated fields of peacebuilding, international relations and security studies (Willett, 2010). It represented a critical victory for women activists who had long campaigned for recognition of their roles in peace processes (Cockburn, 2008). However, feminist scholars have critiqued the agenda for its limited impact in its application. Laura J. Shepherd (2017) argues that the proliferation of WPS-related resolutions has not necessarily translated into transformative change, as many remain focused on institutional reforms rather than addressing the structural inequalities that perpetuate gendered violence. This is significant for understanding meaningful participation, as it

underscores how inclusion at the level of policy or institutional design does not necessarily shift underlying power relations or confer legitimacy on participants' contributions, thereby limiting the extent to which participation can influence outcomes in substantive ways.

The generational dynamics within the WPS agenda have also emerged as a critical area of analysis and are central to this study. While the agenda has predominantly focused on older women, there is growing recognition of the need to consider young women's distinct experiences and contributions, much of which has been pushed by young women themselves (Berents, 2018). Nicola Pratt and Sophie Richter-Devroe (2011) emphasize the importance of moving beyond a singular focus on women as a homogeneous category—similar to criticisms of the homogenization of youth—advocating for analyses that disaggregate by age, socio-economic status, and other intersecting factors. My 2021 analysis echoes this sentiment, highlighting the underrepresentation of young women in WPS scholarship and policy (Leclerc, 2021b). Berents and Mollica (2021) further argue that young women occupy a unique position at the intersection of the WPS and YPS agendas, yet their voices are often excluded from both.

The conceptualization of security within the WPS framework has also been a subject of critique. Traditional security studies, rooted in State-centric and militarized perspectives, have been challenged by feminist scholars who advocate for a human-centred approach to security. Ian R. Gibson and the late Betty Reardon (2007) argued that feminist security theory shifts the focus from protecting states to safeguarding individuals and communities, emphasizing the interconnectedness of economic, political, and social factors in achieving peaceful results. This shift has significant implications for

understanding the roles of young women in WPS, as they often experience security threats differently from older women or men due to their age and societal positions.

Despite the WPS agenda's emphasis on women's participation, significant barriers to leadership and decision-making roles persist. Pratt (2011) and Susan Willett (2010) critique the tokenistic inclusion of women in many peace processes, where they are often invited to participate without being granted substantive influence. This critique aligns with broader feminist analyses of international peacebuilding, which highlight the tendency of global frameworks to impose top-down solutions that fail to engage substantively with local and grassroots actors (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Young women, in particular, face additional barriers due to societal norms that devalue their contributions and limit their access to leadership opportunities.

Gender mainstreaming, a key strategy of the WPS agenda, has been both celebrated and critiqued within the literature. Dennis J. D. Sandole and Ingrid Staroste (2015) define gender mainstreaming as the integration of gendered perspectives at all stages of conflict and peacebuilding processes. While this approach has increased awareness of gender-based issues, scholars such as Jacqui True (2012) and Pratt (2011) argue that it often remains superficial, failing to address the root causes of gender inequality. For young women, the limitations of gender mainstreaming are particularly pronounced, as their experiences are frequently overshadowed by broader discussions of women's rights that prioritize older adult perspectives.

Intersectionality, a theoretical lens that emerged from the work of critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and has been adopted by several WPS researchers, has shed light on the ways in which overlapping identities shape women's experiences of

conflict and peacebuilding. Crenshaw's (1991) foundational work on intersectionality has been applied in the WPS context to analyze how factors such as race, ethnicity, and class intersect with gender to produce unique forms of oppression. Jamie J. Hagen (2016) extends this analysis to consider the intersection of gender, sexuality and age, arguing that LBTQI+ women often navigate compounded forms of discrimination that limit their participation in peace processes.

Despite its limitations, the WPS agenda has significantly influenced policy and scholarship, contributing to the development of a substantial body of feminist security studies that interrogates gendered power relations, challenges State-centric understandings of security, and foregrounds the roles and experiences of women in peacebuilding processes advancing commitments to gender equality in the realms of peace and security. However, it has faced critiques for its limitations, particularly its tendency to prioritize state-level interventions over grassroots and community-based approaches, which are often more accessible and impactful for young women. Thus, bridging the WPS and YPS agendas offers a unique opportunity to address these limitations, fostering a deeper understanding of gendered peace and security while promoting sustainable and equitable progress in conflict settings.

### *2.3.2. Intersectionality and Representation*

The WPS agenda has catalyzed significant advances in addressing gender equality in peace and security; however, its limitations in engaging with intersectionality and diverse lived experiences remain a persistent critique. Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality highlights how overlapping systems of oppression—such as those rooted in gender, race, class, and age—compound marginalization. For young women, these

intersecting dynamics shape their experiences in peacebuilding, often exacerbated by societal and structural exclusions that restrict their participation and agency.

Critical race theory offers additional insights into how racialized and gendered oppressions intersect to marginalize women of colour in peacebuilding. bell hooks (1981) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) emphasize that global frameworks like WPS frequently privilege Western, white feminist perspectives, excluding the voices and contributions of racialized women. Chandra Mohanty (2003) critiques these frameworks for perpetuating colonial hierarchies, particularly in postcolonial contexts where young women's roles are often appropriated or devalued.

Structural and institutional barriers further exacerbate young women's underrepresentation. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provides a useful lens for understanding how cultural expectations constrain young women's engagement, while broader cultural norms favour elder women's voices and dismiss younger generations as inexperienced. This age-based discrimination intersects with economic precarity, where limited access to education, financial resources, and professional networks compounds young women's exclusion (Kabeer, 1999). In conflict-affected settings, economic and structural inequalities reinforce patterns of exclusion, leaving young women with limited avenues to influence formal decision-making processes.

While grassroots and community-based approaches often provide alternative spaces for young women's leadership, these efforts are rarely integrated into WPS discourse. Scholars such as Cynthia Enloe (2014) and Audre Lorde (1984) argue for centring the voices of those most affected by conflict and marginalization, advocating for

methodologies that prioritize inclusivity as both an ethical and epistemological imperative. Drawing on Enloe's (2014) attention to the everyday and the political significance of marginalized experiences, as well as Butler's (1990) conceptualization of performativity and the social construction of identity, this dissertation situates meaningful participation as shaped by the norms, expectations, and power relations that structure who is recognized as a legitimate actor in peace and security spaces. To address these gaps, a more transformative approach is needed, one that bridges the WPS and YPS agendas to integrate the diverse experiences of young women. Recognizing their dual identities as both youth and women enables a more comprehensive understanding of their unique challenges and contributions.

### *2.3.3. Bridging YPS and WPS Agendas*

The WPS and YPS agendas are both grounded in the principle of participation, advocating for the inclusion of historically excluded groups in peace processes. While these frameworks share overlapping objectives, they are often implemented and studied in isolation, resulting in a fragmented approach to peace and security. This institutional separation has marginalized young women, whose dual identities as youth and women place them at the intersection of these agendas. Bridging the WPS and YPS frameworks presents an opportunity to address these gaps in both application and research, and foster a more integrated and inclusive approach to participation.

Young women's participation in peacebuilding is shaped by overlapping forms of marginalization, which are inadequately addressed within the WPS and YPS frameworks. Scholars such as True (2012) and Carol Cohn and Claire Duncanson (2020) have emphasized the importance of an intersectional lens in understanding how age- and

gender-based discrimination intersect to restrict young women's access to meaningful roles in peacebuilding.

A key critique of both agendas is the prevalence of tokenistic inclusion, which emphasizes the presence of women or youth in peacebuilding processes without addressing the underlying structures that sustain their exclusion. Several researchers have been highly critical of quotas, arguing that while they may be symbolic of progress, they often fail to create substantive opportunities for influence (Goetz, 2009). Berents and Mollica (2021) further argue that meaningful participation requires dismantling normative and structural barriers that exclude young women. According to them, bridging the WPS and YPS agendas would allow for the development of integrated strategies to address these issues, fostering more transformative forms of inclusion (Berents and Mollica, 2022).

Another critical area for alignment lies in operationalizing intersectionality. While the WPS agenda has increasingly invoked intersectional frameworks, these often remain rhetorical rather than substantive (Haastrup and Hagen, 2021). Crenshaw's (1991) theoretical contributions offer a pathway for bridging these agendas by ensuring that policies and practices reflect the intersecting realities of age, gender, race, and socio-economic status. This approach would enable the development of more inclusive methodologies, capable of addressing the diverse barriers faced by young women in conflict-affected settings. In this thesis, this is operationalized by examining how these intersecting dimensions shape access to participation, the forms of engagement available, and the extent to which contributions are recognized as legitimate. It therefore informs

the analysis by moving beyond singular identity categories to trace how power operates across multiple axes, shaping both the possibilities and limits of meaningful participation.

Moreover, bridging the WPS and YPS agendas necessitates both a significant shift toward intersectional and inclusive peacebuilding. Young women occupy a unique position at the intersection of these identities, facing structural barriers that demand targeted interventions. By integrating principles and insights focused on age and gender, pathways for meaningful participation can become more holistic and lead to greater agency among young women.

## **2.4. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Meaningful Participation**

### *2.4.1. Theoretical Conceptualizations of Participation*

The concept of participation is central to governance, peacebuilding, and social justice inquiries but remains a contested and multidimensional concept. In peace and security contexts, participation is often understood as both an ethical imperative and a practical means of achieving positive, long-standing outcomes (Lederach, 1997). Scholars across political science, international relations, gender studies, and development studies have debated its meanings, exploring key tensions between representation, influence, inclusion, and agency. This section synthesizes these perspectives to offer a nuanced theoretical foundation for analyzing meaningful participation, particularly for young women in peace and security contexts.

In political science, participation is closely tied to democratic theory and the equitable distribution of power. Robert Dahl (1971) defines participation as the ability of individuals to shape collective decision-making, emphasizing its role in ensuring accountability and legitimacy. John Gaventa (2006) deepens this understanding by

analyzing participatory spaces, categorizing them as “invited” spaces provided by authorities, “claimed” spaces taken by marginalized groups, and “created” spaces that emerge through new forms of engagement. These distinctions are critical for examining how traditionally excluded groups, such as young women, interact with governance structures and navigate barriers to influence as they provide an analytical framework for distinguishing between forms of participation that are structured by existing power holders and those that are actively reshaped or contested by participants, thereby enabling this study to assess not only where participation occurs, but how it is constituted and with what implications for power and influence.

International relations brings a global perspective to participation, particularly in the context of peace and security. Traditional international relations theories, grounded in State-centric approaches, often marginalize non-state actors, including women and youth. Feminist international relations scholars challenge this exclusion, emphasizing the importance of human security over state security (El-Ghazal et al., 2023). Cynthia Enloe (2014) critiques the neglect of women’s lived experiences in mainstream international relations, arguing for a reframing of participation that accounts for both local and global power dynamics. J. Ann Tickner (1992) similarly critiqued the patronizing underpinnings of international relations, highlighting how global governance structures often replicate patriarchal norms that exclude young women from substantive roles in peacebuilding. These perspectives emphasize the need to situate participation within broader systems of power that operate at local, national, and international levels.

Gender studies offers critical insights into the intersectional dimensions of participation, challenging its neutral framing in political science and international

relations. Judith Butler (1990) and Nancy Fraser (1999) highlight how participation is shaped by power dynamics related to age, class, gender, and race. Fraser's (1999) concept of "participatory parity" advocates for structural reforms to dismantle systemic inequalities and create equitable conditions for engagement. In peacebuilding contexts, these critiques draw attention to how patriarchal norms and gendered violence disproportionately impact young women, relegating them to symbolic or peripheral roles while limiting their substantive influence on decision-making processes.

In development studies, participation has been a key theme since the 1980s, particularly in the context of community-led initiatives. Robert Chambers (1997) popularized participatory development, emphasizing local agency in the design and implementation of community-based efforts. However, Giles Mohan and Kristian Stokke (2000) critique these approaches for failing to address structural inequalities, arguing that they often reinforce existing hierarchies. In peacebuilding, these critiques demonstrate the importance of centring marginalized voices, particularly those of young women, in participatory processes to avoid perpetuating exclusion.

The debates surrounding participation often focus on tensions between representation and influence. Representation, in this research, refers to the inclusion of diverse groups in decision-making processes, while influence emphasizes their ability to shape outcomes. Scholars such as Lesley Pruitt (2020) argue that frameworks emphasizing representation without addressing power dynamics often fail to achieve meaningful inclusion. In peacebuilding processes, young women are often included in consultative roles but are frequently excluded from positions of substantive decision-making. This disconnect highlights the limitations of quantitative measures of

participation, such as quotas, which often fail to capture qualitative dimensions like agency and power imbalances (Goetz, 2009).

Ultimately, meaningful participation requires more than the presence of marginalized groups; as demonstrated above, research shows that structural reforms are needed to enable substantive influence and agency. By synthesizing perspectives across disciplines, this analysis provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how young women navigate and challenge barriers to participation in peace and security contexts.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has established the theoretical and conceptual background for this study, situating the research on young women's meaningful participation within the broader frameworks of the YPS and WPS literature. Drawing on interdisciplinary debates from international relations, development studies, gender studies, and political science, this work has highlighted the critical tensions between representation and influence, inclusion and agency, and the interplay between global frameworks and the local realities experienced by young women in conflict settings as representation does not necessarily translate into decision-making power, inclusion can occur without meaningful agency, and global policy frameworks often fail to account for the contextual and relational dynamics that shape participation at the local level.

Through this literature review, meaningful participation emerges as a multidimensional construct that goes beyond numerical inclusion to encompass active engagement, influence, and the dismantling of structural barriers. The critique of tokenistic practices and the emphasis on intersectional approaches highlight the limitations of existing literature and practice, which fail to adequately account for the

diverse experiences of young women. These analyses underscore the importance of addressing systemic constraints rooted in age, gender, socio-economic status, and overlapping forms of discrimination.

This chapter lays the foundation for the subsequent empirical analysis, which will explore the lived experiences of young women in contexts of peace and security decision-making. By grounding the research in these theoretical frameworks, the study aims to contribute to the academic and practical understanding of meaningful participation, offering insights into how young women navigate, resist, and reshape the power structures that define peace and security processes. In doing so, it seeks to advance the discourse on inclusive and transformative approaches to participation in global and local contexts.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approach of this study on how young women perceive and define meaningful participation in peace and security decision-making. The methodological choices were driven by the study's objectives to examine how structural and systemic challenges manifest, to identify recurring patterns in the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and to propose actionable solutions grounded in inclusivity and equity.

The research utilizes a grounded theory approach, introduced by sociologists Barney G. Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967, to explore theoretical considerations directly informed by the lived experiences of research participants. This qualitative methodology allows for flexible data collection and analysis, making it well-suited to exploring the complex, context-specific nature of participation in conflict contexts. Grounded theory is further supported by participatory and emancipatory research principles; in this study, it aims to prioritize the voices and agency of young women throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2006).

The data collection included a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and a global survey. These methods were used to capture individual narratives while identifying broader trends among the young women participants. The literature review situates the research within existing academic debates on the UN's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) policy agendas, while thematic examples focus on the experiences of young women who are also first-generation scholars, English second-language speakers, or who identify as belonging to the LGBTQI+ community.

The global survey was developed to broaden the scope, providing an opportunity to identify systemic patterns and to reinforce the findings from the interviews.

Positionality, reflexivity, and ethical considerations are woven throughout the chapter, acknowledging the power dynamics and complexities inherent in conducting research with marginalized communities. The research is grounded in a commitment to amplifying participant voices while maintaining critical self-awareness of the researcher's role and influence.

### **3.2. Methodological Framework**

Grounded theory underpins this research. It provides an approach that begins with participants' lived experiences to uncover and understand systemic exclusion and barriers to meaningful participation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) while also generating theory inductively from the data itself, rather than applying a pre-existing theoretical framework. The strength of grounded theory lies in its process, in which data collection and analysis are integrated, enabling the study to respond to emerging themes and information. Through iterative coding and constant comparison, the approach facilitates the construction of analytical categories and webs of meaning that reflect not only structural dynamics, but also participants' beliefs, interpretations, and understandings of their own experiences. This methodology ensures that the findings are rooted in the realities of young women navigating peace and security contexts.

Unlike methodologies such as phenomenology, which focus on understanding lived experiences in their essence, or ethnography, which immerses itself in the cultural contexts of a group, grounded theory emphasizes explanation and action (Anadón, 2006, 20). It is not solely about capturing what happens; it is about understanding why and how

systemic barriers operate and, more importantly, what can be done about them while also tracing how meaning is constructed and negotiated by participants themselves. This is precisely what makes grounded theory a suitable choice for this study: its ability to uncover patterns of exclusion and identify pathways to what young women perceive as meaningful participation.

What sets this study apart is the integration of participatory and emancipatory principles into the grounded theory framework (Freire, 2020). Often, traditional research processes reinforce hierarchies by privileging the researcher's perspective over that of their participants. In this study, participants are not merely subjects of research; they are active contributors to the interpretation of their experiences. Their voices, expertise, and lived experiences shape the analysis through iterative engagement with the data, including the co-construction of meaning during interviews, the prioritization of participants' interpretations in the coding process, opportunities to review, amend, and expand upon their transcripts. While participants were not involved in the initial design of the research instruments or analytical framework, their engagement in these later stages played a substantive role in shaping how their experiences were interpreted and represented. This collaborative approach challenges the structural dynamics perpetuating exclusion and ensures that the knowledge documented and produced is relevant, grounded, and actionable. This is also achieved due to the intrinsic relationships between me, as the researcher, and the participants in this study (more on this later in the chapter). It is also important to note that, given my practitioner background, several participants had previously engaged with me in professional and advocacy contexts, and their insights

informed the conceptual orientations that shaped the framing of this research, building on and refining my own observations.

The inclusion of emancipatory principles further enhances this approach, though it is important to situate these claims with precision. Rather than constituting a fully participatory or co-designed research process, this study draws on emancipatory commitments in its analytical orientation and ethical positioning. Grounded theory's ability to generate context-specific reflections complements the goal of advocating for structural change. This study examines the systemic inequities faced by these groups, focusing on the unique experiences of young women who are first-generation scholars, English-language learners, and members of the LGBTQI+ community. Their perspectives are central to identifying actionable strategies for inclusion in peace and security policymaking debates that have historically excluded or sidelined them. In this sense, the emancipatory dimension of the research lies not in shared ownership of the research design, but in its commitment to amplifying marginalized forms of knowledge, interrogating exclusionary structures, and producing findings that are responsive to participants' lived realities.

This work also leans on an intersectional lens to deepen its analysis (see Crenshaw, 1989, introduced in Chapter 2). Exclusion is not a single-layered experience; it reflects overlapping and compounding factors, including age, gender, language, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Grounded theory enables the unpacking of this complexity. By focusing on the intersections experienced by young women, the research moves beyond simplistic narratives, offering a more nuanced understanding of

how exclusion operates and how meaningful participation can be achieved as defined by young women themselves.

The grounded theory approach allows for the flexibility to refine emerging themes as the research progresses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, observations of linguistic barriers, as articulated through participants' responses, expanded into a broader theme of emotional labour, highlighting the invisible work required to navigate and challenge exclusionary systems. The adaptability of the grounded theory approach ensures that the findings remain closely connected to participants' realities while drawing parallels to existing systemic structures.

At its core, grounded theory, coupled with participatory and intentionally emancipatory approaches—where participatory refers to the active involvement of participants in shaping the research process and interpretation of findings, and emancipatory signals a commitment to challenging and transforming the power relations that structure both knowledge production and participation itself—, provides a rigorous and responsive method. It ensures that the research not only uncovers barriers but also advances practical, inclusive, and transformative solutions identified by the participants. By keeping intersectionality and structural change at the centre of the study, this research contributes to the ongoing effort to identify spaces where young women's participation in peace and security is welcomed and recognized as essential.

### **3.3. Research Design and Data Collection**

The research design for this study combines qualitative and participatory methods to explore the systemic exclusion of young women from decision-making processes related to peace and security. This approach is deliberately multi-layered, designed to capture the

complexity of these barriers while centring the voices and experiences of those most affected. By integrating a literature review, thematic examples, and a global survey, this research creates a comprehensive and dynamic approach to investigate both the challenges to meaningful participation and the opportunities to address them.

Each method brings something unique to this process. The literature review in Chapter 2 establishes a contextual foundation by identifying gaps and patterns in existing research that inform the remainder of the study. The thematic examples offer depth, uncovering the lived realities of systemic exclusion and resilience through the narratives of first-generation scholars, English second-language speakers, and LGBTQI+ individuals. The global survey adds breadth, offering a broader lens to validate and expand on the insights gathered through the other methods.

These methods are not just tools; they reflect the participatory principles that underpin this research. They ensure that the study is rooted in collaboration and inclusivity, aligning with the broader goal of amplifying marginalized voices in WPS and YPS policies by creating space for participants to articulate their own understandings of participation, prioritizing their perspectives in the analytical process, and ensuring that their experiences directly inform the identification of themes, patterns, and proposed pathways forward. Together, they offer not only a robust analysis of the barriers young women face but also a pathway toward solutions that are grounded in their realities.

### *3.3.1. Literature Review*

The literature review is the backbone of this study, synthesizing academic perspectives from international relations, gender studies, development studies, and political science. It focuses on meaningful participation in peace and security processes, contextualizing the

systemic barriers that young women face. The review critically engages with the YPS and WPS scholarships while incorporating interdisciplinary approaches to participation, agency, and intersectionality. By drawing on academic literature, Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical foundation for understanding the lived experiences of young women in policy debates on WPS and YPS.

Covering the period from 2000 to 2024, this review examines pivotal developments in WPS and YPS policies and their application and is complemented by a systematic review of grey literature, including policy documents, reports, and practitioner outputs, to capture how these agendas are operationalized in practice. Following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, the WPS agenda introduced gender considerations into peace and security policy. However, its focus has predominantly been on older women, often overlooking the unique contributions and challenges faced by younger generations. Similarly, the YPS agenda, established by Resolution 2250 in 2015, has emphasized the role of youth in peacebuilding; however, the literature highlights a persistent gap in addressing the intersection of gender and age. Feminist scholars such as Helen Berents and Caitlin Mollica (2021) argue that the voices of young women remain marginalized within these frameworks, necessitating a deeper exploration of their experiences.

The literature analyzed in this review highlights structural barriers to young women's participation, including tokenism, linguistic exclusion, and socioeconomic inequities. Recurring themes, such as intersectionality and the connections between agency and systemic vulnerability, emerged through thematic coding and align with the study's focus on the lived realities of first-generation scholars, English second-language

speakers, and LGBTQI+ individuals. For instance, scholars such as Yolande Bouka (2021) critique the failure of global initiatives to account for the intersecting oppressions faced by marginalized women and youth, underscoring the need for targeted, context-specific approaches.

This review draws heavily on academic literature to critically assess the theoretical underpinnings of participation. Scholars such as the foundational work of Margaret Conway in 2001 and Jocelyn Crowley in 2006, who conceptualized participation as more than representation, emphasized that it entails creating equitable conditions for influence and agency. In peacebuilding contexts, this means addressing systemic hierarchies that limit young women's ability to shape decisions and policies meaningfully (Charlesworth, 2008; Leclerc, Yague & Berents, 2025). These insights are crucial for framing this study's analysis of meaningful participation, particularly in spaces where young women are often included symbolically but excluded from substantive roles while not serving as a fixed analytical framework; rather, they inform the sensitizing concepts that guide the inquiry, with theoretical insights being refined and reworked through the grounded theory process as they are engaged with participants' lived experiences.

Although this review prioritizes academic research, it also considers select policy frameworks to provide context for the academic debates. The UN resolutions establishing the WPS and YPS agendas offer a historical lens for examining commitments to inclusion. However, this study deliberately shifts focus from academic critiques and empirical studies to interrogate the gaps between policy rhetoric and lived realities. This

focus aligns with the broader aim of grounding the research in the voices and experiences of young women, rather than relying solely on policy narratives.

By centring academic literature, the review highlights both the challenges and the opportunities for advancing meaningful participation. It establishes a foundation for the empirical analysis, ensuring that the study builds on established theoretical work while addressing significant gaps in the understanding of young women's experiences in peace and security contexts.

### *3.3.2. Thematic Examples*

The thematic examples are the core of this research, providing a detailed examination of the lived experiences of young women navigating systemic barriers in their work on peace and security. These examples focus on three interconnected themes that emerged from existing literature and my own observations over years of engagement in this area:

First-generation access to higher education: Young women breaking ground as the first in their families to pursue higher education, bringing unique perspectives while facing the distinct challenges of navigating decision-making debates without established networks or guidance.

English as a second language: Young women advocating in peace and security spaces where English dominates, even though it is not their first language—highlighting linguistic barriers and the extra labour required to be engaged.

Membership in the LGBTQI+ community: Young women identifying as lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or gender-diverse, exploring how their identities intersect with systemic exclusion and their resilience in overcoming these barriers.

To capture the diversity of experiences within these themes, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 participants. These individuals were identified through purposive and snowball sampling, leveraging professional networks and activist platforms. The sample includes activists from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas,<sup>2</sup> ensuring that the research reflects a range of perspectives across regional contexts.

The interviews were designed to create space for participants to share their stories in their own words. Open-ended questions encouraged them to explore concepts such as meaningful participation, the barriers they had faced, and moments of inclusion that stood out to them. For example, one question asked, “Can you describe a moment where you felt truly included in a decision-making space?” Another delved into the intersection of identity and advocacy: “How has being a first-generation scholar shaped your contributions to peace and security efforts?” These questions were intentionally flexible, allowing participants to guide the conversation toward what mattered most to them.

Recognizing the importance of linguistic accessibility, interviews were conducted in English, French, or Spanish based on participants’ preferences. This multilingual approach not only reduced barriers but also affirmed the importance of honouring

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<sup>2</sup> Participants originated from the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Chad, Colombia, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Georgia, Jordan, Mexico, Moldova, Nigeria, the Philippines, Senegal, Somali-Kenya, Syria, Tunisia, and the United States.

participants' comfort and self-expression. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized to protect confidentiality, especially given the personal examples shared.

Thematic analysis was employed to code the interview data, guided by grounded theory principles. Initial coding captured key ideas and patterns, which were then iteratively refined to develop explanatory frameworks outlined in the following chapters. Emerging themes, such as tokenism, intersectionality, and resilience strategies, helped illuminate the systemic barriers that young women face and how they navigate them. These approaches are grounded in participants' lived realities, ensuring that the findings reflect their expertise and agency.

### *3.3.3. General Survey*

The global survey complements the thematic examples by providing a broader perspective on the trends and patterns shaping young women's participation in peace and security policymaking. It enabled the research to reach individuals who might not otherwise have been included in the interviews, thereby capturing diverse perspectives and experiences. By leveraging platforms such as the Global Coalition on YPS and the Civil Society Working Group on YPS, the survey drew on existing networks of youth activists and practitioners to ensure broad reach. The survey included 37 responses (23 in English; 6 in French; 5 in Spanish; and 3 in Arabic).

Accessibility was a key priority in the survey's design. To minimize barriers, the survey was made available in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish and hosted on Google Forms, an online platform accessible to most participants. It originally intended to feature a mix of closed and open-ended questions, creating space for both quantitative and qualitative insights. The questions were centred around themes of inclusion, exclusion,

and examples of meaningful participation. For example, participants were asked to describe the barriers they encountered in accessing decision-making debates and to highlight initiatives they believed successfully supported young women's inclusion. These open-ended responses added depth, while the structured questions helped identify broader patterns.

While the survey brought valuable insights, it also had limitations. Since it was open to anyone and participants were not vetted, the quality and depth of responses varied significantly. Some contributions were detailed and reflective, while others provided minimal information. To address this variability, the survey was primarily used to identify trends and reinforce themes already emerging from the thematic examples and the literature review. For example, recurring issues such as linguistic barriers and tokenistic inclusion were highlighted in the survey and confirmed in the interviews, lending credibility to the overall findings.

The analysis of survey responses provided an opportunity for qualitative assessment. Responses were grouped into categories, such as education, language, and identity, to mirror the thematic examples, and then cross-referenced with the findings and the literature review. This triangulation ensured that the survey enriched and validated the research, providing a broader context for the deep, qualitative insights gathered elsewhere.

By integrating the survey into the research design, this study strikes a balance between depth and breadth. The literature review establishes the theoretical and contextual groundwork, while the thematic examples dive into the lived realities of systemic exclusion. The survey complements these methods by capturing overarching

trends and patterns and by grounding the findings in diverse, context-specific perspectives.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study was guided by grounded theory, emphasizing coding, comparison, and the development of theories rooted in participants' lived experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach ensured that the findings were directly informed by the data, allowing for the construction of context-specific insights into the systemic exclusion faced by young women in peace and security contexts. The process was dynamic and flexible, with data collection and analysis occurring simultaneously. This allowed themes to emerge and develop naturally as new patterns and insights came to light.

The first phase of analysis focused on the literature review. I examined academic and select policy documents to identify recurring concepts and areas of policy gaps. Drawing on fields such as international relations, gender studies, and political science, as well as resources from the Youth, Peace and Security Database (2024) and graduate student research gathered through YPS activist networks,<sup>3</sup> the review highlighted persistent disconnects between policy commitments and lived realities. Themes such as tokenism, linguistic barriers, and the intersectionality of exclusion emerged as critical. For example, policies often emphasize “youth engagement” or “youth inclusion” yet fail

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<sup>3</sup> Although their graduate research is largely unpublished, I remain grateful to the past students who chose to privately share their graduate dissertations with me. In particular, I would like to recognize and extend thanks to Lani Anaya, Swati Chawla, Briona Collins, Franziska Chyle, David Edberg Landerström, Imogen Fraser, Mehmet Ilhanli, Martina Lastikova, Ma'in Alshamayleh, Diksha Poddar, and Bruna Karoline Pinto da Silva.

to move beyond superficial involvement (UNOY Peacebuilders, 2021). These findings directly informed the development of interview questions and survey content, ensuring alignment between theoretical frameworks and the empirical components of the research.

The semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of qualitative data, with 24 participants across three thematic categories: first-generation access to higher education, English as a second language, and self-identified membership in the LGBTQI+ community. During the analysis, I highlighted key categories directly in my interview notes, organizing participants' reflections into sections based on recurring themes. For instance, participants who described navigating academic spaces as first-generation scholars were grouped under themes like "educational barriers" and "navigating institutional norms." These categories were further expanded and refined as the analysis progressed, revealing broader patterns such as "intersectional barriers" and "strategies for resilience." From these patterns, overarching themes such as "systemic exclusion," "tokenism in participation," and "linguistic marginalization" emerged, providing a structured framework for understanding participants' experiences. These themes were summarized into five primary categories,<sup>4</sup> outlined in Chapter 4, and serve as the *fil conducteur* for the analysis presented in this dissertation.

Grounded theory's flexibility was central to refining these themes. As new data were collected, the initial categories were revisited to deepen the understanding of systemic exclusion. For example, what began as a focus on language barriers evolved into an exploration of how the dominance of English shapes participation in peace and

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<sup>4</sup> The five central themes that have emerged from the data are: 1) barriers to meaningful participation, 2) intersectionality in peace and security frameworks, 3) defining meaningful participation, 4) policy and literature gaps, and 5) power dynamics and legitimacy.

security discourse and its broader implications. This ongoing process of adjustment ensured that the analysis remained rooted in participants' experiences while aligning with the study's broader objectives (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The global survey provided a complementary perspective by capturing broader trends and patterns. The survey originally offered the possibility of mixed-methods analysis. However, once survey responses were submitted, it became evident that the survey would contribute to the qualitative narrative. Open-ended questions frequently surfaced issues like the dominance of English and tokenistic inclusion, echoing themes identified in the interviews. By triangulating findings from the literature review, interviews, and survey responses, the research ensured that recurring patterns were validated across multiple datasets.

Throughout the process, I applied the principle of constant comparison, systematically comparing data across the literature review, interviews, and survey to identify similarities, differences, and recurring dynamics (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach not only strengthened the robustness of the findings but also surfaced nuanced themes that might have been overlooked in a single-method study. For instance, the themes of advocacy fatigue and guilt about not "doing enough" emerged in some interviews and survey responses, illustrating the emotional labour participants endure in navigating exclusionary systems (see Chapters 5 and 6).

A participatory approach to analysis further enhanced the research. Participants were invited to review their transcripts to ensure that their experiences were accurately represented. While this process is better understood as a form of participant validation rather than participatory analysis in itself, it contributed to ensuring that participants'

voices were reflected faithfully in the dataset. Elements of participatory analysis were instead reflected in how participants' interpretations and emphases were prioritized throughout the coding and analytical process. This collaborative approach reinforced the research's credibility and aligned with the study's emancipatory aspirations.

### **3.5. Positionality and Reflexivity**

Positionality and reflexivity are integral to this study, shaping my approach to the research design, data collection, and analysis. This research examines systemic exclusion in peace and security decision-making processes, where structural barriers and power dynamics dictate which voices are heard and which contributions are sidelined. As a researcher, my identity and experiences inevitably intersect with the themes explored in this study, requiring me to remain critically reflective to ensure the research is transparent, ethical, and inclusive.

As a Francophone Canadian woman from a minority linguistic community, I am familiar with the challenges of navigating linguistic and cultural barriers. This shared understanding enabled me to empathize with participants who described how the dominance of English affects their ability to fully participate in discussions on peace and security. However, I also recognize that the privilege I hold in access to higher education and professional networks differentiates my experiences from those of some participants who face compounded exclusions based on intersecting identities, such as race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

My professional background in WPS and YPS policy and programs has shaped my approach to this work. Over the past decade, I have worked closely with policymakers, activists, civil society organizations, and the broader UN structure, gaining

firsthand insight into the structural barriers that young women encounter when navigating these structures. This proximity provides context and depth to my understanding, but it also poses challenges. My familiarity with institutional processes and policy discourse may influence how I frame findings or prioritize certain themes. To counteract this, reflexivity has been a constant throughout the research process. I have critically examined my assumptions and biases to ensure that the research accurately reflects participants' realities rather than my preconceptions.

The power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship were another critical consideration. As someone with access to institutional resources and global platforms, I occupy a position of privilege relative to some participants, particularly those from marginalized communities outside North America or Europe. Additionally, I know most of the participants personally, and some had previously been my direct reports (though not at the time of the interviews). I also continue to maintain professional or personal relationships with some of them. Recognizing these dynamics, I approached the interviews with humility and transparency, striving to amplify participants' voices rather than impose my interpretations. To foster openness and minimize hierarchy, I adopted a conversational style in interviews, creating a space where participants could share authentically. As mentioned above, participants were also invited to review and revise their transcripts to ensure that their narratives were accurately represented and that they retained full agency over their contributions. On some occasions, participants shared information with me because of our familiarity, only to request that I redact or omit it from my analysis and eventual findings.

Intersectionality was central to the analysis and contextualization of participants' narratives. Many participants described overlapping identities that shaped their experiences of exclusion, such as being both a first-generation scholar and a speaker of English as a second (or third or fourth) language. These accounts underscored the complexity of navigating multiple barriers simultaneously. While my own experiences provided some insight into the intersections of language and participation, I was acutely aware that dimensions such as race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location—less central to my personal experience—required careful attention and contextual sensitivity.

Language played a critical role in the research process. Offering interviews in English, French, or Spanish was an intentional decision to reduce linguistic barriers and prioritize participants' preferences. Still, some participants expressed challenges articulating their thoughts in their second, third, or fourth language—for example, some participants from North Africa would have preferred to respond in Arabic. To address this, I encouraged participants to review their transcripts and provide additional written clarifications or comments after our discussions. These extended written reflections, which allowed participants to refine, expand, and reinterpret their contributions, constituted a key element of the study's participatory approach, reinforced the research's participatory and collaborative ethos.

By critically examining my identity, assumptions, and experiences, I have worked to navigate the complexities of studying systemic exclusion while prioritizing participants' voices and agency. Reflexivity has kept me attuned to the power dynamics embedded in the research process, ensuring that the findings remain rooted in participants' lived realities. This commitment to transparency and collaboration reflects

the study's broader aspiration of advancing inclusive, participatory approaches in research and practice.

### **3.6. Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent was a critical component of the study's ethical approach. Participants received detailed information about the research objectives, methods, and potential risks. The consent process emphasized transparency, outlining participants' right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Recognizing the emotional labour often involved in advocacy and the potential sensitivities of sharing personal experiences, I ensured participants had opportunities to ask questions and fully understand their involvement before agreeing to take part. This approach prioritized participants' ability to make informed decisions.

Anonymity and confidentiality are essential, particularly given the risks that some participants may face when discussing topics such as systemic exclusion, discrimination, and advocacy efforts. Identifying details are removed from the data, and participants are identified only by country or region throughout the analysis. For participants in politically sensitive contexts, additional care was taken to anonymize geographic and organizational markers, except when they explicitly consented to the publication of those details.

The intersectionality of participants' identities required particular sensitivity in navigating ethical concerns. Many participants spoke of overlapping barriers related to language, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation. For LGBTQI+ participants and English-second-language speakers, I implemented measures to mitigate vulnerabilities, such as offering multilingual interview options and handling sensitive disclosures with

care. The principles of “do no harm” guided these practices, ensuring that participation in the study did not exacerbate existing challenges or raise concerns about the protection of research participants (Anderson, 1999).

Ethical considerations extended to the presentation and sharing of the findings. Recognizing the power of storytelling, I intentionally amplify participants’ voices without sensationalizing their narratives or reinforcing stereotypes. This is one reason why I have avoided direct quotes; instead, I have paraphrased their contributions and categorized them thoughtfully, ensuring that participants’ contributions are protected and respected. This decision is both ethical and analytical. Given the relatively small and interconnected nature of WPS and YPS communities, even anonymized quotations can render participants identifiable through their roles, affiliations, or specific experiences. Prioritizing paraphrasing therefore reduces potential risks while maintaining the integrity of their contributions. At the same time, the analysis is oriented toward identifying patterns and relational dynamics across experiences, rather than foregrounding individual voices in isolation. Paraphrasing allows for a synthesis of these recurring themes while preserving participants’ intended meanings, rather than privileging select quotations that may be read as representative. This care in representation reflects the broader commitment to ethical integrity throughout the research.

### **3.7. Limitations**

One key limitation lies in the sample size and recruitment process for the semi-structured interviews. The 24 participants brought diverse and in-depth perspectives, but their experiences cannot fully represent the range of challenges faced by young women globally. The purposive and snowball sampling methods relied on my professional

networks and activist platforms, which may have unintentionally excluded young women outside these circles. For example, those without organizational affiliations or access to digital platforms—who often face even greater systemic barriers—were less likely to be included in the survey. This limitation underscores the challenge of achieving broad representation in qualitative research and highlights the need for future studies to expand recruitment strategies to include more underrepresented groups.

The global survey was designed to complement the interviews by capturing broader trends, but its voluntary and open nature introduced variability in response quality. While making the survey available in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish enhanced accessibility, the lack of a vetting process meant that some submissions lacked detail or did not align directly with the study's themes. As a result, the survey findings are primarily used to identify patterns and reinforce themes from the interviews and the literature review, rather than to serve as a standalone dataset. This underscores the trade-offs inherent in balancing inclusivity and methodological rigour in open surveys.

Intersectionality—a core focus of this study and explored in more depth in later chapters—presented methodological complexities. While the research centred on three thematic examples of exclusion (first-generation scholars, English as a second language speakers, and LGBTQI+ individuals), these categories often intersected with other identities, such as race, ethnicity, class, and geographic location. Participants' narratives frequently reflected these intersections, but the study's thematic structure may have oversimplified the complex and layered nature of their experiences. This highlights the need for future research to adopt a more comprehensive approach to intersectionality, ensuring that all relevant dimensions of exclusion are explored.

### **3.8. Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the methodological framework and research design used to define and qualify meaningful participation in peace and security decision-making, drawing from the perceptions and lived experiences of young women navigating these debates. By employing a grounded theory approach, the study allowed insights to emerge organically from the findings, ensuring that the analysis remains closely tied to participants' realities. By integrating participatory and emancipatory principles, the research prioritizes the voices and agency of young women, aligning the process with its broader commitment to inclusivity and equity.

The three-pronged data collection approach—a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and a global survey—provided a comprehensive foundation for the study. The literature review identified critical gaps in academic and policy debates, while the thematic examples provided depth by exploring the nuanced experiences of first-generation scholars, English-as-a-second-language speakers, and LGBTQI+ individuals. The global survey broadened the scope, capturing trends and patterns that complemented the themes emerging from interviews and the literature.

Ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and the management of power dynamics, were prioritized throughout the research. Reflexivity and positionality ensured that my identity and professional background informed but did not overshadow participants' narratives. Limitations, such as sample size and intersectional complexity, were acknowledged to provide context for the findings.

This framework strengthens the study's rigour while contributing to the advancement of inclusive practices in the application of WPS and YPS policies. By

centring the lived realities of young women, the research offers actionable insights for dismantling systemic barriers. The following chapters will build on this foundation, further examining the concept of meaningful participation, defined and determined by young women themselves.

## **Chapter 4: Themes in Young Women's Participation in Peace and Security**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The study of meaningful participation in peace and security policymaking is both an aspirational objective and a contested reality. While international frameworks such as the UN's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) policies have sought to institutionalize the inclusion of young women in decision-making, the extent to which this participation is substantive rather than symbolic remains a central tension. Existing scholarship, outlined in Chapter 2, has critically examined the disconnect between formal commitments and actual implementation, highlighting the structural barriers that continue to exclude young women from shaping peace processes in meaningful ways (Newby & Sebag, 2021). This dissertation builds on those critiques by engaging directly with young women and their lived experiences, positioning them not only as subjects of policy but also as agents of change who are currently navigating, contesting, and redefining these discussions. Through a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), outlined in Chapter 3, five key themes emerged from the research findings, reflecting both systemic obstacles and the adaptive strategies employed by young women. These themes—barriers to meaningful participation, intersectionality in peace and security frameworks, defining meaningful participation, policy and literature gaps, and power dynamics and legitimacy—serve as the analytical thread for the empirical chapters that follow.

Rather than treating these themes as isolated issues, this chapter examines them as interconnected dimensions of the broader struggle for meaningful participation. Young women engaged in peace and security processes do not experience exclusion in a singular

form; rather, they must navigate overlapping and compounding challenges that stem from institutional structures, linguistic hierarchies, and identity-based exclusions (Ullah, 2021). Barriers to participation remain structurally entrenched, embedded in educational inequities, professional gatekeeping, and rigid institutional cultures that continue to privilege established actors over emerging voices (Leclerc & Rouhshahbaz, 2025). These barriers are further compounded by the dominance of English in global policymaking, which creates unequal opportunities for engagement and reinforces unequal access to these spaces for those for whom English is a secondary or tertiary language. Language itself becomes not just a tool for communication but also a gatekeeping mechanism, in which fluency is often mistaken for competence and legitimacy (Aydinli & Aydinli, 2024). These linguistic barriers intersect with broader identity-based exclusions, where young women from racialized, socio-economically marginalized, or LGBTQI+ communities report additional challenges to recognition and access.

The global survey findings, as explained in Chapter 3, reinforce these five analytical components, providing a broader understanding by capturing recurring patterns across a wider and more diverse set of respondents, thereby situating the qualitative insights within a broader landscape of shared experiences and systemic trends through which to observe systemic barriers emerging from the qualitative interviews. This broader perspective is significant as it allows the study to move beyond individual or context-specific accounts, highlighting the consistency of these barriers across regions and reinforcing their structural nature. Importantly, these findings also foreground a core expectation among participants that meaningful participation should not merely facilitate inclusion, but enable the capacity to challenge and transform existing power structures

and decision-making processes. Admittedly, the survey findings also demonstrated similar themes and general insights, which were explained in greater depth during the targeted interviews. That said, many interview participants expressed frustration with the persistent tokenization of their participation, noting numerous instances in which their inclusion was limited to consultation rather than decision-making. The majority of the young women interviewed reported that, although they were regularly invited to meetings or to join initiatives in advisory capacities, they felt that their input had little to no impact on actual decisions and policy outcomes. Some noted that their names appeared on official lists and reports (including citations as contributors or co-authors), creating the impression of youth engagement, yet the final decisions were made without their involvement or final validation.

Beyond tokenization, the global survey and interview findings highlight the emotional and cognitive labour required to navigate exclusionary spaces, particularly for young women who do not conform to dominant linguistic, racial, or gender norms. Many respondents described struggling with language barriers in international policymaking discussions, noting that participating in English-language dialogues required them to self-censor, adapt, and expend additional effort. Some explained that their contributions were often assessed not on their substance but on how well they aligned with Western professional and academic standards of expression (Piller, 2016). This challenge was particularly pronounced for those whose expertise stemmed from grassroots peacebuilding efforts rather than formal institutional—often academic—affiliations, as they frequently had to demonstrate their credibility in settings where traditionally

acquired credentials were still prioritized (these dynamics are further explored in Chapter 6).

The definition of meaningful participation itself remains deeply contested, both within academic literature and among young women engaged in peacebuilding (United Nations, 2021). While international frameworks emphasize the inclusion of youth and gender, young women's own understandings of what constitutes meaningful participation vary significantly based on their positionality, experiences, and access to decision-making. Several participants described meaningful participation as directly influencing policy, noting that their contributions were reflected in concrete policy changes. Others saw it in ways that went beyond policy discussions, valuing grassroots organizing, coalition-building, and intergenerational dialogue (see Chapter 9) as critical forms of engagement. This contrast reflects a broader tension in peace and security discourse, where international or national institutions often equate participation with access to formal processes. While young women emphasized the need to shift power dynamics and create alternative spaces of influence, alluding to the idea of going beyond the "decision-making table." The metaphor of the "table" refers to policymaking or policy discussions conducted around a figurative or literal table. Advocates commonly demand a "seat at the table" to signal a desire for inclusion in policy discussions and decision-making processes.

The policy and literature gaps identified in this research further underscore the disconnect between institutional rhetoric and lived realities (Adjei, 2019). While the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 and subsequent resolutions signalled a shift toward recognizing youth as key actors in peacebuilding, the implementation of

these policies remains uneven (UNSC, 2015). Many participants described a frustrating cycle of consultations and commitments that fail to materialize into long-term structural change. Some explained that while youth-led initiatives were often encouraged in principle, they remained chronically underfunded and unsupported in practice. This aligns with existing critiques in the literature, which argue that while policy frameworks acknowledge youth agency, they fail to create the structural conditions necessary for its actualization (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018).

Beyond structural and policy-related challenges, this chapter also examines the role of power dynamics in shaping young women's participation. Across both survey and qualitative interviews, questions of credibility, authority, and legitimacy emerged as central to how participation is experienced and evaluated by young women in peace and security spaces. Several respondents described feeling that young women must continuously prove their expertise in ways that older, male, and institutionally affiliated actors are not required to do. This echoes trends identified in the literature, where credibility and authority are unevenly distributed along gendered and institutional lines (Myrntinen, Naujoks & El-Bushra, 2014). Many shared experiences of having their contributions overlooked, only to have the same points later acknowledged when voiced by someone with higher institutional standing. Others noted that their expertise was often categorized as a “youth perspective” rather than being treated as a valid policy contribution. Similar dynamics are reflected in existing scholarship, which highlights how youth contributions are frequently framed as experiential rather than analytical or policy-relevant (Arceta, 2022). These dynamics are further explored in Chapter 6.

At the same time, many young women are actively contesting these hierarchies, employing strategies such as coalition-building, networking, and leveraging digital platforms to amplify their voices beyond traditional policymaking spaces (Genon, 2025b). Rather than seeking institutional validation, some young women claim to have chosen alternative measures to traditional structures entirely, creating parallel youth-led policymaking initiatives that allow them to set their own priorities and redefine the terms of legitimacy. These approaches challenge the notion that expertise is granted by institutions, asserting instead that knowledge is derived equally from lived experience, grassroots activism, and direct engagement in peacebuilding processes (Paffenholz, 2010). This informs how meaningful participation is understood in this thesis by shifting the focus from institutional access alone to the capacity of young women to shape agendas, define priorities, and contest the conditions under which their knowledge is recognized. Meaningful participation, therefore, is not only about being included in existing spaces, but also about transforming or creating spaces where legitimacy, authority, and influence are negotiated on different terms.

This chapter serves as a bridge between the theoretical foundations established in previous chapters and the empirical thematic examples presented in the following research interviews. Mapping the key themes that emerged from the data overall provides a structured lens for understanding the multi-dimensional challenges of participation and exclusion defined by young women. In doing so, the chapter advances a core intellectual contribution by synthesizing these empirical patterns into an analytical framework that reconceptualizes participation as relational, contingent, and shaped by intersecting dynamics of power, legitimacy, and access. Rather than treating young women's

experiences as homogenous, this chapter underscores the diversity of perspectives, strategies, and barriers that shape their engagement in peace and security. The following sections will examine each of these themes in depth, drawing on qualitative interviews and survey data to illustrate systemic patterns, contradictions, and possibilities for transformation in decision-making contexts.

#### **4.2. Barriers to Meaningful Participation**

Despite widespread international commitments to the inclusion of young women in peace and security processes, participation remains deeply conditional limited by structural, linguistic, and identity-based exclusions. These barriers are not incidental or circumstantial; they are embedded within the very systems that govern peace and security decision-making as these systems are structured by unequal power relations that determine whose knowledge is recognized, whose voices are legitimized, and whose participation is deemed credible or authoritative (Newby & Sebag, 2021). Existing scholarship has long argued that participation is not merely a matter of access but of power, determining who is heard, whose expertise is validated, and who must continuously justify their presence (Basu, Kirby & Shepherd, 2020; Bell & O'Rourke, 2010). The findings of this study reinforce these critiques, demonstrating that while young women are increasingly present in peacebuilding and security debates, their participation remains limited by institutional cultures, exclusionary language-based hierarchies, and intersectional discrimination (UN Women, 2018).

Rather than treating these barriers as separate challenges, this section examines them as interconnected barriers to exclusion that shape how young women experience and navigate policymaking as isolating these challenges risks obscuring how power

operates across multiple, intersecting dimensions, whereas examining them together allows for a more accurate understanding of how exclusion is produced, reinforced, and experienced in practice. These challenges do not act in isolation; they compound one another, creating layered disadvantages that require constant negotiation and adaptation from the individuals experiencing them (Fuster, 2022). While some forms of exclusion are explicit, such as outright denial of participation, others are more subtle and normalized. Some examples of subtle exclusion practices include the expectation of elite educational credentials, linguistic conformity, and adherence to institutional norms. The findings of this study reveal that young women from first-generation, non-Western, LGBTQI+, and socio-economically marginalized backgrounds face the most significant challenges in asserting their legitimacy within formal peace and security debates.

#### *4.2.1. Structural and Systemic Obstacles*

One of the most significant barriers to meaningful participation is structural and systemic exclusion, particularly within institutions that shape global peace and security policies. Many young women enter spaces not designed with them in mind, sit at “tables” where the rules of engagement have historically been set by State actors, military representatives, and elite institutions (Forsberg & Olsson, 2021). From a normative perspective, this raises critical questions about the extent to which participation can be considered meaningful when the terms, rules, and criteria of engagement are predefined by dominant actors, effectively limiting the possibility for participants to reshape agendas or influence outcomes. This exclusion is not merely about representation but about influence, a reality that participants in this study repeatedly emphasized in both the global survey and interviews.

A predominant theme that emerged was the role of educational and professional background in shaping access to decision-making spaces. Many young women noted that their ability to participate in high-level policy discussions was directly influenced by their educational credentials, institutional affiliations, or access to professional networks. This dynamic was particularly pronounced for first-generation scholars, who often lacked the mentorship, financial resources, or institutional connections that facilitate entry into these spaces. Participants described how those from privileged backgrounds often had preexisting access to decision-making spaces, whereas those without these advantages had to demonstrate their worth just to be included repeatedly revealing how participation is structured through hierarchical systems that assign credibility, authority, and legitimacy unevenly, often privileging those who already align with institutional norms and expectations.

This challenge extends beyond formal education to the unpaid labour required to gain credibility in peace and security spaces. Several young women reported that participation in international policymaking spaces frequently required self-funding travel to conferences, undertaking unpaid internships and general volunteer roles (primarily junior or menial work), or dedicating unpaid hours to advocacy initiatives within their local organizations. These practices, while often framed as “opportunities for engagement,” reinforce economic barriers that systematically exclude those without financial privilege. This aligns with broader critiques in the literature that highlight how youth peacebuilders are expected to contribute expertise while receiving little institutional support (Berents, Bolton & McEvoy-Levy, 2024; Mollica, 2020). This is particularly significant for understanding meaningful participation, as it demonstrates

how the ability to participate is contingent not only on willingness or expertise, but on access to resources that enable sustained engagement and influence

Beyond educational and economic barriers, institutional cultures within international organizations and government bodies reinforce exclusionary practices that limit young women's meaningful participation. Several participants described encountering bureaucratic and hierarchical structures that prioritize voices from traditional security sectors—such as the military, diplomatic corps, and national security agencies—over feminist, community-based, and youth-led expertise. The research findings revealed that decision-making power remains concentrated within State-centric, top-down structures, leaving grassroots and feminist perspectives sidelined or inexistent (El-Ghazal et al., 2023). This concentration of power further constrains the conditions under which participation can be meaningful, as it limits the extent to which alternative forms of knowledge and expertise can shape policy outcomes.

#### *4.2.2. Linguistic Barriers*

Language remains a fundamental yet often overlooked barrier to meaningful participation in peace and security policymaking. While multilingual engagement should, in theory, enhance inclusivity, the dominance of English as the default language in global policy discussions creates an exclusionary hierarchy that systematically marginalizes non-native speakers (Tsuda, 2014). A significant number of survey responses identified language barriers as a key challenge, explaining that fluency in English is often treated as a prerequisite for legitimacy in peace and security spaces, with participants describing experiences of being overlooked in discussions, self-censoring their contributions due to

lack of confidence, or having their expertise questioned when expressed in non-native or less fluent English, rather than simply as a tool for communication.

The impact of linguistic exclusion extends beyond comprehension; it influences confidence, credibility, and the ability to participate on equal terms (Malik, Guzmán & Vo, 2024). Several young women reported feeling less competent in discussions when speaking in a non-native language, notably when their accent or phrasing led to perceptions of them as less authoritative. Others emphasized that contributing to high-level discussions required simplifying their arguments just to be understood, reducing the nuance and complexity of their policy insights. The data further suggest that these dynamics are relational, emerging through interactions in which authority and legitimacy are co-constructed, rather than inherent demonstrated that linguistic barriers are not simply about fluency but about power, determining who can engage on their own terms and who must constantly adjust, self-censor, or adapt to fit into dominant linguistic norms.

Another key finding was the unrecognized labour of multilingual engagement. Young women who speak multiple languages are often expected to serve as unofficial translators, navigating discussions across Arabic, English, French, Spanish, and other local languages. While this multilingual ability should be valued as an asset, many participants claimed that institutions frequently expected them to provide translation support without prior notice, compensation, or acknowledgment. The additional labour required to bridge linguistic gaps often fell disproportionately on young women from multilingual or diaspora communities, reinforcing an unequal distribution of responsibilities within peace and security forums.

#### *4.2.3. Identity-Based Challenges*

Beyond structural and linguistic barriers, young women face significant identity-based exclusions that shape their participation in peace and security spaces. These exclusions are not experienced in silos; they are shaped by intersecting factors such as race, gender identity, socio-economic background, and sexual orientation. While the WPS and YPS policies promote the aspiration of inclusivity, the data demonstrated that LGBTQI+ youth, young women of colour, and those from marginalized backgrounds often face additional challenges in asserting their legitimacy in policy spaces.

For many young women, gendered expectations within peace and security forums reinforce the symbolic nature of inclusion where their presence is used to signal diversity and legitimacy without granting them substantive influence over agendas or outcomes. Participants described instances in which they were invited to events or discussions only to be spoken over, ignored, or relegated to youth-focused side events rather than to main decision-making spaces. Many observed that, while their presence was used to highlight institutional diversity, they were often excluded from substantive discussions in which policy decisions were made, for example, being invited to speak on panels or consultations without being included in follow-up drafting processes, decision-making meetings, or final validation of policy outputs.

Similarly, LGBTQI+ participants highlighted the erasure of queer security concerns in mainstream peace and security discussions (Nagarajan & Hagen, 2023). While gender is frequently framed within WPS and YPS policies, the participants highlighted that these frameworks remain largely heteronormative, failing to address the specific security challenges faced by LGBTQI+ youth in conflict settings. Many

described having to advocate for the inclusion of LGBTQI+ perspectives themselves, as these concerns were rarely acknowledged within institutional policy dialogues (Rainer et al., 2021).

The barriers outlined in this section underscore the deeply entrenched exclusions that young women continue to navigate in peace and security policymaking. Whether through institutional gatekeeping, linguistic exclusion, or identity-based marginalization, participation remains unequal and conditional for most young women. However, these barriers are not just constraints; they also require adaptation, resilience, and strategic navigation. The following section examines how intersectionality further complicates and redefines pathways to meaningful participation.

### **4.3. Intersectionality in Peace and Security Frameworks**

The barriers young women face in peace and security policymaking are rarely experienced in isolation. Instead, they emerge at the intersection of multiple and overlapping identities, shaped by gender, age, race, socio-economic status, linguistic background, and sexual orientation. While the WPS and YPS agendas acknowledge the importance of participation, the extent to which they consider intersectionality in both policy and practice remains inconsistent and limited. This gap has significant implications for young women navigating these spaces, particularly those from historically excluded communities who continue to navigate the realities of stereotypes and perceptions of their legitimacy in said settings.

The findings of this study highlight that intersectionality is not merely an academic concept but a lived reality that profoundly shapes how young women experience peace and security processes, for example, in how access to spaces is

mediated by socio-economic resources, how credibility is questioned based on racial or linguistic identity, and how certain forms of knowledge are privileged over others depending on institutional norms. The survey and interview data reinforce what intersectional feminist scholars have long argued: participation is not simply about being present in decision-making spaces but about whether participation is equitable, accessible, and transformative (Collins et al., 2021; Crenshaw, 1999). Many young women who took part in this research described how their experiences of inclusion or exclusion were shaped by multiple, interlocking systems of power. While some pointed to gender as the primary barrier, others emphasized that it was the combination of gender and race, or gender and socio-economic status, that determined their access and legitimacy in peace and security spaces.

#### *4.3.1. Understanding Intersectionality in YPS & WPS*

The concept of intersectionality, first theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), underscores how different aspects of identity interact to create distinct experiences of marginalization. Within peace and security policymaking, these intersecting identities shape who is seen as a legitimate participant, whose voices are prioritized, and whose contributions are dismissed or tokenized (Leclerc & Bohémier, 2025). While WPS and YPS frameworks aim to promote inclusion, their application often fails to address the complex realities of those who experience multiple, overlapping forms of exclusion (Berents & Mollica, 2021).

A recurring theme in the survey data was the extent to which young women from marginalized backgrounds must continually negotiate their identities to participate in peace and security discussions. Many respondents explained that they felt pressure to

downplay certain aspects of their identity—whether their race, linguistic background, or sexual orientation—in order to be taken seriously. This challenge was particularly evident among LGBTQI+ participants, who described how, even within feminist and youth-focused spaces, peace and security discussions often reproduced heteronormative narratives. Some young women highlighted that their contributions related to LGBTQI+ security concerns were either sidelined or treated as secondary issues, reinforcing the perception that their perspectives were not necessary or relevant to the mainstream peacebuilding agendas.

Several young women also highlighted the role of race and ethnicity in shaping institutional exclusion, particularly within Western-led peace and security institutions (Matfess, 2020). Some respondents described how, despite having equal qualifications and expertise, they were often assumed to be in junior or administrative roles, while white colleagues, even those with less experience, were immediately treated as experts. This aligns with broader critiques of the colonial legacies embedded in current peacebuilding structures, in which race and institutional affiliation continue to influence credibility and legitimacy within the field (Brower, 2016).

Beyond race and gender, socioeconomic status emerged as a significant determinant of participation. Many young women described how engaging in policymaking spaces required financial resources, particularly when participation meant self-funding travel, accepting unpaid positions, or relying on elite networks. The survey findings further reinforced this reality, with a substantial portion of responses indicating that financial constraints were a primary barrier to participation, particularly in

international forums, where access is often restricted to those with institutional backing or higher socioeconomic status.

The tension between formal inclusion and systemic exclusion raises a critical question as to whether such inclusion can meaningfully be considered inclusion at all, particularly when examined through the lens of positive peace (see Galtung, 1969), which emphasizes the transformation of structural inequalities rather than their superficial accommodation remains a defining characteristic of how intersectionality operates in peace and security contexts. While institutional policies may frame participation as gender-inclusive, they often fail to acknowledge how intersecting identity factors—race, class, sexuality, and language—determine the quality of participation and the extent to which young women are able to influence decision-making.

#### *4.3.2. Tensions in Policy and Practice*

The UN Security Council resolutions on WPS and YPS have enabled important normative commitments to gender and youth inclusion, yet their implementation often fails to address the deeper intersectional challenges that shape exclusion (Leclerc & Bohémier, 2025; Berents & Mollica, 2021). This is particularly evident in how policies approach youth participation as a monolithic category, failing to distinguish between diverse experiences of exclusion within youth and women's groups themselves.

Several survey participants pointed to the disconnect between institutional commitments to inclusion and the realities of exclusion they encountered in practice. Many young women expressed frustration with policies that promoted “youth engagement” and “gender inclusion” but failed to reflect the complexity of their lived experiences. Several respondents explained that institutional narratives often assumed all

young women faced the same barriers, when in reality, those with multiple marginalized identities encountered far greater challenges in asserting their voices.

One of the most striking inconsistencies in policy implementation is the manner in which participation is structured. While international frameworks promote the inclusion of youth and women, they rarely challenge hierarchical decision-making processes that continue to privilege elite voices over grassroots and intersectional perspectives (Berents, 2024). Many young women described how, despite being invited to participate in international forums, their participation was often limited to side events, youth-specific panels, or observatory roles with no substantive decision-making authority. This reflects a broader pattern of youth instrumentalization, in which participation is encouraged as a “feel-good exercise” but remains, at best, conditional and controlled (Fraser, 2024).

Research has consistently shown that youth engagement frameworks often reproduce the same exclusionary structures they claim to challenge, offering participation on terms dictated by governments, multilateral agencies, and donor institutions rather than by youth themselves (Apollo & Mbah, 2022; Mollica, 2017). The challenge, therefore, is not merely to increase participation quotas but to fundamentally restructure participation to be more accessible, equitable, and responsive to the realities faced by young women from diverse backgrounds.

Several interviewees emphasized that policy frameworks should move beyond broad commitments to inclusion and adopt specific, intersectional measures that account for race, gender identity, language, and socioeconomic status in meaningful ways. Some participants proposed a differentiated approach to youth and gender inclusion, arguing

that youth policies should recognize the diverse realities of young women, rather than assuming a “one-size-fits-all” framework.

Intersectionality remains one of the most significant yet under-addressed gaps in the implementation of the WPS and YPS policies. While international frameworks have created the language of inclusion, their application often fails to reflect the diverse and overlapping barriers that shape exclusion in practice (Lee-Koo & Pruitt, 2020). Young women who experience multiple forms of marginalization—whether based on race, class, sexual orientation, or language—must navigate additional layers of institutional bias, social discrimination, and economic barriers that are rarely accounted for in mainstream policies.

To move beyond symbolic inclusion, peace and security institutions must recognize that participation is not just about representation but about power redistribution (Mueller & Rauh, 2024). Without an intersectional approach—one that makes visible how different forms of marginalization shape access to resources, legitimacy, and decision-making authority, and therefore enables targeted efforts to redistribute influence across these axes—that acknowledges the differentiated realities of young women, efforts to promote inclusion will continue to fall short. The following section will further explore how young women define meaningful participation, offering insights into what an intersectional, transformative approach to engagement could look like in practice.

#### **4.4. Defining and Achieving Meaningful Participation**

The concept of meaningful participation in peace and security policymaking has become a sort of slogan in institutional discourse, yet its actual meaning and implications remain largely undefined. While international frameworks, such as the WPS and YPS policies,

emphasize the need for inclusive participation, their implementation often reduces participation to mere presence rather than influence. This distinction is critical: young women who participated in this study consistently articulated that mere inclusion in decision-making spaces does not equate to meaningful participation. Instead, meaningful participation is substantive, impact-driven, and power-shifting, rather than performative, symbolic, or extractive.

This section explores the various understandings of meaningful participation among the young women, distinguishing between tokenistic and substantive engagement. It further examines examples and sample models that support genuine inclusion, highlighting where progress has been made and where structural reforms remain necessary. The findings underscore a fundamental challenge in policy implementation: while there is broad recognition of the need for participation, the terms of that participation are often dictated by institutions rather than by young women themselves, which limits the effectiveness of these policies, as they fail to align with the lived realities, priorities, and conditions required for participation to be meaningful, ultimately undermining their ability to achieve transformative or sustained impact.

#### *4.4.1. Divergent Understandings of “Meaningful Participation”*

Survey and interview data reveal that young women define meaningful participation in multiple ways, often shaped by their positionality, lived experiences, and access to decision-making spaces. For some, meaningful participation is defined by direct policy influence: having the ability to shape discussions, challenge dominant narratives, and see their contributions reflected in formal decisions. For others, participation is more relational and process-oriented, focusing on community-based engagement,

intergenerational collaboration, and alternative forms of knowledge production that transcend formal institutions.

A recurring theme in the data is frustration with tokenistic engagement, where young women are invited to speak but not to decide. Many survey respondents expressed dissatisfaction with participation limited to consultation rather than influence, noting that although they were included in forums, panels, or advisory groups, the decisions had already been made without their input. Others noted that their involvement was often for optics, to fulfill diversity quotas, or as “feel-good exercises,” without creating space for meaningful engagement.

This experience of surface-level inclusion without substantive influence reflects broader critiques of institutional approaches to participation, which often instrumentalize youth and gender representation without addressing the power dynamics that shape decision-making processes. Many young women reported that they had contributed to consultations, reports, and policy discussions, only to find that their insights were ignored, diluted, or used to justify preexisting decisions, including for the political gain of powerholders.

Beyond tokenism, young women also identified emotional and intellectual labour as key concerns in their experiences of participation. Several interviewees noted that while they were expected to share their expertise and lived experiences, their contributions were often treated as secondary to those of senior policymakers or institutional actors. Some described the exhaustion of repeatedly having to justify why young women’s perspectives matter, explaining that they were often required to prove their expertise multiple times before being taken seriously (if at all).

Despite these challenges, the study also identified instances in which participation felt meaningful to young women. When asked to describe experiences in which they felt genuinely included, participants pointed to moments in which their contributions were taken seriously, their perspectives reflected in final decisions, and they were treated as equal stakeholders rather than junior partners. One example involved a policy co-creation process in Chad, in which young women were not only consulted but also had the authority to draft sections of the national WPS plan, ensuring that their priorities were integrated into the final document. To this day, the Chad WPS process remains one of the most age-inclusive, as evidenced by both the policy itself and the testimonies gathered throughout this research. Similarly, young women engaged in feminist grassroots networks in the Philippines described how their advocacy strategies were co-developed with experienced organizers, creating an intergenerational model of engagement in which knowledge and power were shared rather than concentrated.

#### *4.4.2. Interventions That Support Inclusion*

While critiques of tokenism dominate discussions on participation, several effective models and interventions emerged from this study that support substantive and transformative inclusion (Leclerc & Wong, 2024). These approaches challenge traditional power hierarchies, institutional norms, and rigid consultation processes, providing alternative pathways for young women to exercise their agency and to have their influence recognized.

A key finding from this research is that youth-led and feminist-driven mechanisms are more likely to create meaningful opportunities for participation than top-down institutional processes. Several respondents highlighted the importance of youth-

led peace networks, feminist policy spaces, and community-driven advocacy as alternative models that allow for genuine co-creation rather than extractive engagement. Many participants explained that in these youth-designed spaces, they did not have to prove their belonging—rather, they could set the terms of engagement themselves.

This highlights a critical gap in institutional policymaking: while formal structures often claim to support youth inclusion, they rarely allow young people to define the process themselves. Research has similarly found that meaningful participation is more likely when young women are given ownership over processes rather than merely being consulted (Mitchell, et al., 2023; Lee-Koo & Pruitt, 2020).

One of the most effective interventions identified in this study was the direct delegation of decision-making authority to young women within policy structures. In contexts where youth-led mechanisms were institutionalized—such as national youth councils, participatory budgeting models, or intergenerational advisory boards—young women reported greater influence and legitimacy. In one example from West Africa, a national youth peace platform integrated young women as equal partners in negotiation processes, rather than relegating them to an advisory role. The young women emphasized that being granted a formal vote rather than merely a consultative role fundamentally changed their ability to influence outcomes and made those outcomes more meaningful.

The integration of feminist methodologies into peace and security decision-making was another approach that respondents identified as effective in promoting meaningful participation (Dersso, 2023; Lenhardt, 2021). Many young women described how feminist facilitation methods—such as rotating leadership structures, co-mentorship, and participatory decision-making models—created environments where they could

engage without conforming to hierarchical norms by redistributing authority, valuing diverse forms of knowledge, and reducing the pressure to conform to dominant institutional behaviours that often marginalize younger or less institutionally affiliated participants. Some explained that working within feminist peace networks that employed consensus-based decision-making enabled them to contribute on equal footing, rather than struggle for recognition within male-dominated institutions.

Another critical factor in achieving meaningful participation is the recognition and redistribution of resources. Many young women emphasized that unpaid engagements perpetuate exclusion, making it difficult for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds to access spaces and sustain long-term participation. Several responses noted that providing paid opportunities (for travel and time), travel stipends, and institutional funding for youth-led initiatives significantly enhance the quality and accessibility of participation. This aligns with broader critiques that financial precarity remains a significant barrier to inclusion, and that meaningful participation must be resourced, not just encouraged (UNOY & OSGEY, 2023). For young women in particular, these conditions are often compounded by gendered expectations around unpaid care work, limited access to financial resources, and reduced mobility, which further constrain their ability to engage consistently and on equal terms, thereby deepening existing inequalities in participation.

Meaningful participation in peace and security policymaking is not just about presence: it is about power, influence, and structural transformation. While international frameworks have acknowledged the need for inclusion, the terms of participation often remain top-down, conditional, and extractive (Del Felice & Wisler, 2007). This study

underscores that young women must define meaningful participation, whether through policy co-creation, community-driven activism, or feminist methodologies that challenge hierarchical norms.

To move beyond tokenistic engagement, institutions must adopt intersectional, youth-led, and feminist-driven approaches that shift participation from consultative processes to co-development and co-ownership. Without this shift, participation will remain a rhetorical commitment rather than a structural reality. The following section will explore the disconnect between policy rhetoric and implementation, further examining how participation frameworks often fail to translate into substantive outcomes for young women in peace and security spaces.

#### **4.5. Policy and Literature Gaps**

The gap between policy rhetoric and lived realities is one of the most persistent challenges in putting into practice the WPS and YPS policies. While these frameworks acknowledge the need for inclusive participation, their ability to translate into actionable, transformative outcomes remains limited and highly contested. This disconnect is not only a matter of slow implementation or bureaucratic inefficiencies (though these challenges persist), it reflects deeper structural issues that shape how peace and security institutions engage with youth and women in the broader context.

Survey and interview data consistently highlighted these claims, demonstrating that young women experience this policy gap first-hand, often encountering performative engagement, limited follow-through on commitments, and institutional resistance to shifting power dynamics. This section critically examines the discrepancies between frameworks and implementation, exploring how policy commitments almost always fail

to translate into meaningful change. It further analyzes young women's experiences on the periphery of policymaking processes, highlighting how tokenism, structural exclusion, and credibility barriers reinforce the limitations of existing peace and security frameworks.

#### *4.5.1. Discrepancies Between Frameworks and Implementation*

Despite their notable and legally valid status as internationally recognized normative frameworks, including binding and non-binding commitments such as UN Security Council resolutions and national action plans advances in international law and national frameworks, the WPS and YPS policies remain largely aspirational in practice. While these frameworks call for the inclusion of women and youth in peace and security processes, they fail to address the structural barriers that condition participation (Berents, 2020). This contradiction is evident in the ways many international and national institutions frame participation as an end goal rather than as a process of power redistribution (Bell, 2018).

A dominant theme in the survey findings was widespread disillusionment with policy effectiveness. Many respondents reported participating in consultations, advisory groups, or forums in which their input was acknowledged but not incorporated into final policies. Several participants noted that, although they were frequently asked to share their perspectives, these were rarely translated into concrete policy actions, despite often sharing personal accounts and specific recommendations. Some described instances where institutions documented youth contributions in reports but failed to integrate them into actual decision-making processes.

This phenomenon is not unique to WPS and YPS; it reflects a broader trend in participatory policymaking, in which youth and gender inclusion are institutionalized in discourse but not in decision-making authority (Berents & Mollica, 2021). Although limited research on YPS is a concern, the existing literature has consistently critiqued the co-optation of these frameworks into bureaucratic structures, reducing participation to symbolic engagement rather than a means of structural change (Berents, 2024).

Another significant policy gap is the lack of accountability mechanisms for participation commitments. While States and multilateral organizations frequently produce progress reports on WPS and YPS implementation, these reports rarely assess whether participation has been meaningful or whether young women's contributions have led to tangible policy shifts. Instead, they rely on quantitative indicators, such as the number of women and youth included in discussions, without considering qualitative factors for evaluating the quality or impact of their engagement (Ozcelik et al., 2021). Many young women emphasized that inclusion is measured by numbers, not by influence, reinforcing concerns that representation alone does not translate into agency, power, or change. What is distinct in the context of WPS and YPS is that these frameworks explicitly position women and young people as agents of change, yet in practice continue to assess their participation through metrics that overlook the relational and transformative dimensions of their engagement. This reveals a gap between the normative ambitions of these agendas and their operationalization, offering critical insight into how participation is conceptualized and measured within global governance more broadly.

This aligns with feminist critiques of indicator-driven governance, which argue that reliance on participation quotas and numerical benchmarks fails to address the underlying power structures shaping policymaking (Taylor, 2020). This is demonstrated by the approaches cited by the young women in this research, as well as by the processes established for inter-agency coordination within UN bodies. For example, several major UN entities that hold mandates for YPS implementation now have a joint indicator for the number of national action plans on YPS, without regard to the quality or process of establishing these plans. While frameworks such as YPS and WPS have established the normative foundation for inclusion in the international policy space, their implementation often remains surface-level, reinforcing rather than dismantling existing hierarchies (Kern, 2025a). Importantly, the coexistence of WPS and YPS agendas further complicates how participation is operationalized and experienced, as young women often navigate overlapping yet fragmented frameworks that articulate inclusion differently but are implemented through similar institutional logics. Rather than examining these agendas in isolation, the findings of this study highlight how their interaction shapes lived experiences of participation—where commitments to inclusion are layered, but not necessarily coordinated or translated into coherent pathways for influence.

Furthermore, existing policies tend to treat young women as a homogenous category, failing to address the intersectional barriers that shape participation. As discussed in previous sections, young women from racialized, LGBTQI+, and lower-income backgrounds often experience additional layers of exclusion, yet WPS and YPS action plans rarely incorporate targeted measures to address these specific concerns (DHF, 2023). This lack of differentiation reinforces a “one-size-fits-all” approach to

inclusion, thereby limiting the effectiveness of existing frameworks in addressing persistent structural inequalities (Smith & Stavrevska, 2022).

#### *4.5.2. Young Women's Perspectives on Policymaking*

One of the clearest indicators of the disconnect between policy rhetoric and practice is young women's disillusionment with formal policymaking spaces as policymaking is ostensibly designed to be inclusive and representative of those it affects, yet their disillusionment signals that these spaces continue to serve and prioritize the interests, norms, and actors already embedded within institutional power structures. While WPS and YPS policies promote youth and gender participation, young women frequently encounter barriers that limit their ability to influence decision-making processes, regardless of the frameworks (Leclerc et al., 2023).

Survey findings underscore the pervasive experience of performative participation, in which young women are invited to attend or speak at consultations, roundtables, and high-level meetings, yet there are no avenues or intent to open spaces for decision-making. Many responses described their participation as "symbolic rather than substantive," citing repeated consultations that fail to yield concrete outcomes. Several participants explained that while they were present in discussions, their role was largely passive, with decisions already predetermined in the sense that agendas, priorities, funding parameters, and policy directions had often been set before their engagement began by institutional actors. This limits participation to endorsement or feedback on pre-existing decisions, rather than enabling young women to shape the terms, direction, or outcomes of the process itself.

This experience reflects broader critiques of youth instrumentalization, where young people's participation is framed as valuable for visibility and legitimacy but remains structurally constrained by power dynamics that favour established actors (Leclerc, 2021a; Witting-Acuesa & Ragandang, 2021; Kwon, 2018). Research has shown that while institutions promote youth engagement as an inclusionary practice, they rarely challenge the exclusionary structures that dictate whose expertise is valued (Bailey et al., 2024).

Beyond performative engagement, young women also face structural credibility barriers that limit their ability to be taken seriously in policymaking settings. Many participants explained that even when they had expertise, field experience, or policy knowledge, their contributions were often dismissed in favour of more senior (often male) voices. Others described the ongoing challenge of establishing legitimacy in security discussions, noting that hierarchical norms within peace and security institutions reinforce skepticism toward young women's expertise.

This credibility gap is not simply a matter of age or experience; it is shaped by deep-seated biases regarding who is seen as an authority in peace and security (Leclerc & Rouhshahbaz, 2021; Carl, 2019). While the WPS and YPS policies promote youth inclusion and the recognition of young people as positive actors in peace and security contexts, they often fail to challenge these hierarchical structures, leaving young women in a position in which they are included but not respected as equal stakeholders.

Despite these challenges, the young women interviewed for this study also identified alternative policymaking spaces in which participation felt more meaningful and impactful. Several young women noted that youth-led and feminist-driven initiatives

offered more authentic avenues for influence than State-led or multilateral forums. In some regional youth coalitions, young women did not feel that they were “just consulted” but rather that they actively shaped advocacy strategies and policy recommendations with participants describing experiences of co-developing policy positions, drafting joint statements, and collectively determining advocacy priorities within these spaces.

Participants in these initiatives highlighted the importance of setting their own agendas rather than adapting to bureaucratic processes that often limit power-sharing and the ability of younger participants to share their unique perspectives.

These findings align with broader research advocating for feminist and youth-driven policymaking approaches, which emphasize horizontal decision-making, shared leadership, and participatory models that challenge traditional power hierarchies (O'Malley & Johnson, 2018).

#### *4.5.3. Bridging the Policy Gap*

The disconnect between policy rhetoric and lived realities remains one of the most pressing challenges in the implementation of WPS and YPS. While these policies were framed in terms of inclusion, their practical application often fails to address the deeper power imbalances that shape participation (Simpson, 2018). Without structural reforms, accountability measures, and intersectional approaches, participation will remain a rhetorical commitment rather than a substantive shift in policymaking power.

To move beyond symbolic engagement, institutions must rethink how participation is structured, not as a “box-ticking exercise” but as a process of redistributing power to young women in peace and security (Grizelj, 2021). This requires mechanisms for accountability, ensuring that youth and gender inclusion translates into

concrete influence, not just presence. The following section examines power dynamics and legitimacy, further exploring how young women navigate hierarchies of credibility and influence within peace and security spaces.

#### **4.6. Power Dynamics and Legitimacy**

The ability to participate meaningfully in peace and security policymaking is not only shaped by institutional access and policy commitments but also by hierarchies of credibility and power that determine whose voices are recognized as legitimate. While international frameworks such as the WPS and YPS policies formally acknowledge the need for inclusion, they do not challenge the deeply embedded structures within which they are themselves produced and operationalized, reflecting and reproducing existing norms of authority, expertise, and institutional legitimacy that dictate who is considered an expert, whose knowledge is validated, and whose authority is presumed (Berents, 2024). This suggests that WPS and YPS should be understood not only as policy frameworks, but as broader agendas shaped by—and shaping—the same power relations they seek to address, creating inherent tensions between their normative commitments and their implementation. Even as young women are increasingly invited into decision-making spaces, they continue to face barriers to legitimacy, including having their expertise questioned, their contributions undervalued, and their presence contingent on institutional recognition rather than substantive influence (Leclerc, 2021b).

This section examines how power dynamics shape legitimacy in peace and security spaces, focusing on institutional credibility as a gatekeeping mechanism and on the strategies employed by young women to assert their authority despite existing constraints. The findings illustrate a recurring pattern of exclusion, in which young

women must continually demonstrate their expertise in ways that older, male, or more institutionally recognized actors do not. At the same time, young women are also proactively reshaping the terms of legitimacy, using coalition-building, digital activism, and alternative policymaking mechanisms to challenge entrenched hierarchies and redefine expertise on their own terms (Genon, 2025b).

#### *4.6.1. Whose Voices Are Considered Legitimate?*

Legitimacy in peace and security policymaking is actively constructed rather than neutral. Institutional norms continue to favour expertise that is State-backed, military-affiliated, or derived from elite institutions, often marginalizing the perspectives of youth, women, and grassroots peacebuilders (Akbari & True, 2024; Leclerc et al., 2023). Traditional security spaces—such as diplomatic forums, national security discussions, and high-level policy negotiations—tend to prioritize voices with formal institutional affiliations, government credentials, or Western-based policy experience, sidelining knowledge that comes from lived experience, local peacebuilding, or feminist and youth-led organizing (Butler, Tavits & Hadzic, 2022).

Survey and interview data reinforce the conclusion that these credibility hierarchies shape young women’s participation. Many respondents reported having experienced situations where their expertise was undervalued or dismissed because they were young, female, or from the Global South. Several participants described instances in which their contributions were overlooked until repeated by a more senior male counterpart, or in which their insights were framed as “youth perspectives” rather than as substantive policy contributions.

For young women from the Global South, these barriers are further compounded by geopolitical power dynamics. Several respondents described encounters in which their expertise was considered credible only after it had been validated by a Western institution or reframed by a more senior, internationally recognized expert. For example, some participants recounted presenting context-specific policy recommendations in consultations that were initially overlooked, only for similar ideas to gain traction once repeated or endorsed by representatives from well-known international organizations. Many expressed frustration that their insights were often disregarded until echoed by someone with institutional standing, highlighting how knowledge from the Global South continues to be filtered through Western gatekeeping structures before being legitimized.

These findings align with critiques of international policymaking spaces, which argue that they continue to operate within colonial legacies, reinforcing global power asymmetries in determining who holds expertise in peace and security (Byrne, Clarke & Rahman, 2018). Even within youth-led spaces, privilege and access remain unevenly distributed, with young women from elite backgrounds or Western institutions more likely to be granted credibility than their counterparts from conflict-affected or under-resourced communities.

#### *4.6.2. Youth Strategies to Challenge Power Structures*

Despite these barriers, young women are actively redefining legitimacy in peace and security spaces, employing strategic interventions to claim space, assert authority, and challenge exclusionary power structures (Archilleos-Sarll, 2024; Manchanda, 2001). Many are building coalitions, leveraging digital platforms, and creating their own

policymaking spaces to bypass traditional gatekeeping mechanisms and set new terms for inclusion (Genon, 2024).

One of the most effective approaches young women use to challenge these hierarchies is coalition-building and collective advocacy. Rather than relying on individual recognition, young women are increasingly working within feminist and youth-led networks to amplify one another's voices, ensuring that legitimacy is not determined solely by the weight of institutional affiliation. A notable example comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where young women peacebuilders successfully negotiated with their national government to co-author the country's YPS action plan (Tshite & Mungala, 2024). By organizing at the grassroots level and leveraging international partnerships, they created public pressure campaigns that forced policymakers to recognize their contributions (Leclerc & Mugo, 2024). Participants in the process emphasized that, by collectively mobilizing political pressure, they shifted the terms of engagement, thereby making their participation inevitable. This illustrates a key dimension of meaningful participation in this study, where influence is not granted through institutional invitation alone but achieved through collective strategies that reshape power relations, expand access to decision-making, and enable young women to co-determine outcomes.

Another key strategy that young women use to challenge institutional gatekeeping is digital activism and public legitimacy-building (Genon 2025; Jouët, 2018). Social media platforms, online policy discussions, and digital advocacy campaigns have provided new avenues to shape policy debates without requiring institutional endorsement. In Southeast Asia, young women peace activists employed Twitter

campaigns and virtual policy roundtables to expose gendered and age-based exclusions in their countries' national security strategies. By publishing their recommendations online, coordinating with journalists, and forcing policymakers to respond in public forums, they bypassed institutional barriers while also transforming the terms of engagement by redefining where and how legitimacy is constructed, shifting it from closed institutional spaces to more open, public, and participatory arenas and ensured that youth-driven security priorities could not be ignored (Genon, 2025a).

Beyond advocacy, young women are also creating alternative policymaking structures that operate outside traditional institutions. Several respondents cited the importance of youth-led and feminist-driven spaces in which legitimacy is not determined by age, institutional affiliation, or geopolitical power, but by lived experience and collective expertise. In Latin America, a regional feminist youth network independently developed and implemented a youth peace policy, allowing young women to define priorities and shape decision-making processes on their own terms, without institutional backing. Participants in this initiative described how alternative policymaking spaces enabled them to bypass restrictive institutional structures that often limit their agency and ability to convene, and to centre their own voices and expertise without external validation.

These approaches highlight a fundamental shift in how young women engage with power in peace and security spaces. Rather than seeking approval within existing structures, many are actively bypassing, contesting, and, in some cases, incrementally reshaping those structures to ensure that legitimacy is not confined to elite, male-dominated, or Western-dominated institutions.

### *4.6.3. Redefining Expertise*

Power dynamics and legitimacy remain some of the most significant barriers to young women's participation in peace and security processes. Even as inclusion frameworks expand, institutional norms continue to dictate which expertise is recognized, whose voices are heard, and who is deemed credible (Berents, 2024; Simpson, 2018). However, young women across regions are not merely navigating these structures; they are actively contesting and redefining them, employing collective advocacy, digital activism, and feminist policymaking to shift power dynamics in their favour.

The findings from this study underscore that meaningful participation is not merely about gaining access to decision-making spaces but about transforming how those spaces operate (i.e., going “beyond the decision-making table”). Without challenging entrenched hierarchies, participation risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative (Mueller & Rauh, 2024). The following chapter will build on these insights by exploring how young women's strategies of resistance, adaptation, and institutional engagement continue to evolve, ensuring that participation moves beyond mere inclusion toward a fundamental redistribution of power in peace and security policymaking.

## **4.7. Conclusion**

The analysis presented in this chapter underscores the multi-dimensional barriers, tensions, and contradictions that shape young women's participation in peace and security policymaking. The five key themes that emerged—barriers to the meaningful involvement, intersectionality in peace and security frameworks, defining meaningful participation, policy and literature gaps, and power dynamics and legitimacy—reveal the

complex landscape in which young women navigate, contest, and redefine their roles within decision-making spaces. While international frameworks such as the WPS and YPS policies provide a foundation for aspirations toward inclusion, their practical application remains constrained by systemic inequalities, institutional gatekeeping, and deeply ingrained biases regarding legitimacy and expertise.

Across these themes, a common pattern emerges: participation is not merely about access but also about influence and the redistribution of power. Young women's experiences demonstrate that inclusion—when framed as presence without substantive decision-making power—often results in performative engagement rather than structural reconceptualizing and transformation. Many respondents highlighted how peace and security institutions, while promoting youth and gender inclusion rhetorically, continue to operate within exclusionary logics that favor elite, hierarchical, and male-dominated decision-making processes. These structural limitations are further compounded by intersectional barriers, where young women from racialized, LGBTQI+, and lower socio-economic backgrounds face additional challenges in asserting their legitimacy and securing meaningful roles within these spaces.

The barriers to meaningful participation outlined in this study demonstrate the layers of exclusion that shape access to decision-making on peace and security. Institutional cultures continue to favour traditional security credentials, diplomatic affiliations, and elite educational backgrounds, making it particularly difficult for young women—especially those from grassroots movements or conflict-affected regions—to be recognized as credible actors. Linguistic hierarchies further reinforce exclusion, with English hegemony in global policymaking forums creating an uneven playing field where

fluency is often mistaken for expertise. These structural challenges are not accidental but are deeply embedded in the historical and geopolitical power structures that define peace and security governance.

Beyond structural barriers, intersectionality remains one of the most under-addressed gaps in WPS and YPS practice. While these frameworks aim to promote youth and gender inclusion, they often fail to account for the multiple, overlapping identities that shape young women's experiences of exclusion and marginalization. As this chapter has demonstrated, participation is not experienced in a vacuum; it is conditioned by intersections of gender, race, class, geography, and sexuality, which determine whose voices are heard, whose contributions are valued, and whose presence is welcomed.

At the same time, young women's own definitions of meaningful participation often diverge from institutional interpretations. While policymakers tend to measure inclusion through participation in advisory boards, consultations, and formal policy dialogues, young women consistently emphasize the need for co-creation, shared decision-making, and direct influence over agendas. This misalignment limits the transformative potential of participation frameworks, as institutions often prioritize presence over power (quantitative versus qualitative), consultation over influence, and visibility over substantive engagement.

The disconnect between policy rhetoric and implementation remains a significant challenge to the effective implementation of the WPS and YPS policies. The policy and literature gaps identified in this study further demonstrate that the existing frameworks remain largely aspirational, with limited accountability mechanisms, funding structures, or enforcement measures that would ensure young women's participation translates into

actual decision-making power. Respondents expressed frustration with repetitive consultations that did not translate into meaningful policy shifts, as well as the reliance on quantitative metrics.

Perhaps the most defining challenge young women face is the issue of power and legitimacy. Participation does not automatically confer credibility, as young women must continually navigate deeply entrenched hierarchies of expertise, authority, and recognition that continue to privilege older, male, and institutionally affiliated actors. Even when they gain access to policymaking spaces, they often face scrutiny, must justify their presence, or are relegated to junior roles despite their expertise. This credibility gap is particularly evident in how institutions determine whose knowledge is considered valuable, with Western, elite, and institutional voices still being prioritized over grassroots and Global South perspectives.

However, young women are not merely navigating these barriers; they are actively resisting them, using collective advocacy, digital activism, and youth-led policymaking spaces to redefine the terms of legitimacy and shift power dynamics in their favour. Their strategies challenge conventional models of participation, demonstrating that influence need not be granted by institutions; it can be claimed through collective action and alternative governance models. The coalition-building, feminist policymaking frameworks, and digital activism strategies identified in this study illustrate new ways of engaging with and reshaping peace and security structures beyond institutional validation.

These findings contribute to broader theoretical debates on participation, expertise, and legitimacy in peace and security. They reinforce existing critiques that

institutional inclusion efforts remain insufficient unless accompanied by structural transformations that reallocate decision-making power, address intersectional inequalities, and create sustained pathways for young women's leadership. At the same time, they challenge dominant assumptions in WPS and YPS literature by demonstrating that young women are not simply passive recipients of inclusion efforts; they are active agents of change, developing innovative models of participation that transcend conventional institutional boundaries.

Reflecting on the systemic patterns identified in this analysis, it is clear that young women's exclusion from peace and security policymaking is not an isolated issue but a symptom of broader institutional inequalities. Their experiences highlight the limitations of current policy frameworks, which—despite commitments to inclusion—do not fundamentally alter the conditions that sustain exclusion. Meaningful participation cannot be achieved simply by adding more young women into existing structures; it requires a fundamental rethinking of how expertise, leadership, and decision-making power are conceptualized and distributed.

The next chapters will build on this thematic analysis by shifting focus to in-depth thematic examples and personal narratives, offering an understanding of how young women navigate these barriers in specific contexts. These interview-based analyses will further explore how strategies of resistance, adaptation, and transformation continue to evolve across diverse regions and policy spaces.

Ultimately, this dissertation does not simply seek to document barriers; it aims to highlight possibilities for systemic change identified by young women. While the challenges are undeniable, so are the strategies, innovations, and leadership models that

young women continue to develop. By examining how young women contest, redefine, and transform their participation in peace and security policymaking, the following chapters will provide a regionally grounded, intersectional, and action-oriented perspective on what meaningful participation entails in practice.

## **Chapter 5: Navigating Higher Education as First-Generation Scholars in Peace and Security**

### **5.1. Introduction**

Higher education is frequently positioned within peace and security policy discourse as a neutral pathway to participation, expertise, and influence (Simpson, 2018). Within both the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) policies, education is often invoked as a mechanism for building capacity, strengthening leadership, and preparing young women to engage meaningfully in policymaking spaces thereby reinforcing the assumption that access to education translates into access to participation and influence. Yet, as critical scholarship has long noted, concepts such as “participation” and “empowerment”<sup>5</sup> are often mobilized in ways that obscure underlying power relations, functioning as aspirational language rather than transformative practice (Cornwall & Brock, 2005).

For first-generation scholars—young women who are the first in their families to access higher education or who lack intergenerational ties to academic and policy institutions—education operates as both an entry point and a site of continued negotiation. While university access can provide skills, language, and institutional recognition that facilitate engagement in peace and security spaces, it does not necessarily translate into authority, influence, or decision-making power. Respondents’ experiences complicate linear narratives that equate education with inclusion, revealing a more conditional and uneven form of participation instead.

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<sup>5</sup> See Naila Kabeer’s initial critiques of empowerment published in 1999, later explored in Chapter 7.

This chapter examines how higher education shapes first-generation young women's engagement with peace and security policymaking, drawing on ten in-depth interviews with respondents working across diverse regional, linguistic, and socio-economic contexts. Rather than treating education as an individual achievement or deficit, the chapter situates it within broader systems by examining how educational credentials, institutional affiliations, and access to academic networks function as markers of credibility and legitimacy, shaping who is recognized as an authoritative participant in policy spaces of power that structure access to legitimacy, recognition, and authority in WPS and YPS policy debates. In this sense, education functions less as a solution to exclusion than as part of the institutional infrastructure through which participation is enabled, filtered, and constrained.

The analysis builds on the core themes developed earlier in the thesis and outlined in Chapter 4—barriers to meaningful participation, intersectionality, power and legitimacy, and the gap between policy commitments and practice. It foregrounds how education intersects with other structural conditions, including economic precarity, linguistic hierarchies, institutional prestige, and professional norms. Together, these dynamics shape not only who enters peace and security debates, but who remains, whose contributions are recognized, and whose knowledge is treated as authoritative.

Importantly, respondents did not describe higher education as irrelevant or inherently exclusionary. Many framed education as instrumental in facilitating initial access to peace and security work, particularly in contexts where credentials function as informal prerequisites for participation. At the same time, they were clear that educational access alone did not disrupt entrenched hierarchies within policymaking

spaces. Participation was often experienced as provisionally granted, but contingent on continued performance, availability, and alignment with institutional expectations.

By centring first-generation perspectives, this chapter offers a critical lens on participation within the WPS and YPS policies. It moves beyond questions of access to interrogate how legitimacy is produced, how authority is distributed, and how inclusion can occur without a corresponding redistribution of power. In doing so, it sets the groundwork for examining the material, linguistic, and professional conditions that shape participation in peace and security spaces, and for understanding why education, while necessary for some forms of access, remains insufficient as a pathway to meaningful inclusion.

## **5.2. Education, Credentials, and the Politics of Legitimacy in Peace and Security**

Across interviews, young women drew a clear distinction between having higher education and being recognized as credible within peace and security spaces. While degrees were often necessary to gain access to WPS and YPS processes, respondents consistently noted that credentials did not translate automatically into authority, influence, or trust. Legitimacy, in their accounts, was relational and unevenly distributed, shaped by institutional prestige, network proximity, and geopolitical location rather than by education alone.

Several young women described learning—often through experience rather than explicit guidance—that peace and security institutions relied on a narrow set of markers to assess credibility. These markers went beyond formal qualifications to include where one studied, who endorsed one's work, and how closely one's profile aligned with dominant institutional norms. As a result, education functioned less as a guarantee of

inclusion than as an entry condition into a secondary process of validation, in which some credentials carried significantly more weight than others.

This section examines how educational credentials operate as signals of legitimacy in peace and security policymaking, and how these signals intersect with Global North-Global South hierarchies and institutional ecosystems. It highlights how first-generation scholars navigated spaces where recognition was often “borrowed”<sup>6</sup> from institutional affiliation rather than grounded in substantive expertise or lived experience.

### *5.2.1. Degrees Versus Credibility in WPS and YPS*

Young women interviewees consistently distinguished between having an education and being taken seriously within peace and security policymaking spaces. While higher education was often a prerequisite for entry, it did not automatically confer credibility. Instead, legitimacy was described as something that had to be continually demonstrated, negotiated, and, in some cases, “borrowed” through association with particular institutions, individuals, or networks, as noted above.

Several respondents reflected that academic degrees functioned less as evidence of expertise than as signals of institutional alignment. In WPS and YPS policy debates, where participation is formally encouraged but informally regulated, educational credentials operated as shorthand indicators of professionalism and reliability. However, this shorthand was unevenly applied. Degrees from under-resourced, non-Western, or less internationally recognized institutions were frequently treated as weaker markers of

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<sup>6</sup> The term “borrowed” is used here to signal that legitimacy in peace and security spaces is not treated as inherent to individuals’ expertise, but is instead temporarily awarded through association with recognized institutions, credentials, or actors.

competence, regardless of respondents' substantive knowledge or experience revealing how power operates through the validation of certain institutional pathways over others, shaping whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate and whose participation is taken seriously. As a result, respondents learned that education mattered not simply in terms of attainment, but in terms of where and how it was acquired which has direct implications for meaningful participation, as it conditions access to influence, limits the uptake of diverse perspectives, and reinforces existing hierarchies within policymaking spaces.

This distinction shaped respondents' experiences of participation. While education enabled access to meetings, consultations, and fellowships, credibility was often conditional on external validation. Several respondents described situations in which their contributions were acknowledged only after being endorsed by senior academics, international organizations, or well-known institutions. In this sense, legitimacy was not wholly owned but mediated, circulating through institutional prestige rather than residing in the young women's expertise.

Global North-Global South asymmetries were particularly pronounced. Credentials associated with institutions in Europe or North America were widely perceived as transferable across peace and security contexts, while qualifications rooted in local or regional institutions required additional justification. Interviewees from the Global South noted that their expertise was frequently framed as "contextual or experiential"—contributions treated as testimonial—rather than as analytical or strategic, reinforcing hierarchies in which certain forms of knowledge are treated as universal and others as supplementary. These dynamics echo broader critiques of how peace and

security institutions continue to privilege Eurocentric standards of credibility and authority (Tikly, 2020; Unterhalter, 2017).

For first-generation scholars, these hierarchies were intensified by the absence of intergenerational familiarity with academic and policy norms. Respondents described learning—often belatedly—that credibility in WPS and YPS spaces was shaped as much by institutional reputation and network proximity as by academic performance. Without access to informal guidance on which credentials counted or mattered, respondents frequently entered peace and security spaces assuming that education alone would suffice, only to encounter additional layers of evaluation.

Importantly, young women did not reject education as irrelevant. Rather, they identified a gap between the promise of education as a pathway to participation and the realities of how legitimacy is constructed in peace and security policymaking. Degrees opened doors, but they did not dismantle the hierarchies that determined whose voices carried authority once inside. Participation, in this context, was enabled but not equalized, revealing how educational access can coexist with persistent forms of exclusion within WPS and YPS spaces.

### *5.2.2. Institutional Reputation, Networks, and Colonial Hierarchies*

Beyond formal credentials, respondents emphasized that participation in peace and security policymaking was structured through dense institutional ecosystems in which opportunities circulated unevenly. Fellowships, speaking roles, consultancies, and advisory positions were rarely secured through open processes alone; instead, they were secured through established networks linked to a relatively small number of universities, donors, and international organizations reflecting how influence is embedded within

institutional hierarchies that privilege proximity to established centres of power and limit access for those outside these networks. Within WPS and YPS spaces, institutional reputation functioned as a powerful organizing principle, shaping who was visible, who was trusted, and who was repeatedly invited to contribute thereby reproducing hierarchies of legitimacy that privilege certain actors, forms of knowledge, and institutional affiliations over others.

Young women described learning that pathways to peace and security were less linear than they appeared from the outside. Access to one opportunity often generated access to the next, creating cumulative advantage for those already embedded in recognized institutional circuits highlighting how participation is structured through the uneven distribution of institutional opportunities rather than solely through individual qualifications or educational attainment. A recommendation from a well-positioned academic, a fellowship affiliated with a known donor, or a short-term placement in an international organization could significantly alter a young woman's trajectory. Conversely, the absence of such institutional anchors and access to these opportunity structures left equally qualified individuals on the margins, navigating uncertainty and discontinuity despite sustained engagement in peacebuilding work.

These dynamics were closely tied to colonial hierarchies in knowledge production (Ishkanian et al., 2025). Respondents noted that expertise associated with institutions in the Global North travelled more easily across contexts, while knowledge rooted in local, national, or regional institutions was frequently treated as needing translation or validation. In WPS and YPS policymaking, this asymmetry shaped which analyses were treated as strategic and which were framed as anecdotal or contextual. The result was not

only differential access, but differential authority, reinforcing longstanding critiques of Eurocentric standards of expertise in peace and security governance (Tikly, 2020; Unterhalter, 2017).

These patterns also reflect normative expectations about youth participation within peace and security governance, often theorized through the figure of the “good youth.” As Helen Berents and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy argue, youth inclusion is frequently conditional upon young people being legible as responsible, professional, non-confrontational, and aligned with dominant institutional norms. In WPS and YPS spaces, this idealized youth subject is often produced through educational and institutional markers: degrees from recognized universities, fluency in policy language, and familiarity with donor and organizational priorities. The young women’s accounts suggest that institutional reputation operates not only as a signal of competence, but as a mechanism through which certain forms of youth participation are rendered acceptable, while others—particularly those rooted in local activism, lived experience, or non-Western educational pathways—are treated as supplementary or in need of translation (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015).

Institutional reputation thus operated as a proxy for authority. In practice, this meant that peace and security spaces often relied on affiliation to assess credibility, rather than engaging directly with the substance of participants’ contributions. Respondents observed that individuals affiliated with recognized organizations were more readily positioned as experts, even when their proximity to affected communities was limited. By contrast, those with deep community-based experience but weaker institutional backing

were more likely to be positioned as implementers or beneficiaries, rather than as knowledge producers (Leclerc & Rouhshahbaz, 2025; Leclerc & Rouhshahbaz, 2021).

For first-generation scholars, these patterns were particularly consequential. Without inherited access to academic or policy networks, respondents navigated peace and security spaces largely through trial and error. Several described what they came to understand as a “hidden architecture” of participation: knowing which institutions mattered, how to approach senior figures, and when to convert activism into professionally legible outputs revealing participation not as a static point of access, but as an ongoing, relational process shaped by interactions, expectations, and the ability to navigate evolving institutional norms. Peers with generational ties to academia or international policy spaces often had access to this knowledge informally, whereas first-generation scholars learned through missed opportunities, unpaid labour, or delayed recognition.

Within the WPS and YPS policies, these institutional dynamics complicate claims of inclusion. While policy discourse increasingly emphasises youth and women’s participation, the circulation of opportunities through elite institutional networks limits whose participation becomes visible and influential. In this sense, inclusion does not occur on a level playing field; it is mediated through reputational economies that reproduce colonial and class-based hierarchies, even as they outwardly diversify representation.

Interviewees’ accounts suggest that meaningful participation cannot be assessed solely by the presence of individuals in peace and security debates. It also requires attention to how authority is produced, how opportunities are distributed, and whose

knowledge is allowed to travel. Without confronting the institutional ecosystems that structure participation, efforts to broaden inclusion within WPS and YPS risk expanding access at the margins while leaving core hierarchies intact.

### **5.3. The Material and Linguistic Conditions of Participation**

Respondents' accounts made clear that participation in peace and security spaces is shaped not only by credentials and institutional recognition, but by material and linguistic conditions that determine who can remain present, visible, and engaged over time. These conditions operate prior to, alongside, and beyond formal moments of inclusion, shaping participation in ways that are often rendered invisible within WPS and YPS policies.

Rather than experiencing exclusion as a single barrier, respondents described navigating layered constraints that gradually filtered participation, producing patterns of uneven access and influence.

#### *5.3.1. Economic Precarity and Conditional Inclusion*

Young women consistently described economic precarity as a central yet underacknowledged factor shaping their participation in peace and security policymaking. While WPS and YPS policies emphasize inclusion, respondents' experiences revealed that participation was often structured around assumptions of financial flexibility, geographic mobility, and unpaid availability. These assumptions functioned as material filters, determining who could remain present in peace and security spaces over time.

Peace and security pathways were frequently described as reliant on unpaid or underpaid labour. Internships without stipends, short-term consultancies with delayed

payment, and volunteer roles framed as “exposure” were common entry points into WPS and YPS spaces. For first-generation scholars, these arrangements posed significant barriers. Several respondents described declining prestigious opportunities because they could not afford to relocate, self-fund travel, or take time away from paid employment. Others accepted unpaid roles at considerable personal cost, including debt accumulation, exhaustion, and heightened financial insecurity. These dynamics reflect broader critiques of the expectation that youth peacebuilders contribute expertise without adequate institutional support (Berents, 2018).

Importantly, respondents framed these experiences not as isolated hardships, but as part of a cumulative pattern. Early financial constraints limited participation in unpaid extracurricular or professional activities, thereby reducing access to networks, references, and subsequent opportunities. Over time, this produced uneven trajectories in which those with economic support were able to build continuity and visibility, while others experienced fragmented engagement reflecting the absence of enabling environments and institutional supports necessary to sustain participation over time. From this perspective, participation was not simply impeded by a single barrier but gradually redirected by the accumulation of missed opportunities (Stephens et al., 2012).

Rather than outright exclusion, respondents described a form of conditional inclusion. Young women were invited to participate in peace and security spaces, but only if they could subsidise their own involvement. Those able to absorb the costs of unpaid labour, international travel, and professional availability were more likely to be perceived as committed, reliable, and representative. This dynamic shaped whose voices were repeatedly amplified within WPS and YPS forums, even as participation was

formally framed as open and inclusive thereby reproducing socio-economic hierarchies in which access to resources translates into greater visibility, credibility, and influence within decision-making spaces.

Young women were clear that these conditions were not accidental. Several framed them as predictable outcomes of institutional models that externalize the costs of participation onto individuals, while retaining decision-making authority within well-resourced organizations. In this context, inclusion functioned less as a redistributive practice than as a legitimacy strategy—allowing institutions to demonstrate responsiveness to youth and gender inclusion without addressing the material inequalities that structure access in the first place.

These findings underscore the limits of participation frameworks that focus on representation without confronting economic conditions (OSGEY & UNOY, 2023). For first-generation scholars in particular, the expectation of unpaid or self-funded engagement created a stark tension between participation and survival. Meaningful inclusion in peace and security policymaking, respondents suggested, cannot be separated from questions of material support, sustainability, and institutional responsibility.

### *5.3.2. Language, Authority, and Epistemic Hierarchy*

Alongside material constraints, respondents identified language as a critical condition shaping participation in peace and security spaces. English dominance was not experienced simply as a practical challenge, but as a structuring feature of authority—shaping who could speak with confidence, whose contributions were treated as coherent, and whose knowledge was recognized as legitimate. While multilingualism is often celebrated rhetorically within WPS and YPS discourse (for example in Simpson’s 2018

*The Missing Peace*), respondents' experiences suggest that it is rarely supported in ways that enable equitable participation.

Respondents described the labour involved in participating in English-dominated peace and security spaces: preparing interventions in advance, monitoring accent and phrasing, and simplifying analysis to avoid misunderstanding or dismissal. These strategies were not framed as matters of individual preference, but as adaptive responses to environments in which fluency, speed, and confidence were implicitly treated as indicators of competence. Those who spoke English as an additional language often described participating under conditions of heightened self-surveillance, aware that linguistic missteps could undermine their credibility.

Language hierarchies shaped not only who spoke, but how discussions unfolded. Young women noted that those with high levels of English fluency were able to intervene quickly, improvise responses, and set the conversational pace often leading to forms of unconscious exclusion, where participation was shaped not by explicit intent but by the implicit privileging of speed, fluency, and linguistic confidence. By contrast, participants working across multiple languages often required more time to process and translate internally, only to find that discussions had moved on. This uneven tempo subtly privileged certain participants while marginalizing others, even in settings formally committed to inclusion.

Several respondents linked language directly to epistemic authority.<sup>7</sup> Accent discrimination and assumptions about professionalism were often intertwined, producing

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<sup>7</sup> In this context, epistemic authority refers to the recognition of certain individuals or groups as credible and legitimate producers of knowledge, whose contributions are more likely to be accepted, taken up, and acted upon. In this study, it highlights how language, accent, and institutional affiliation shape whose knowledge is considered authoritative within peace and security policy spaces.

situations in which English proficiency functioned as a proxy for intelligence or expertise. Multilingual participants described expending energy countering stereotypes while simultaneously engaging in substantive policy work. Over time, these dynamics contributed to self-censorship, including limiting interventions, avoiding disagreement, and withholding complex analysis for fear of being misunderstood or mischaracterized.

Language hierarchies also shaped access to knowledge itself. Respondents noted that key policy documents, funding calls, and scholarly debates in peace and security circulated primarily in English. As a result, academic and activist work produced in other languages—often deeply grounded in local peacebuilding practice—remained peripheral within international WPS and YPS forums. This reinforces a structural imbalance in which English-language scholarship circulates as universal, while other epistemologies are treated as contextual or supplementary. As Ingrid Piller (2016) argues, language functions not only as a communicative tool but as a mechanism for distributing authority, determining which forms of knowledge are legible and which remain marginal.

These dynamics have concrete implications for participation. Where English-language publication and performance are treated as markers of legitimacy, regional scholarship and activist knowledge produced in other languages are less likely to be cited, funded, or incorporated into policy design, as reported by participants, who noted that work produced in local languages was often overlooked in favour of English-language outputs when informing policy discussions, funding decisions, and citations. Linguistic hierarchies thus reinforce broader knowledge hierarchies within peace and security governance, shaping not only who speaks in meetings, but which bodies of work are recognized as constitutive of “the field.”

Rather than duplicating this analysis, the following chapter examines language in greater depth, focusing specifically on how working in English as a second or third language shapes participation, authority, and resistance in peace and security spaces. Taken together, this chapter and the following highlight how material and linguistic conditions operate in tandem, filtering participation even where inclusion is formally endorsed.

#### **5.4. Professionalization, Education, and the Reshaping of Activism**

Young women frequently described higher education as a key site where their political commitments were translated into forms that were legible within peace and security institutions. While education expanded access to policy spaces, it also shaped how activism was expressed, evaluated, and rewarded. Rather than enabling participation on respondents' own terms, educational pathways often encouraged forms of engagement that aligned with institutional norms, donor expectations, and state-facing frameworks. This process did not eliminate political commitments, but it altered how they could be articulated within WPS and YPS spaces.

##### *5.4.1. From Political Commitment to Institutional Legibility*

Young women frequently described higher education as reshaping not only where they could participate in peace and security work, but also how their political commitments were expressed and received. Education functioned as a process through which activism was translated into forms that were legible to donors, governments, and professional

policy environments. While this translation enabled access, it also altered the terms on which engagement was valued.

Several respondents reflected that peace and security spaces rewarded particular modes of activism—those framed as constructive, technical, and aligned with institutional priorities. Project-based initiatives, policy briefs, and consultative roles were encouraged, whereas more confrontational, disruptive, or structural (often termed “radical”) critiques were often sidelined. Education played a key role in facilitating this shift, equipping respondents with the language and formats required to engage institutions, but also signalling which forms of political expression were considered acceptable.

This process was not experienced as overt suppression, but as a subtle form of disciplining. Interviewees described learning, through repeated interactions in policy spaces—such as being interrupted, receiving selective feedback, observing which interventions were acknowledged or dismissed, and adapting to implicit expectations communicated through tone, response, and institutional norms—, often implicitly, how to calibrate their interventions: moderating tone, framing demands in policy-friendly language, and aligning critique with existing agendas. Over time, political commitments were rearticulated as professional competencies: skills in facilitation, analysis, and advocacy that could be demonstrated without directly challenging institutional authority. As Riyad A. Shahjahan (2014) notes, such processes can depoliticize activism by translating dissent into administratively manageable forms.

For first-generation scholars, this professionalization carried particular weight. Without alternative pathways into peace and security spaces, education often became the

primary means of sustaining participation. Respondents described a tension between remaining politically grounded and becoming institutionally legible. Some worried that adapting to professional norms risked diluting the urgency or radical intent of their work, even as it expanded their access to policy arenas by requiring them to frame critiques in ways that align with institutional priorities, moderate the language of their demands, and prioritize forms of knowledge that are recognized within policy spaces, thereby shaping not only how they participate but what forms of participation are possible.

Importantly, young women did not frame professionalization as entirely negative. Many recognized its strategic value, allowing them to navigate institutions more effectively and to advance certain priorities from within. However, they were also attentive to its limits. Several noted that professionalized forms of engagement were more likely to be rewarded when they aligned with donor priorities or State interests, raising questions about whose political agendas could be advanced through institutional channels.

Within WPS and YPS contexts, these dynamics underscore a broader tension between inclusion and transformation. While professionalization (see again Berents and McEvoy-Levy's 2015 critique of the "good youth") can broaden participation, it can also constrain the range of political claims heard by privileging those that are articulated in policy-friendly language, align with institutional priorities, and avoid direct challenges to existing power structures. Education thus operates not only as a pathway into peace and security spaces, but also as a mechanism that reshapes activism itself, privileging forms of engagement compatible with existing power structures.

#### *5.4.2. Representational Pressure and Internal Hierarchies*

As interviewees gained access to peace and security spaces through education and professionalization, many encountered a new and often unspoken form of pressure: the expectation to represent others. Academic affiliation and institutional visibility frequently positioned first-generation scholars as spokespersons for youth, women, or entire communities, even when their access was shaped more by institutional pathways than by collective mandate. This dynamic introduced new hierarchies within activist and peacebuilding spaces, complicating how participation was experienced and understood.

Several young women described being invited to speak on panels, contribute to consultations, or advise on policy precisely because they were legible to institutions: educated, articulate, and able to navigate professional norms. Participants contrasted these experiences with earlier stages of their engagement, where similar contributions had not been solicited or recognized, suggesting that such invitations were contingent on meeting institutional expectations of credibility. While these opportunities expanded reach and visibility, they also raised concerns about accountability. Young women questioned whether their presence was being used to stand in for broader constituencies whose voices remained structurally excluded. In WPS and YPS contexts, representation thus became both an opportunity and a burden.

This representational pressure was particularly acute for first-generation scholars. Because of their academic affiliations, respondents were often asked to speak on behalf of youth or women, yet they had limited influence over decision-making processes. Participation, in these cases, was framed around voice rather than authority. Interviewees noted that while their perspectives were welcomed in discussions, they were rarely

positioned to shape outcomes, priorities, or resource allocation. This reinforced a hierarchy in which inclusion was symbolic, rather than transformative.

Respondents also reflected on how education reshaped internal dynamics within activist communities themselves. Those with academic credentials or institutional affiliations were more likely to be selected for external engagements, sometimes displacing long-standing activists or community leaders whose expertise was grounded in lived experience rather than formal education. While young women valued the opportunities they received, many expressed discomfort at being elevated in this way, particularly when it created distance from the movements that had initially informed their political commitments.

These dynamics illustrate how education can simultaneously expand access and produce new exclusions. By privileging certain forms of legitimacy and knowledge, peace and security institutions inadvertently reshape who is seen as an appropriate representative. Over time, this can narrow the range of voices that circulate within WPS and YPS debates or who sits “at the table,” even as participation appears to broaden. Young women emphasized that representation without mandate risks reproducing the same hierarchies that inclusion efforts seek to dismantle.

Several respondents described navigating this tension by serving as intermediaries, bringing community concerns into institutional spaces while remaining accountable to those excluded from those spaces. However, this bridging role was emotionally and politically demanding. It required constant negotiation: translating institutional language without losing political substance, and participating in spaces that

offered visibility but limited influence. For first-generation scholars, the cost of this role was often absorbed individually, without institutional recognition or support.

Taken together, these accounts highlight that participation in peace and security policymaking is shaped not only by access to education but also by how representation is interpreted and valued within institutional contexts, as well as organized and rewarded. Inclusion efforts that rely on a small number of legible representatives risk reinforcing internal hierarchies and masking deeper exclusions. Young women's experiences suggest that meaningful participation requires attention not only to who is present, but to how representation is constructed, whose authority is recognized, and how accountability to broader constituencies is maintained as reflected in participants' emphasis on practices such as collective agenda-setting, ongoing consultation with their networks, and mechanisms for feedback and validation that extend beyond individual representation. These insights point toward more ideal forms of participation as relational, collective, and accountable processes, rather than individualized forms of inclusion that concentrate visibility and influence in a limited number of actors.

### **5.5. Meaningful Participation Through a First-Generation Lens**

Taken together, respondents' experiences complicate dominant understandings of participation within the WPS and YPS policy frameworks. Rather than describing participation as a linear outcome of access or capacity-building, first-generation scholars framed it as a negotiated and often fragile position, shaped by conditional inclusion, uneven authority, and persistent power asymmetries. Participation, in this sense, was not simply about being present in peace and security spaces, but about navigating the limits of what that presence enabled.

For many respondents from the Global South, access to higher education—particularly opportunities to study abroad—was framed explicitly as both a privilege and a responsibility. Several described being acutely aware that their educational trajectories were enabled by structural inequalities that excluded others in their communities. Studying abroad, in particular, was experienced as a profound turning point: it created access to credentials, networks, and institutional recognition, while simultaneously producing physical and emotional distance from the communities that had shaped their upbringings and their “why.”

This distance was often accompanied by guilt. Young women did not describe guilt as a purely personal emotion but as a relational and political experience, rooted in awareness of who could leave, who remained, and whose labour continued to sustain community-level peacebuilding. Several reflected on the tension of being celebrated internationally as youth or women leaders, while knowing that peers engaged in frontline activism lacked similar visibility or resources. Education, in this sense, was not experienced as an unqualified achievement but as an opportunity that carried ethical weight.

This sense of responsibility shaped respondents’ understanding of meaningful participation. Many described feeling compelled to “give back,” whether by centring community priorities in policy spaces, mentoring others, or attempting to channel institutional resources toward local initiatives. At the same time, young women were clear about the limits of this role. Acting as a bridge between institutions and communities required constant translation, emotional labour, and political navigation, work that was rarely recognized as expertise within peace and security frameworks.

Imposter syndrome also emerged within this context, not as an individual psychological condition, but as a rational response to conditional legitimacy. First-generation scholars—particularly those educated abroad—described feeling that their authority was provisional, dependent on continued performance and alignment with institutional norms. Even when they possessed deep contextual knowledge, their legitimacy in peace and security domains was often mediated by educational credentials and institutional affiliation rather than by community-based expertise. For example, through the prioritization of formal qualifications in selection processes, the weighting of institutional affiliations in invitations to participate, and the greater uptake of contributions framed through recognized academic or policy conventions.

Several respondents described participation as being visible without being decisive. They were invited into consultations, panels, and advisory spaces, often precisely because they embodied the kind of educated, mobile, and articulate youth that institutions sought to showcase (*they were “the good youth,”* described by Berents and McEvoy-Levy, 2015). Yet decision-making power remained concentrated elsewhere. In these cases, participation functioned as consultation rather than influence, reinforcing a gap between the rhetoric of inclusion within the WPS and YPS policies and the realities of authority.

Education thus operated as an enabling but insufficient condition for meaningful participation. While it facilitated access and recognition, it did not redistribute power or create the conditions through which participants could shape agendas, influence decisions, or ensure accountability for how their contributions were taken up or unsettle the hierarchies that structured peace and security governance. For first-generation scholars

from the Global South, this gap was particularly pronounced: the very pathways that enabled entry into global policy spaces also risked reproducing distance, representation without mandate, and responsibility without authority.

By foregrounding these experiences, this chapter reframes participation as a question of power and relational responsibility. It highlights how education can expand access while intensifying ethical and political tensions for those positioned at the margins of both institutions and communities. These insights underscore the need for WPS and YPS policies to move beyond presence-based measures of participation and toward approaches that recognize the uneven costs, responsibilities, and risks imposed on those they include.

## **5.6. Conclusion**

This chapter has examined how higher education shapes the participation of first-generation young women in peace and security policymaking, particularly within the WPS and YPS policy frameworks. Rather than operating as a neutral or equalizing force, education emerged as part of the institutional infrastructure through which legitimacy, access, and authority are unevenly distributed. While educational credentials facilitated entry into peace and security debates, they did not dismantle the hierarchies that determine whose knowledge is recognized and whose participation carries influence.

Respondents' experiences challenge participation narratives found in public accounts that treat education as a sufficient condition for inclusion. For many—especially respondents from the Global South—access to higher education, and in particular the opportunity to study abroad, was framed as both a privilege and a responsibility. This access enabled entry into global policy debates, but it also produced distance from the

communities that had shaped their political commitments. Participation, in this context, was often accompanied by ethical tension: being visible internationally while remaining acutely aware of those excluded from the same opportunities.

The chapter has shown that while education expanded access, it did not guarantee meaningful participation. Young women frequently described being present in peace and security spaces without the authority to shape policy agendas, allocate resources, or influence outcomes. Inclusion often took the form of consultation rather than decision-making, reinforcing a pattern in which young women's participation was valued symbolically but constrained substantively. These dynamics were compounded by material precarity, linguistic hierarchies, and professional norms that filtered participation over time.

This chapter advances the argument that education enabled access without redistributing power. First-generation scholars were often positioned as intermediaries—bridging institutions and communities—without institutional recognition of the labour this role entailed or the authority to effect structural change. For respondents from the Global South, this intermediary position carried particular weight, as expectations to “give back” coexisted with limited capacity to reshape the systems they had entered. Responsibility, in these cases, was individualized, while power remained institutional.

These findings point to significant implications for WPS and YPS participation frameworks. When participation is assessed primarily through indicators of presence, representation, or educational attainment, deeper inequalities remain obscured. The experiences documented in this chapter suggest that meaningful participation cannot be reduced to access or credentials; it requires attention to who sets agendas, whose

knowledge travels, and how authority is distributed within peace and security governance.

The chapter also underscores the importance of examining the conditions under which participation is sustained. Economic precarity, unpaid labour, and linguistic dominance shaped not only who could enter peace and security debates, but who could remain engaged over time. These dynamics reveal how inclusion can coexist with exclusion, particularly when institutions externalize the costs of participation onto individuals.

The following chapter builds on these insights by examining language as a distinct yet interconnected dimension of participation. While Chapter 5 has focused on how education structures access and legitimacy, Chapter 6 explores how working in English as a second or third language shapes authority, voice, and exclusion within peace and security spaces. Together, these chapters inform the broader analytical discussion in Chapter 8, which reflects on the implications of these findings for participation, power, and accountability within the WPS and YPS policies.

## Chapter 6: English Dominance and Exclusion in Peace and Security

### 6.1. Introduction

In international peace and security debates, language determines not only who can speak, but whose voices are heard, legitimized, and taken seriously. English, in particular, has become the dominant working language in most policymaking global and regional arenas. This phenomenon is quietly reinforcing hierarchies that are often invisible but deeply consequential, such as privileging native or near-native speakers, favouring those trained in Western academic and policy traditions, and elevating certain forms of expression as more “professional,” credible, or policy-relevant than others. This persists despite the normative commitments of global governance institutions—such as the United Nations’ recognition of multiple official languages—which, while formally promoting linguistic diversity, continue to operate in practice through English-dominant processes that reproduce unequal access to participation and influence. While peace and security policies such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas invoke the concepts of inclusivity and participation, they rarely interrogate the linguistic norms that shape the terms of that participation.

In practice, young women who do not speak English as their first or strongest language face unspoken conditions when invited into policymaking discussions. Access is not merely a matter of being “at the table”<sup>8</sup>; it often requires developing fluency, confidence, and familiarity with institutional discourse that was never designed with them in mind. The dominance of English functions as a mechanism of legitimacy, limiting the

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<sup>8</sup> Referring to policymaking or policy discussions conducted around a figurative or literal table. Advocates commonly demand a “seat at the table” to signal a desire for inclusion in policy discussions and decision-making processes. This concept was also introduced in Chapter 4 and 5.

extent to which diverse experiences and forms of knowledge are recognized or validated within these settings.

Language barriers are often framed as technical challenges to be overcome by offering interpretation or encouraging English-language training. However, this framing misses the structural dynamics at play. Language operates as an embedded form of power that shapes who is seen as credible, articulate, and considered an expert. In many multilateral and donor environments, the assumption remains that English fluency signals intelligence and leadership as reflected in participants' accounts of being taken more seriously when speaking fluently, having their contributions more readily acknowledged, and observing that those with stronger command of English were more frequently invited to speak, lead discussions, or represent their organizations. An assumption that marginalizes those whose expertise is expressed in ways other than those recognized by the dominant culture and language.

This linguistic dominance is not incidental. It is rooted in colonial histories that have shaped which languages—and by extension, whose knowledge—are granted legitimacy in global policy discussions (Zeng & Yang, 2024). As we will explore in this chapter, the historical privileging of English is a legacy of empire, embedded in international institutions that continue to centre Global North ways of knowing and speaking (Nyamekye & Uwen, 2024). This occurs often at the expense of local, indigenous, or non-Western forms of expression.

This chapter begins from the premise that language is central to any conversation about inclusion in peace and security. It takes seriously the idea that language is not a neutral medium, but a social and political filter. Building on the five main themes of this

thesis,<sup>9</sup> it asks: What happens when the ability to speak the language of policy, literally and figuratively, becomes a precondition for influence? How do young women who operate in their second or third language navigate these expectations? And what are the costs, emotional, intellectual, and political, of having to constantly adapt one's way of speaking in order to be heard?

Drawing on ten in-depth interviews and long-standing engagement in peacebuilding spaces and multilingual settings, this chapter explores the ways in which linguistic hierarchies shape legitimacy and participation. It reflects on the burdens placed on those who must constantly translate, whether between languages, contexts, or worlds. While English may enable access to international forums, it can also flatten the complexity of local knowledge, limit expression, and reinforce dominant ways of thinking about peace and security, including the privileging of technocratic policy language, which requires participants to frame their insights in standardized, depoliticized, and institutionally legible terms in order to be recognized within formal decision-making spaces.

At the same time, this chapter resists the idea that non-English first-language speakers are simply disadvantaged, idle participants. Young women are not passive in the face of these dynamics. Many actively challenge the linguistic norms of peace and security spaces, whether by building multilingual networks, co-creating more inclusive platforms, or pushing for shifts in how institutions understand and value participation.

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<sup>9</sup> The five main themes that serve as the *fil conducteur* in this thesis project are outlined in Chapter 4. The themes are: 1) barriers to meaningful participation, 2) intersectionality in peace and security frameworks, 3) defining meaningful participation, 4) policy and literature gaps, and 5) power dynamics and legitimacy.

Their strategies point toward alternative models of engagement, ones that recognize multilingualism as a strength rather than a liability.

The sections that follow examine how language shapes credibility, access, and influence in peace and security policymaking. Through this lens, the chapter reflects on the broader implications of English dominance, including its colonial legacies, and the urgent need to rethink participation not just in terms of who is present, but in whose language, on whose terms, and with what consequences.

## **6.2. Structural Exclusion and Language as Institutional Gatekeeping**

The dominance of English in peace and security policymaking is not only a logistical convenience. It is a structural mechanism that reinforces existing power hierarchies – built on historical legacies of colonialism, the global concentration of political and economic influence in English-speaking or Western institutions, and the privileging of certain forms of knowledge production and communication – and governs who is granted access to influence and decision-making. Institutions such as the African Union, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, European Union, and the UN operate primarily in English (United Nations Office at Geneva, n.d.; African Union Commission, n.d.; Jutatungcharoen, 2022; European Commission, n.d.). By doing so, they are setting the terms of engagement in ways that systematically disadvantage non-English speakers. Despite their global mandates, discussions, documentation, funding applications, and negotiations, they overwhelmingly function within a single linguistic framework, often forcing young women from non-English-speaking contexts to either adapt or remain sidelined.

Language thus operates as an unspoken filter: those proficient in English are presumed ready to participate, while others are treated as less capable, regardless of their policy knowledge or lived experience. This adds an axis of exclusion, layering onto existing inequalities of age, gender, race, and geography. Importantly, English-language proficiency is rarely acknowledged as a structural barrier in its own right. It is naturalized as a neutral prerequisite, rather than recognized as a form of embedded privilege (Pennycook 2017; Fricker 2007).

### *6.2.1. English as the Default Language in Policymaking Spaces*

In global governance, English has become the dominant language of diplomacy, security policy, and multilateral negotiations. Its status as a *lingua franca*<sup>10</sup> in these contexts creates an uneven terrain, in which fluency confers authority and marginalizes those who cannot speak it with ease (Todorova & Todorova, 2018). Young women from non-English-speaking regions must either attain a high level of proficiency or rely on inconsistent translation mechanisms, each of which imposes its own burdens.

Respondents from Chad, Senegal, and Somalia-Kenya reported that English-dominant forums often made them feel like outsiders, regardless of their expertise.<sup>11</sup> A participant from Jordan explained that although she was invited to international dialogues on youth peacebuilding, she struggled to articulate her ideas in English, noting that her contributions felt diminished relative to those of English-speaking peers. Others, such as

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<sup>10</sup> Lingua franca is defined as a common language used between two individuals who do not share the same mother tongue.

<sup>11</sup> In this chapter, all ten interviewees consented to being identified by country of origin, unlike respondents whose experiences are discussed in Chapters 5 and 7. National identifiers are therefore included here to support the analysis of linguistic dynamics and contextual specificity.

a Senegalese respondent, reported pressure to self-edit and simplify their thoughts to be understood. From her perspective, these experiences continually shaped perceptions of her credibility.

Even when translation services are offered, they often fail to provide equitable access, according to interviewees. Respondents from Argentina, Georgia, and Moldova highlighted frequent issues: lack of technical vocabulary, unreliable interpretation, or the flattening of nuanced arguments into simplified statements (as exemplified above by the Senegalese participant). One Argentinian young woman explained that institutional translations often stripped her contributions of complexity, while another from Georgia noted that interpreters unfamiliar with peace and security terminology made it difficult to communicate policy ideas precisely. She emphasized that she felt the nuance and meaning behind her words were lost in translation. Unfortunately, these limitations not only obstruct comprehension. They actively reshape the content and reception of English-language contributions by second-language speakers.

### *6.2.2. Language and Unequal Access to Opportunity*

English also functions as a gatekeeper beyond dialogue, influencing access to funding, leadership roles, and visibility. Many respondents reported that to be eligible for fellowships or professional appointments, they needed near-native fluency (an expectation rarely placed on English speakers in reverse).

A respondent from Somali-Kenya described the years it took to acquire English proficiency before she could access international opportunities. In contrast, her English-speaking peers entered the same spaces without needing to acquire another language, reinforcing a double standard that rewards those already closest to dominant institutions.

A Jordanian participant similarly described how speaking with an accent sometimes undermined her professional authority, even when she held deep policy expertise.

Perhaps most stark is the impact on access to resources. One Senegalese respondent detailed how funding applications, even those aimed at non-English-speaking regions, were available only in English (or poorly translated by digital software that did not accurately capture the context). This systemic design excludes youth-led and grassroots organizations that may lack the resources for language training or professional translation, despite being well-placed to drive local peacebuilding initiatives (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Brigg, 2002)

### *6.2.3. Linguistic Inequality as Structural Exclusion*

The issue is not simply about communication; it reflects deeper systemic imbalances. Language intersects with other exclusions—aged, gendered, racialized, and classed—in ways that magnify disparities for young women from the Global South (Nyamekye & Uwen, 2024; Cameron, 1998). Respondents from Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East described the years of additional effort required to learn English to the level expected in peace and security forums. Unlike their first-language English-speaking counterparts, who could focus on substantive issues, they were expected to invest significant time and energy merely to be included reinforcing earlier discussions in this thesis of the disproportionate burden of participation, where marginalized actors must expend additional labour simply to access and sustain engagement within these spaces.

This dynamic reveals how language functions as a form of institutional gatekeeping. The assumption that English should be the default for peace and security work reflects not only linguistic convenience but also a failure to meaningfully

accommodate diverse forms of knowledge and participation (Piller, 2016; Brock-Utne, 2000). It privileges a narrow epistemic frame and perpetuates colonial legacies by rendering other linguistic contributions peripheral or illegible (Spivak, 1988; Mignolo, 2007).

#### *6.2.4. Language as a Hidden Barrier to Participation*

Importantly, this linguistic exclusion is rarely addressed in policy agendas that claim to be inclusive. English is often treated as the neutral infrastructure through which inclusion occurs, rather than as an exclusionary structure itself. Yet for young women navigating these physical and digital spaces, it is both a practical and symbolic barrier.

This section has shown that language operates on multiple levels: as a barrier to opportunity, a determinant of credibility, and a mechanism that reproduces global hierarchies. While translation may appear to offer a solution, its inadequacy only underscores the extent to which English remains the assumed standard. As the next section will explore, the burden of multilingual engagement—particularly the emotional and cognitive labour required to participate meaningfully—further illustrates how language shapes the terms and conditions of inclusion in peace and security policymaking.

### **6.3. Multilingualism as Labour: The Burden of Constant Translation**

For young women engaged in peace and security policymaking, multilingualism is not simply a skill: it is an unacknowledged form of labour. While the ability to speak multiple languages can facilitate cross-regional collaboration, it often comes with additional demands that first-language or unilingual English speakers are not expected to bear.

Many respondents described being informally tasked with translating discussions, mediating cultural references, or clarifying institutional language for peers. Several respondents claimed that these roles diverted their attention and energy from their own participation. The expectations, rarely compensated or recognized, reproduce unequal dynamics in policymaking discussions and reinforce the perception that multilingualism is a prerequisite for inclusion rather than an institutional responsibility (Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018; Kerfoot & Hyltenstam, 2017).

This section examines the emotional, cognitive, and professional burdens associated with multilingual engagement. It examines how these pressures shape participation, highlighting how language functions not only as a barrier to comprehension but also as a determinant of perceived legitimacy, authority, and credibility.

### *6.3.1. Emotional and Cognitive Strain of Informal Translation*

One of the most persistent challenges faced by English-as-a-second-language speakers is the expectation to serve as real-time interpreters in dialogue settings, including in peace and security policymaking contexts. Even when formal interpretation is available (typically limited to high-level events), informal translation remains a common demand. Respondents from Jordan and Tunisia described being frequently expected to summarize and relay discussions to peers from Arabic-speaking regions. While these efforts are framed as acts of solidarity, they functionally relegate young women to supporting roles, restricting their own engagement and increasing their cognitive load during already high-stakes discussions, raising questions about how such expectations are distributed, and suggesting that linguistic labour is often informally assigned to those perceived as both

capable and accommodating, particularly young women, thereby reflecting broader gendered and generational power asymmetries within these spaces.

A Tunisian participant explained that she often had to split her attention between following the discussion and ensuring others were included, leading to missed opportunities to intervene and difficulty formulating her own arguments under pressure. This dynamic exposes how linguistic labour, while often invisible, directly limits access to influence and recognition (Piller, 2016; Angouri, 2013).

Moreover, translation in these contexts extends beyond language. Respondents from Georgia and Moldova highlighted the need to adapt culturally unfamiliar policy concepts into terms relevant to their local contexts, particularly when Western frameworks are imposed without regard for their daily realities. A Moldovan participant described the pressure of not only translating words but also reinterpreting policy debates, while trying to ensure her own insights were not lost or misunderstood in the process. This dual role—translator and “contextualizer”—represents a profound and under-acknowledged burden (Sultana, 2015). This underscores that meaningful participation is not simply about presence or voice, but about the ability to engage on equal terms without disproportionate labour, where contributions can be expressed, understood, and taken up without distortion or loss.

### *6.3.2. Performing Fluency and Institutional Belonging*

In international peace and security contexts, the expectation that participants speak English not only but also in institutionally sanctioned ways creates a narrow definition of credibility. Young women navigating these forums often find that fluency is insufficient. They must also speak in a particular tone, use technical vocabulary, and convey their

ideas with composure and confidence, even when discussing deeply personal or urgent issues. These expectations reflect not only linguistic hierarchies but also unspoken norms of belonging, shaped by colonial and Eurocentric standards of professionalism (Kathori, 2006). These dynamics were alluded to in the previous chapter when discussing the concept of the “good youth” as critiqued by Helen Berents and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy (2015). This notion of the “good youth” helps to explain how participation is conditioned not only by access, but by conformity to institutional norms that privilege moderation, technical fluency, and depoliticized forms of engagement, thereby narrowing the range of voices and expressions considered legitimate within peace and security spaces.

Performing fluency becomes a strategy of adaptation. Rather than simply communicating their views, young women are often required to present their expertise in ways that align with dominant policy styles. This includes anticipating how their words will be received, adjusting their sentence structures, and downplaying emotion in favour of what is perceived as objective, policy-relevant expression. These expectations are also gendered, as young women expressed feeling judged for expressions of emotion or assertiveness, reinforcing norms that equate professionalism with restraint and composure. These pressures are heightened by the speed and high stakes of many international discussions, where they must quickly formulate responses in English, their second or third language, while translating their own thoughts in real time.

The burden of performance is unequally distributed. English first-language speakers are rarely expected to change their tone or manner of speech, while non-English speakers often feel they must adopt a particular policy voice to be taken seriously. This reinforces a system in which linguistic and cultural familiarity with dominant institutions

is rewarded, and other forms of expression are regarded as less authoritative (Soler & Morales-Gálvez, 2022; Bourdieu, 1977).

These dynamics constrain the ways young women can express complex ideas and contribute meaningfully. While some may develop fluency in policy discourse, the requirement to constantly perform belonging limits the space for alternative forms of knowledge, storytelling, and advocacy. It also marginalizes those who choose not to—or cannot—conform to these norms, reinforcing exclusion in spaces that purport to be inclusive.

### *6.3.3. The Politics of Simplification*

Across many accounts, young women described pressure to simplify their contributions, not for clarity but for acceptability. A Chadian respondent described how she often condensed her thoughts to keep up with the rapid pace of English-language discussions, especially in high-level meetings with public officials. This affected how her contributions were interpreted: not as policy insight, but as anecdotal or general commentary. Similarly, a Georgian participant shared that when she hesitated or paused to find the right words in English, she felt her credibility being questioned, even by those with less substantive knowledge.

These experiences illustrate how English fluency becomes a proxy for intelligence and strategic thinking (Abu Guba et al., 2023). In contexts where language is treated as a marker of expertise, English-as-a-second-language speakers are often perceived as less capable, regardless of their actual expertise. Silence, hesitation, or linguistic simplicity are interpreted as a lack of knowledge rather than as the result of translation fatigue, self-censorship, or the mental effort required to operate in a second or third language.

#### *6.3.4. Reframing Multilingualism: From Asset to Obligation*

Despite assumptions that multilingualism enhances participation, this section demonstrates that it often functions as an unrecognized burden. Young women are expected not only to speak English but also to navigate multiple linguistic registers, serve as bridges between communities and institutions, and continually reframe their ideas to conform to dominant norms. This labour remains invisible to those who do not perform it, and is rarely acknowledged as central to policymaking processes.

Rather than being treated as a form of expertise, multilingual capacity is often viewed as an individual advantage that absolves institutions of the responsibility to ensure accessibility. This framing reinforces hierarchies that reward English fluency while quietly demanding more from those who operate outside of its bounds (Ibnouf, 2020).

The expectation to simplify, translate, and adapt—without structural support—further entrenches disparities in whose knowledge counts and who is deemed a credible actor. These dynamics are not incidental. They reflect systemic patterns that favour linguistic proximity to dominant institutions over lived experience, contextual knowledge, or critical insight, mirroring dynamics of affiliation explored in Chapter 5. As the following section will explore, language does not merely influence how expertise is expressed; it shapes whose expertise is recognized in the first place.

#### **6.4. The Impact of Language on Legitimacy and Credibility**

Language is not only a vehicle for communication; it is a marker of power and legitimacy in peace and security policymaking. For many young women from non-English-speaking

backgrounds, fluency in English is not an advantage, but a precondition for being taken seriously. While both the WPS and YPS policies frame inclusion as a guiding principle, implementation is primarily embedded within English-speaking institutional cultures, such as English-dominant meetings, documentation, funding applications, and informal networking spaces where influence is negotiated. Efforts such as translating WPS and YPS documents<sup>12</sup> into multiple languages represent an important step toward broader accessibility, but they remain situated toward the more procedural end of the inclusion spectrum, as they do not necessarily shift the underlying linguistic norms through which participation, deliberation, and decision-making occur. As a result, these policy frameworks often reproduce the very institutional hierarchies they claim to challenge or dismantle.

This section examines how English fluency serves as a proxy for credibility and expertise, reinforcing exclusionary norms that favour proximity to powerful institutions. It also examines the differentiated linguistic landscapes of international and regional forums, highlighting how young women must continually negotiate legitimacy across linguistic and institutional boundaries.

#### *6.4.1. Fluency as a Proxy for Expertise*

Across global peace and security institutions, English fluency is often conflated with intelligence and strategic insight, creating a system in which accent, hesitations, or imperfect grammar are mistaken for a lack of expertise. This dynamic disproportionately

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<sup>12</sup> Although the UN Security Council Resolutions are translated into the six UN languages, other policy-related materials are largely available only in English, with occasional translations into Arabic, French, Spanish, or other languages.

affects young women from non-English-speaking backgrounds, whose substantive knowledge is frequently filtered through assumptions about their linguistic competence.

Respondents from Georgia and Somali-Kenya described the exhaustion of having to prove their expertise repeatedly. As explored above, one Georgian participant explained that although she was confident in her policy knowledge, her accent and pauses in speech often caused others to dismiss her ideas. A Somali-Kenyan participant adds that she routinely felt pressure to over-prepare for meetings, knowing that any minor slip in language would invite doubt or condescension.

These insights were echoed by participants from Argentina, Chad, and Senegal. A respondent from Argentina explained that, unlike her English-speaking peers, who could contribute spontaneously, she had to script and rehearse her interventions in advance to ensure precision and clarity. This pressure to present perfectly often resulted in a trade-off: clarity over depth, safety over critique (Holliday, 2006).

This dynamic entrenches a double standard. English-first-language speakers are often afforded greater ease in contributing to discussions, with participants noting that fluency allowed for more spontaneous, less scrutinized interventions, whereas non-English speakers must navigate both content and delivery with care. The result is an uneven terrain in which fluency, not expertise, becomes a key marker of authority as reflected in participants' experiences of needing to carefully calibrate their language in order to be taken seriously.

#### *6.4.2. Disjunctures Between Global and Local Legitimacy*

While English dominates international policy arenas, regional and national spaces often operate in Arabic, French, Spanish, or other local languages. This creates uneven

opportunities for participation. Some respondents described feeling far more confident and credible in regional policy processes, where their language and cultural knowledge aligned more naturally with the setting. However, the shift from local to international advocacy often required both linguistic and conceptual translation, as exemplified above.

A participant from Tunisia explained that she navigated regional security discussions in Arabic and French with ease, but struggled to convey the same ideas in English to global audiences. A Jordanian respondent noted that many core peace and security concepts lacked direct Arabic equivalents, requiring significant adaptation. She described the strain of translating both vocabulary and frameworks, ensuring that policy positions remained legible to English-speaking institutions while retaining their original intent.

Others, such as a respondent from Moldova, critiqued the epistemic limits of international frameworks themselves. She argued that Western-centric approaches to security often fail to resonate in local contexts, rendering translation not only linguistic but also political. Even when global frameworks were formally translated into local languages, their conceptual underpinnings remained misaligned with regional realities.

These disconnects create what one might term a dual legitimacy burden. One in which young women must be intelligible and persuasive in both institutional English and their own local languages or communication styles. This is often the case without adequate support. This structural expectation privileges those already situated near dominant policy cultures and further marginalizes those whose knowledge is rooted in other contexts. These dynamics are not incidental. They reflect enduring colonial hierarchies that continue to shape whose knowledge is heard and recognized in global

governance, again mirroring the dynamics of affiliation and belonging explored in Chapter 5. The privileging of English-language and institutionally sanctioned expertise over locally grounded insight is a clear reminder that coloniality persists not only through political and economic structures, but also through language.

#### *6.4.3. Language as a Gatekeeper of Legitimacy*

Taken together, the testimonies in this section point to a broader pattern: English fluency functions as a gatekeeper of credibility. While some young women are able to navigate these linguistic expectations through preparation, peer support, or bilingual advocacy, the burden of doing so is unequally distributed. English first-language speakers are not required to translate their knowledge, literally or figuratively, into an unfamiliar register to be taken seriously. Non-English speakers, by contrast, must often adapt their expression to conform to institutional norms or risk invisibility.

This dynamic reflects deeper colonial and Western-centric hierarchies of knowledge production (Nyamekye & Uwen, 2024; Canagarajah, 2002; Alatas, 2000). In many international policy settings, legitimacy is conferred through a narrow set of linguistic performances, shaped by histories of empire and elite diplomacy (Pennycook, 2017; Phillipson, 1992). Those who can mirror these norms—through accent, fluency, or confidence—are rewarded with authority. Those who cannot are frequently sidelined, regardless of the value of their contributions (Mignolo, 2011; Spivak, 1988).

At the same time, legitimacy is not universally determined by English fluency. Some regional spaces offer more accessible modes of engagement and, at times, greater recognition of non-English voices. Yet even in these dialogue spaces, young women often face the reverse challenge: translating international frameworks into local languages

and political realities, a role that is frequently shaped by their positioning as both younger actors and women, who are expected to be adaptable, responsive, and able to bridge institutional and community spaces. This dual positioning places them at the intersection of multiple expectations—both to interpret and to represent—creating a distinct form of participatory labour that is not equally distributed across participants. This back-and-forth movement between languages and expectations places a constant cognitive and emotional burden on young women activists.

#### *6.4.4. Shifting the Terms of Legitimacy*

Ultimately, the dominance of English is not a neutral fact of global governance, it is a mechanism of structural exclusion that determines whose voices carry weight. It shapes not only who can participate in policy conversations, but whose ideas are seen as legitimate, timely, and actionable. Young women from non-English-speaking contexts are left to do the work of translation—linguistic, conceptual, and political—while institutions remain slow to adapt.

Yet this exclusion is not uncontested. As the next section will explore, many young women are challenging these linguistic hierarchies, whether by leveraging multilingual advocacy networks, co-authoring policy work across language divides, or pushing institutions to shift their norms. Their strategies offer insight into how legitimacy can be reclaimed on terms that do not rely on English fluency alone. In doing so, reframe meaningful participation as the ability to engage on equitable terms, where influence is not contingent on conformity to dominant linguistic norms but grounded in the recognition of diverse forms of knowledge and expression.

## **6.5. Strategies for Navigating Language-Based Exclusions**

For young women in peace and security policymaking, language is not only a barrier to overcome. Language is a structural challenge that they must navigate strategically. While linguistic hierarchies in international institutions perpetuate exclusion, many young women develop adaptive and resistant strategies to assert their expertise, bolster their confidence, and participate in policy spaces on their own terms. These approaches range from self-training and peer mentorship to the use of digital and multilingual platforms that circumvent traditional institutional gatekeeping.

This section explores how young women build linguistic resilience, co-create informal support networks, and mobilize alternative channels for advocacy. Through these strategies, they contest the dominance of English and expand the boundaries of what constitutes meaningful participation in peace and security policymaking.

### *6.5.1. Self-Training and Peer Support*

For many English-as-a-second-language-speaking young women, learning English is not an incidental part of education. It is a conscious, labour-intensive effort that must be undertaken alongside professional, academic, and activist commitments. Without formal institutional support, many pursue self-training through immersion in policy documents, international media, and English-language academic publications. This work can be seen as a form of unpaid, invisible labour by the feminist political economy, a concept first introduced by Cynthia Enloe in 1989 (Waring, 2003).

A respondent from Mexico described dedicating significant time outside of her work and studies to master policy-relevant English, using podcasts and peace and security policy reports to familiarize herself with technical language. Others shared

similar strategies, building glossaries, watching speeches from Security Council meetings, or following English-speaking experts on social media to learn idiomatic and sector-specific language.

However, this individualized labour is often not enough. Peer mentorship plays a critical role in helping young women overcome linguistic insecurity. A participant from Jordan noted that being mentored by others who had also struggled with English helped shift her perception of language as a marker of legitimacy. These informal support networks offered spaces to practice, refine arguments, and receive constructive feedback, often outside the high-pressure environments of institutional meetings.

Still, even after developing strong English skills, many young women reported that biases persisted. Respondents from Argentina and Senegal reported that, despite years of experience and improved fluency, they continued to feel that English-first-language speakers were perceived as more legitimate. One young woman from Argentina noted the need to over-prepare for meetings. She described how internalized expectations of perfection became a coping mechanism to avoid scrutiny or dismissal.

These accounts reflect how the burden of translation—linguistic, cognitive, and emotional—is shouldered disproportionately by non-English speakers. While self-training and mentorship offer important tools for navigating English-dominated spaces, they also underscore the structural nature of the exclusion many young women face.

### *6.5.2. Leveraging Digital and Regional Advocacy Spaces*

To circumvent the constraints of English-dominated policymaking arenas, many young women turn to digital platforms and multilingual advocacy networks. These alternative

spaces allow them to share expertise, build coalitions, and influence discourse—often in their first languages—without the pressure to conform to institutional English.

A respondent from Tunisia explained that social media had allowed her to reach international audiences without relying on traditional institutions. Through advocacy posts, blogs, and participation in online discussions conducted in Arabic and French, she contributed meaningfully to peace and security debates virtually while avoiding the linguistic barriers of formal policy forums.

Similarly, a participant from Mexico described how local advocacy efforts conducted in Spanish were later translated into English for wider circulation. This strategy enabled her to maintain cultural and linguistic authenticity while ensuring that her work was recognized internationally. She credited regional peace networks for offering platforms that validated her expertise in both Spanish and English, depending on the audience. This highlights that meaningful participation is often enabled through forms of allyship and alternative spaces of engagement, where linguistic diversity is supported and recognition is not contingent on a single dominant language.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, one respondent described how her organization's hybrid language model—using French, Swahili, and English—enabled them to engage with local communities and international stakeholders simultaneously. Public statements, training resources, and advocacy campaigns were deliberately multilingual, reflecting a strategy of inclusion rather than accommodation. This example highlights how meaningful participation is both relationally driven and rooted in authenticity, enabling individuals to engage across contexts while remaining grounded in their lived experiences and forms of expertise.

A young Chadian woman noted that regional networks operating in French created accessible entry points into peace and security discussions, particularly for those excluded from English-dominated global forums. These networks served as intermediaries between local activism and global policy, allowing young women to gain legitimacy without relying solely on English-language institutions.

### *6.5.3. Strategic Institutional Engagement*

While some young women opt to build influence through alternative channels, others choose to challenge exclusionary norms from within the institutions themselves. These strategies often require navigating linguistic hierarchies while also attempting to reform them.

A respondent from Senegal described her deliberate engagement in working groups and advisory bodies, where she advocated for institutional reforms, including interpretation services, improved translation of policy documents, and the recognition of multilingual expertise. Her participation was both strategic and political. She viewed her contributions as an attempt to shift the expectations placed on non-English speakers.

Similarly, a participant from Colombia explained that she built alliances with English-speaking colleagues to co-author policy briefs. This tactic allowed her insights to reach decision-making spaces without being filtered out due to perceived linguistic inadequacy. Rather than conforming entirely to institutional norms, she found ways to insert her perspective into formal processes by leveraging relationships and collaborative authorship.

These approaches reflect a refusal to be marginalized. Rather than accepting the premise that credibility must be earned through English fluency, these young women

assert their right to be heard and to shape the rules of engagement themselves. Such strategies resonate with feminist institutionalist scholarship, which explores how actors deliberately occupy both insider and outsider roles to influence institutions from within (Chappell & Mackay, 2021).

#### *6.5.4. Challenging Linguistic Hierarchies Through Adaptation and Resistance*

As strategies used by young women illustrate, youth activists facing linguistic exclusion are not passive recipients of marginalization. They adapt, resist, and reconfigure pathways into policymaking spaces, using self-training, peer support, digital platforms, and institutional engagement to assert their expertise.

While these strategies cannot undo the structural inequities that make English a prerequisite for global policy legitimacy, they demonstrate that young women are actively shaping the contours of participation (Hamilton & Hammond, 2022). Some create alternative spaces for advocacy; others attempt to reform institutions from within. In both cases, they challenge the assumption that fluency alone defines credibility.

The next section will explore how these acts of navigation and resistance are not only about inclusion but also about power. They concern the reclaiming of authority and legitimacy in international forums where their voices have historically been sidelined. By reframing participation on their own terms, young women are helping to redefine what expertise entails in peace and security.

### **6.6. Redefining Meaningful Participation Beyond English Proficiency**

The dominance of English in peace and security policymaking continues to shape who is heard, whose expertise is recognized, and who holds influence in international forums

(Mac Guinty, 2021). As exemplified above, for young women from non-English-speaking contexts, this linguistic barrier is not merely a practical challenge. This challenge is a structural limitation that reinforces broader patterns of exclusion. Yet many of these young women are not only adapting to such contexts but also actively resisting them. Rather than conforming to expectations of fluency, they are pushing for a redefinition of meaningful participation itself: one that centres multilingual inclusion, challenges institutional biases, and expands the scope of what counts as legitimate knowledge.

This chapter argues that the global dominance of English is not neutral. I argue that it is a product of colonial histories that continue to shape which voices are prioritized in international policymaking spaces (Nyamekye & Uwen, 2024; Evans, 2006). English rose to prominence not only through commerce and diplomacy but also through imperial conquest and the systematic erasure of indigenous languages, knowledge systems, and ways of being (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994). Today, many peace and security institutions reproduce this coloniality by upholding English as the default language of credibility, expertise, and legitimacy. For young women from formerly colonized regions, and in contexts where neocolonialism persists, navigating English-dominated institutions often entails not only linguistic adaptation (R'boul, 2025; Kroskrity, 2000). It is also the silencing or translation of cultural and political expressions that do not conform to Western registers. This dynamic reinforces epistemic hierarchies, where proximity to colonial languages and norms becomes a prerequisite for participation (Santos, 2007). This leads to non-English knowledge being undervalued, mistranslated, or excluded altogether.

This section explores how young women conceptualize meaningful participation on their own terms, identifying core principles such as inclusion, influence, and linguistic justice. It also outlines the reforms they advocate, ranging from practical solutions such as real-time translation to more transformative changes in institutional norms and leadership structures.

#### *6.6.1. Young Women's Definitions of Participation*

As observed above, global institutions often conflate English proficiency with expertise, sidelining those who do not conform linguistically. Many young women interviewed for this research rejected this framing, emphasizing that meaningful participation cannot and should not be measured by language fluency alone. Rather, they underscored participation as a matter of agency (see Cornwall, 2008), influence (see Gaventa, 2009), and equitable access to decision-making processes (see Carmody, 2014).

A participant from Jordan argued that true inclusion requires structural shifts. From her perspective, institutions should not merely invite non-English-speaking participants to the table, but should design those tables to be multilingual. For her, meaningful participation included institutional design that anticipates and supports linguistic diversity, rather than expecting individuals to adapt without support.

Others stressed the importance of positioning non-English speakers in leadership—not just consultation—roles. A respondent from Georgia noted the performative nature of many global forums, where non-English first-language speakers are invited to speak but are rarely provided the opportunity to shape policy outcomes. From her perspective, being invited to speak was not enough; meaningful participation

required placing non-English speakers in positions where they could influence decisions, not merely share perspectives.

Several participants also challenged narrow definitions of policy-relevant knowledge. A respondent from Cameroon pointed out that oral traditions, grassroots advocacy, and non-Western forms of community organizing are often excluded from formal peace and security frameworks. This is due, in part, to the fact that they are not expressed in dominant English-centric registers, which tend to shape what is considered legitimate within institutional spaces. These exclusions reflect broader epistemic hierarchies rooted in colonial legacies and underscore the value of knowledge produced from marginalized perspectives (Ishkanian et al, 2025; Mignolo, 2009; Harding, 1996).

Together, these reflections disrupt the idea that legitimacy is earned through proximity to dominant norms. Instead, they advocate for a more plural understanding of participation, one that encompasses diverse languages, modes of speaking, and forms of knowledge production.

#### *6.6.2. Recommendations for Institutional Reform*

In response to these exclusionary dynamics, many young women are not just calling attention to the problem. They are proposing tangible, often practical reforms to transform institutional cultures and practices.

One of the most widely cited needs identified by young women respondents was investment in real-time interpretation and multilingual documentation. A young woman from Somali-Kenya described how partial or inconsistent translation in international spaces limits engagement and perpetuates inequity. She framed interpretation as a right, not a courtesy, critical to participation and comprehension, especially in fast-paced

negotiations and consultations. A participant from Mexico echoed this concern, noting that most key documents—policy briefs, frameworks, and resolutions—are available only in English. She advocated for institutionalized translation mechanisms that would enable young women across linguistic contexts to engage with and contribute to global policymaking processes meaningfully.

Yet access alone is not enough. Many respondents also emphasized the need to shift the institutional attitudes that equate English fluency with competence. As a participant from Tunisia explained, even when translation is available, non-English speakers are often dismissed as less authoritative. She argued that institutional cultures must be actively transformed to dismantle the hierarchy that privileges English first-language speakers in discussions of credibility and influence (Ishkanian et al., 2025).

Similarly, a respondent from Senegal stressed the importance of recognizing the value of lived experience and policy expertise acquired outside of dominant language structures. She called for inclusive leadership pipelines, not just advisory roles for appearance's sake, but substantive positions for non-English speakers that allow them to shape policy directions.

Others pointed to the role of grassroots, multilingual advocacy spaces as models that institutional spaces could learn from. A participant from Jordan described feminist youth coalitions in her region that deliberately operate in Arabic, French, and English. These spaces, she noted, are not bound by linguistic assimilation and offer powerful models of inclusion that centre linguistic justice as a foundational value rather than a logistical afterthought.

### *6.6.3. Expanding the Terms of Participation*

The insights in this section argue that English-language fluency has been mischaracterized as a prerequisite for legitimacy and influence. For many young women, particularly those from the Global South, this expectation reproduces colonial patterns of exclusion and privileges proximity to the Global North, as explored in Chapter 5 (Tollefson, 1991).

Participants across diverse regions called for a structural reframing of linguistic inclusion, where institutions proactively dismantle barriers rather than placing the burden of adaptation on individuals. This includes real-time translation, multilingual documentation, and institutional reforms that elevate the leadership of non-English speakers. It also requires deeper changes: cultural and political recognition that participation is not about assimilation, but about transformation.

A more inclusive approach to peace and security would recognize that language is not a neutral tool, but a form of power, as emphasized in this chapter. As long as institutional credibility is linked to English, participation will remain conditional and exclusionary. To counter this, young women are advancing a broader definition of participation. This approach is rooted in linguistic justice (see Nee et al., 2022) understood as the right to engage, deliberate, and influence in one's own language without disadvantage. It also draws on epistemic plurality (see Breidlid, 2013) which recognizes multiple forms of knowledge, including those grounded in local, experiential, and non-Western contexts, as equally valid. Finally, it emphasizes shared decision-making power (see Berents, 2024) where participants are able not only to contribute but to shape agendas and outcomes collectively.

These findings support the growing consensus among feminist peacebuilders and critical scholars that inclusion must be redefined through practices of accessibility, legitimacy, and power redistribution, rather than through representation alone. Until institutions make these shifts, the burden of participation will continue to fall unequally, demanding linguistic labour from those already marginalized by systems they seek to influence.

### **6.7. Conclusion**

Language remains one of the most pervasive yet underexamined structural barriers in peace and security policymaking. Despite rhetorical commitments to inclusivity, the dominance of English within international institutions reinforces exclusionary dynamics that disproportionately affect young women from non-English-speaking backgrounds. As this chapter has shown, English is not simply a tool for communication. It functions as a gatekeeping mechanism and barrier that shapes who is granted legitimacy, whose expertise is recognized, and whose contributions are taken seriously in global security discussions.

The young women who shared their experiences in this study make clear that English fluency is too often treated as a proxy for credibility, even when other forms of knowledge—such as lived experience, grassroots organizing, and community-based advocacy—hold equal, if not greater, relevance. The burden of linguistic adaptation falls squarely on non-English speakers, many of whom must navigate complex policy environments while simultaneously managing translation responsibilities, performance anxiety, and the internalized pressure to sound like an expert. Meanwhile, English speakers are rarely expected to reciprocate this type of labour.

This linguistic hierarchy is not neutral. It is rooted in colonial legacies that continue to shape which voices are amplified and whose knowledge is considered valid. The elevation of English as the default language of diplomacy and policymaking reflects deeper historical power imbalances, ones that privilege Global North actors and epistemologies while marginalizing perspectives rooted in other linguistic and cultural traditions. In this way, language operates not only as a structural barrier but also as a vehicle for reproducing coloniality in global governance.

Yet despite these challenges, young women are not passive in the face of linguistic exclusion. They are developing and enacting creative, contextually grounded strategies to participate meaningfully on their own terms. From self-training in policy-relevant English to building peer-mentorship networks, engaging through regional or multilingual platforms, and bypassing traditional mechanisms through digital advocacy, they are actively reshaping the conditions under which participation becomes possible. Others are working from within institutional structures to advocate for more inclusive language policies, better translation systems, and a shift in whose voices are centred in policymaking.

The findings outlined above point to an urgent need for a more robust and intentional approach to linguistic inclusion. An approach that moves beyond superficial translation efforts and addresses the deeper institutional attitudes that equate English with expertise. This requires structural reforms: real-time translation in policymaking forums, multilingual publication of key documents, and deliberate efforts to elevate non-English-speaking young women into leadership and decision-making roles. That said, it also requires a cultural shift in recognizing that multilingualism and diverse forms of

communication are not obstacles to overcome. They are assets that enrich peace and security policymaking.

In short, the expectation that young women must linguistically assimilate to be heard reflects a narrow and exclusionary vision of participation. If peace and security institutions are truly committed to inclusion, they must reconfigure the very terms of engagement. This includes confronting the colonial roots of English dominance and reimagining participation not as a process of assimilation, but as one of structural transformation. Until such shifts occur, meaningful participation will remain conditional, accessible primarily to those already fluent in the language of power.

## Chapter 7: Inclusion and Exclusion: LGBTQI+ Young Women in Peace and Security

### 7.1. Introduction

The inclusion of young women who identify as LGBTQI+<sup>13</sup> within the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) policy spaces remains significantly underexplored. While both frameworks have sought to advance gender-sensitive and youth-inclusive approaches to peace and security, they have largely operated within heteronormative and binary gender constructs (Hagen & O'Rourke, 2023). As a result, the specific challenges faced by LGBTQI+ young women in these spaces have been overlooked, and their participation remains peripheral, often confined to tokenistic representation rather than substantive engagement in policymaking and application. The experiences of young women at the intersection of youth, gender, and queer<sup>14</sup> identities highlight systemic barriers to participation, the absence of intersectional approaches, and the continued struggle for legitimacy in peace and security spaces (Muganda, 2023; OutRight International, 2022). This chapter critically examines these dynamics, drawing on empirical data to analyze how LGBTQI+ young women navigate exclusion, contest marginalization, and the conditions that enable their participation in decision-making.

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<sup>13</sup> LGBTQI+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex individuals, with the '+' recognizing the diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions that exist beyond these categories. This inclusive terminology reflects evolving language within global and local movements, acknowledging that no single acronym can fully encompass all identities.

<sup>14</sup> I use the term "queer" intentionally in this text, reflecting its reclamation by several of my interviewees as a political and identity marker. While historically pejorative, they described its usage as an act of resistance.

This chapter is situated within the broader research findings and is structured around five key themes that emerged from the study outlined in Chapter 4. First, the analysis of structural and systemic barriers to meaningful participation underscores how legal, institutional, and socio-cultural constraints shape the extent to which LGBTQI+ young women can engage in peace and security processes. These barriers are often exacerbated by the geopolitical context, with young women in certain regions facing outright criminalization of their identities, while in others, exclusion operates through more implicit but equally limiting cultural and social norms (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Second, the chapter builds on previous chapters' analyses of intersectionality by considering its role in the peace and security frameworks, examining how overlapping identities, particularly gender, age, sexual orientation, race, and class, contribute to layered experiences of marginalization or, conversely, access to advocacy spaces. While intersectionality is often referenced within feminist peacebuilding discourse (see Berghof Foundation & Platform Peaceful Conflict Transformation, 2023; Stavrevska & Smith, 2020), its application in policy remains inconsistent. LGBTQI+ identities are frequently treated as an afterthought rather than as an integral component of peace and security (Ritholtz et al., 2023; Palazzo, 2022).

The third theme addresses what constitutes meaningful participation for young women who have identified a sense of belonging within the LGBTQI+ community and who engage with WPS and YPS policies. While both agendas emphasize participation, this inclusion is often instrumentalized, with LGBTQI+ youth called upon to provide testimonials rather than shape policy frameworks (Conciliation Resources, 2024; Ensor et al., 2021). The fourth theme of the study examines gaps in policy and the literature. In

this chapter, I highlight the absence of comprehensive frameworks that integrate LGBTQI+ concerns into existing WPS and YPS mechanisms. While feminist security studies (see Sjoberg, 2024; Ritholtz et al., 2023) have made strides in expanding gender analysis within peacebuilding, the literature remains largely limited to binary gender categories, leaving significant gaps in understanding the specific security concerns of LGBTQI+ individuals. Similarly, WPS and YPS policy documents frequently fail to address the distinct vulnerabilities faced by queer women and youth in conflict and post-conflict settings, further reinforcing their exclusion from implementation efforts (OutRight International, 2022; Aveta, 2022).

Finally, the chapter considers the role of power dynamics and legitimacy in shaping LGBTQI+ young women's participation in WPS and YPS policymaking. As we will see below, across different regional contexts, participants highlighted the tension between advocating for inclusion and navigating the skepticism or outright dismissal of their concerns by policymakers and peacebuilding institutions. While some have found ways to carve out spaces for LGBTQI+ inclusion, this often requires a disproportionate amount of effort compared to other areas of advocacy. The question of whose voices are considered legitimate in peace and security discussions remains deeply political, and LGBTQI+ young women often find their contributions scrutinized or minimized in ways that do not apply to their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts.

## **7.2. Methodology and Positionality**

This chapter draws on empirical data gathered from seven in-depth interviews and additional insights from the global survey. The interviewees whose experiences reflect both common challenges and regional particularities originate from European, Central

Asian, North American, and South American countries. Given the sensitivity of LGBTQI+ activism in certain geopolitical contexts, as in previous chapters, all interview data has been paraphrased rather than directly quoted. The purpose is to ensure that participants' insights are preserved without compromising their anonymity. Additionally, rather than identifying individuals by name, regional markers are used to contextualize their perspectives. This approach enables analysis that preserves both the specificity of respondents' experiences and the necessary level of discretion for ethical research. Ensuring anonymity is particularly crucial in regions where LGBTQI+ identities are criminalized or where activists face social and political repercussions for advocating inclusion. By attributing insights to regional contexts rather than individuals, this study enables a comparative perspective on LGBTQI+ exclusion across different peace and security environments while mitigating risks to those who shared their experiences.

Methodologically, this study prioritizes an analytical rather than descriptive engagement with interview data. While respondents provided rich personal accounts, this chapter aims to synthesize these insights within a broader critical framework that assesses the systemic nature of their exclusion. The approach taken here acknowledges the limitations of current policy frameworks while also considering emerging spaces for inclusion. Ethical considerations also extend to the framing of LGBTQI+ issues within this research. LGBTQI+ inclusion in peace and security is often perceived or framed as a Western agenda, which in turn contributes to its marginalization in policy discussions in regions where queer identities are stigmatized or criminalized (Kaoma, 2012; Heinze, 2001). This chapter consciously avoids framing LGBTQI+ inclusion as an externally

imposed norm and instead highlights the organic and regionally driven activism of young LGBTQI+ women who are already working within peacebuilding processes.

As a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman conducting this research, I am acutely aware of my positionality and the privileges it confers. While I have been invited into and have engaged deeply with queer spaces, particularly within WPS and YPS advocacy movements, I remain an ally positioned on the margins of these communities. This research is informed by my collaborations and partnerships with queer activists and academics, including co-authored policy and academic work on queering WPS and YPS. Yet, I recognize that my perspective is shaped by my own social location and the relative safety and legitimacy I hold, particularly as someone based in Canada. This chapter reflects an ongoing commitment to amplifying the voices and expertise of LGBTQI+ young women themselves, while striving to avoid appropriating their narratives or positioning myself as a spokesperson. Instead, I see my role as critically examining how systems of exclusion operate and supporting regionally rooted efforts for inclusion without reinforcing hierarchies of knowledge production.

By structuring the chapter around the dissertation's five major themes (see Chapter 4), this analysis offers both a critique of existing exclusionary practices and an examination of the conditions that enable greater inclusion. The chapter argues that meaningful participation for LGBTQI+ young women in peace and security requires more than symbolic representation; it demands structural changes in how participation is conceptualized and facilitated. Furthermore, it highlights the agency of young LGBTQI+ peacebuilders who, despite systemic barriers, continue to advocate for their rightful place in shaping peace and security policies. The findings presented in this chapter underscore

the urgency of moving beyond rhetorical commitments to LGBTQI+ inclusion and toward concrete policy mechanisms that integrate their voices as fundamental to peace and security decision-making.

### **7.3. Structural and Systemic Barriers to Meaningful Participation**

Despite international commitments to inclusivity in peace and security (see Berents & Fosu, 2025), young women who express a sense of belonging to the LGBTQI+ community continue to face significant structural and systemic barriers to participation in WPS and YPS policymaking. While both agendas reference gender equality and inclusion, explicit engagement with LGBTQI+ identities remains limited, and in the case of YPS, entirely absent from the core Security Council resolutions, rendering these identities largely invisible within formal policy frameworks (Bohémier, 2026). These barriers manifest in a variety of ways, ranging from legal restrictions that criminalize LGBTQI+ identities in certain regions to more subtle but equally exclusionary institutional practices that limit substantive engagement (OutRight International, 2022; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). While the YPS and WPS policies advocate for the increased participation of marginalized groups in peacebuilding, they often fail to account for the specific vulnerabilities and challenges experienced by LGBTQI+ individuals. In many contexts, LGBTQI+ young women must contend with policies that either overlook or actively suppress their involvement, making it difficult to access leadership opportunities, advocacy platforms, or policymaking processes (CCYPS, 2024).

One of the most pervasive barriers is the lack of legal protections for LGBTQI+ individuals in many parts of the world. In regions where LGBTQI+ identities are criminalized, young women face not only legal repercussions but also social exclusion

that limits their ability to advocate openly for peace and security (Human Dignity Trust, 2022). Even in contexts where legal protections exist, institutional mechanisms for ensuring inclusion in decision-making remain inadequate. Many interviewees reported that, although they may be allowed into policy discussions, their contributions are often dismissed or framed as secondary to core security concerns. The terminology here is intentional. “Allowed” reflects the language used by interviewees, highlighting the structural power imbalances and conditional forms of inclusion they experience. The reference to “core security concerns” aligns with respondents’ critique of dominant UN discourses, which often frame security through a militarized lens, marginalizing alternative, community-based and human security perspectives. This exclusion is further reinforced by the structural power dynamics of peace and security institutions, which remain dominated by heteronormative and patriarchal perspectives (Bohémier, 2026; McClearn, Jensen, & Talhouk, 2023).

### *7.3.1. Legal and Institutional Barriers*

The legal status of LGBTQI+ identities varies significantly across different regions, shaping the degree to which young women can participate openly in peace and security initiatives. In some countries, legal frameworks explicitly criminalize same-sex relationships or gender nonconformity, making public advocacy risky or even life-threatening (UN Women, 2024). In contexts such as Nigeria and Uganda, LGBTQI+ individuals are often forced to engage in peacebuilding efforts under heteronormative frameworks, obscuring their identities to avoid persecution (Shaw, 2023; Conciliation Resources, 2018). The absence of legal recognition for non-binary and transgender

individuals in many States further exacerbates exclusion, preventing full participation in national or international peacebuilding mechanisms (Williamson, 2024; GATE, 2023).

In regions where LGBTQI+ rights have been legally recognized, institutional barriers persist in more subtle ways. Governments and peacebuilding institutions may adopt inclusive rhetoric while failing to provide substantive avenues for engagement (McClearn, Jensen, & Talhouk, 2023; Kanter, 1977). Some interviewees reported that, while LGBTQI+ youth are occasionally invited to participate in discussions, these opportunities are largely symbolic, with little effort to integrate their insights into policy decisions. Others noted that existing funding structures actively constrain their ability to engage with peace and security issues from an LGBTQI+ perspective. Resources are often distributed according to frameworks that privilege traditional gender binaries, rather than adopting intersectional approaches that reflect the diversity of gender identities. Calls for funding proposals, particularly those that claim to target marginalized populations, continue to prioritize “women and girls,” thereby excluding broader understandings of the gender spectrum. Interviewees emphasized that funding opportunities for queer-led peacebuilding initiatives are extremely limited. Where such spaces do exist, they are often dominated by more established, often older, women activists and academics, making it difficult for grassroots and emerging voices to access resources and influence policy agendas.

The ability of LGBTQI+ young women to engage in the application of peace and security policy is further constrained by how legal frameworks conceptualize security. Many security-focused initiatives continue to prioritize traditional State-centric and militarized understandings of conflict, leaving little room for alternative perspectives that

emphasize gender identity, sexual orientation, or community-based approaches to safety and well-being (Zakarian, 2025; Wright, 2016). As a result, LGBTQI+ young women must frequently justify the relevance of their work, expending energy on securing recognition rather than focusing on substantive contributions to peacebuilding (Bohémier, 2026). This dynamic reflects what critical feminist and queer security theorists describe as epistemic violence: the silencing and devaluation of non-normative ways of knowing and being in security discourse (FitzGerald, 2021; Fricker, 2007). By privileging State stability and militarized interventions, dominant frameworks enforce heteronormative and cisnormative conceptions of security, rendering invisible the lived insecurities of LGBTQI+ young women. As a result, their knowledge and experience are often excluded from what counts as legitimate security expertise, further constraining their ability to shape peacebuilding agendas and perpetuating power hierarchies within the international peace and security architecture.

### *7.3.2. Cultural and Social Barriers*

Beyond legal and institutional constraints, cultural and social attitudes play a crucial role in shaping the extent to which LGBTQI+ young women can participate in peace and security discussions. These barriers vary regionally, reflecting the broader socio-political climates that either facilitate or hinder inclusion.

**7.3.2.1. North American Social Dynamics.** In North America, LGBTQI+ young women face a complex political landscape that presents both opportunities and challenges for participation. While there are legal protections and a general commitment to LGBTQI+ rights in Canada, for example, the degree of engagement remains inconsistent

(Smith, 2022). Many respondents reported that, although they have been able to participate in peace and security discussions, their contributions are often framed within a national agenda rather than within global leadership. This means that while LGBTQI+ inclusion may be acknowledged in domestic policies, it is rarely prioritized in international peacebuilding efforts (Aggestam & Holmgren, 2022).

Additionally, LGBTQI+ advocacy in North America is frequently polarized along political lines, as exemplified by the 2025 political shift in the United States, creating an environment where activists must navigate ideological divides that affect funding, institutional support, and access to decision-making spaces (Karol, 2023). Some respondents emphasized that while Canada has made progress in advancing LGBTQI+ inclusion in peace and security, engagement often stops at symbolic acknowledgment rather than full integration into policymaking. In the United States, the absence of a strong YPS movement and the dominance of older, mostly cis-white women in WPS spaces further limit opportunities for LGBTQI+ young women to lead advocacy efforts. These dynamics concentrate authority among established actors, limit accountability to more diverse constituencies, and constrain the relational networks through which meaningful participation is built and sustained.

The dynamics described above underscore how certain identities within the LGBTQI+ community are more readily accommodated in peace and security spaces than others. As I argue in a forthcoming volume written alongside two queer activists (Leclerc, Bohémier & Farion, forthcoming), cisnormative frameworks often position cisgender gay and lesbian individuals as acceptable within dominant social norms, while trans women and gender-diverse people remain heavily marginalized and subject to

structural exclusion. This dynamic is observed even in contexts where legal protections exist. This reflects what feminist and queer security scholars describe as gender essentialism and cisnormativity: systems of thought that assume binary, fixed relationships between sex assigned at birth and gender identity, thereby rendering trans experiences invisible in security discourse (Hagen, 2016; Otto, 2014). The result is a hierarchy of inclusion shaped by homonormativity and the politics of respectability (Puar, 2017; Duggan, 2002). Queer identities that align with heteronormative and State-centric security frameworks are often granted conditional access to peace and security spaces (Weber, 2016), while those who challenge these norms, particularly trans and gender-diverse individuals, must continually justify the relevance of their perspectives and work (Hagen, 2016; Otto, 2014). This stratified inclusion not only limits meaningful participation but also reproduces the very hierarchies that peace and security agendas claim to dismantle.

**7.3.2.2. Latin American Social Dynamics.** In Latin America, LGBTQI+ inclusion in peace and security remains largely uneven, often contingent on specific national policies or the presence of progressive feminist movements (Maier, 2016). Respondents noted that while intersectionality is widely discussed in feminist spaces, it is frequently limited to considerations of race, ethnicity, and gender, with LGBTQI+ identities remaining peripheral. As a result, young women belonging to the LGBTQI+ community often find themselves engaged in peacebuilding efforts that fail to fully acknowledge or integrate their perspectives (Ritholtz et al., 2023).

In some Latin American countries, notably in Colombia, LGBTQI+ individuals have been included in transitional justice and peace processes, particularly in contexts where civil society organizations have pushed for intersectional approaches to security (Biddolph, 2024). However, policy spaces tend to acknowledge LGBTQI+ concerns at a surface level, incorporating them into broader human rights frameworks without establishing specific mechanisms for inclusion. Some respondents expressed frustration at having to constantly justify the relevance of LGBTQI+ issues within YPS and WPS, as policymakers often prioritize more traditionally recognized forms of marginalization.

The focus on Colombia reflects a broader trend in WPS scholarship, where much of the literature on “queering peace and security” has centred on the Colombian context (Hagen et al., 2023). Some interviewees critiqued this over-representation, noting that it risks overshadowing the unique challenges and emerging initiatives in other parts of Latin America. Others, however, acknowledged Colombia’s significant progress, particularly the integration of LGBTQI+ perspectives into its peace and security frameworks. The country’s 2024-2034 WPS national action plan explicitly incorporates sexual orientation and gender identity across all four pillars of WPS—prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery—with at least eight specific actions dedicated to LGBTQI+ inclusion (Gobierno de Colombia, 2024). This is the strongest integration of LGBTQI+ perspectives in any WPS action plan in the region to date. Importantly, this level of inclusion did not emerge organically within institutional policies but rather resulted from sustained and strategic advocacy by feminist and LGBTQI+ organizations, particularly Colombia Diversa. Their convening of the first LBT Forum in 2022 to generate recommendations on the inclusion of queer and trans

women demonstrates how grassroots actors can drive transformative shifts in peace and security agendas. However, while Colombia's action plan provides a valuable model for embedding queer perspectives, it also illustrates the fragility of such gains: without robust implementation and accountability mechanisms, there is a risk that these commitments remain symbolic rather than structural, replicating patterns of inclusion that prioritize visibility over systemic change.

**7.3.2.3. European Social Dynamics.** Interviewees from Europe noted that LGBTQI+ inclusion is often treated as a separate issue, rather than as an integral aspect of peace and security policymaking. While there is a general recognition of LGBTQI+ rights, especially in Western Europe, these issues are frequently siloed into specialized discussions and rarely mainstreamed within WPS and YPS policies. For instance, the European Union's Action Plan on WPS (2019-2024) fails to explicitly incorporate sexual orientation or gender identity, reflecting a narrow and binary conceptualization of gender within European Union external action (Council of the European Union, 2019).

For some young women, LGBTQI+ advocacy is perceived as an "either/or" issue, with policymakers and practitioners suggesting they must choose between advancing gender equality or LGBTQI+ rights in their activism. This expectation reinforces a hierarchy of marginalization, in which only certain aspects of identity are deemed relevant to peace and security policy. Several respondents described encountering skepticism from more conservative feminist and peacebuilding circles, which prioritize traditional gender binaries and often frame LGBTQI+ concerns as secondary to broader women's rights issues. This dynamic illustrates what queer theorists refer to as

homonormativity: systems that accommodate certain LGBTQI+ identities, such as cisgender gay and lesbian individuals, while excluding those that challenge heteronormative and binary frameworks (Duggan, 2002). Consequently, trans and non-binary individuals frequently remain invisible within peace and security spaces, even in countries or regions with robust legal protections.

### *7.3.3. Barriers in International Advocacy*

Beyond national contexts, the international peace and security landscape presents additional barriers to LGBTQI+ inclusion. Many participants highlighted that LGBTQI+ issues are often deprioritized in conflict settings, where immediate security concerns are framed in terms of State stability and military interventions rather than inclusive peacebuilding approaches.

One of the most pressing challenges remains the lack of funding and resources for initiatives that adopt an intersectional approach to security. As mentioned briefly above, many funding mechanisms continue to prioritize gender-based projects that do not explicitly incorporate LGBTQI+ concerns, forcing advocates to either conform to restrictive funding requirements or operate with minimal institutional support (Human Rights Funders Network, 2022).

Additionally, LGBTQI+ young women frequently experience the burden of representation, being expected to speak on behalf of the entire community in advocacy settings (Hammack, 2010; Kanter, 1977). Although monolithic interpretations of marginalized communities and their representation are not unique to the dynamics of LGBTQI+ identity, as observed in previous chapters. Many respondents expressed frustration at being the only LGBTQI+ voices in spaces where peacebuilding is framed in

heteronormative terms, making it challenging to push for systemic change. The expectation that LGBTQI+ advocates must continually educate and justify their presence in WPS and YPS discussions places an additional strain on those already working within marginalized and underfunded movements (McClean, Jensen, & Talhouk, 2023; Ritholtz et al., 2023).

Despite these barriers, young LGBTQI+ women continue to navigate exclusionary systems, leveraging coalition-building, advocacy networks, and grassroots mobilization to challenge institutional resistance. However, until structural changes are implemented within peace and security frameworks, their participation will remain constrained by the same hierarchies and biases that have historically shaped this discourse.

#### **7.4. Intersectionality in Peace and Security Frameworks**

Efforts to integrate gender and youth perspectives into peace and security have often fallen short in addressing intersectionality, particularly for young women identifying a sense of belonging to the LGBTQI+ community. As demonstrated in previous chapters, intersectionality as a concept has gained traction in feminist and human rights discourse, yet its application within the WPS and YPS policies remains inconsistent and superficial (Transforming Society, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989). Young LGBTQI+ women occupy a complex position within peacebuilding spaces, where their multiple and overlapping identities—gender, age, sexual orientation, race, and nationality—shape their experiences of inclusion and exclusion. However, institutional approaches to peace and security largely fail to capture these nuanced realities, treating LGBTQI+ concerns as either an

afterthought or a separate issue rather than an integral component of gender-sensitive peacebuilding (Ritholtz et al., 2023).

The policy frameworks underpinning WPS and YPS often operate within binary understandings of gender that focus primarily on the protection and “empowerment of women and girls,”<sup>15</sup> without acknowledging the specific vulnerabilities of LGBTQI+ individuals (Trithart, 2020). The assumption that gender is synonymous with cisgender, heterosexual women results in policies that do not account for the security risks, legal discrimination, and social stigma faced by LGBTQI+ young women in conflict and post-conflict settings (Li et al., 2023). As a result, LGBTQI+ inclusion within peace and security remains contingent on broader political priorities, which are often deprioritized in favour of more traditional security concerns (Zakarian, 2025). This dynamic underscores the importance of human security (see Gibson & Reardon, 2007) approaches, which centre lived experiences and protection from structural violence, offering a more expansive framework for understanding and operationalizing LGBTQI+ inclusion.

Intersectionality, in theory, should serve as a framework for recognizing overlapping systems of oppression and ensuring that peacebuilding efforts address multiple layers of exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989). However, in practice, many LGBTQI+ activists find that intersectional discourse within peace and security is limited to race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, with sexual orientation and gender identity frequently omitted from the conversation. This exclusion is not merely a conceptual

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<sup>15</sup> Although a systematic study on the terminology of “empowerment” would be valuable, it falls outside the scope of this dissertation. Scholars such as Naila Kabeer (1999), Andrea Cornwall (2007), and Srilatha Batliwala (2007) have critiqued empowerment discourse for its depoliticization and co-optation in development and security frameworks. However, the prevalence and framing of “empowerment” in WPS and YPS resolutions remain unquantified in existing literature.

oversight; it has material consequences for young LGBTQI+ women, who often find themselves navigating peacebuilding spaces that fail to acknowledge or validate their experiences. This pattern reflects underlying power asymmetries, where certain identities are more readily legible and institutionally accepted, reinforcing hierarchies of whose inclusion is prioritized and whose remains marginal.

#### *7.4.1. Intersectionality and Exclusion in Policy*

Despite international commitments to gender-sensitive peace and security, LGBTQI+ identities remain largely absent from WPS and YPS policy development. This omission is particularly evident in national action plans on WPS, where references to gender remain overwhelmingly focused on cisgender women's experiences of conflict (OutRight International, 2023a; Trithart, 2020). Even when LGBTQI+ inclusion is mentioned, it is rarely accompanied by concrete mechanisms, making it challenging to translate commitments into actionable policies (Li et al., 2023).

This absence is mirrored in the YPS policy space. A review of publicly available YPS National Action Plans<sup>16</sup> reveals that most adopt a binary understanding of gender, centring on women and men while neglecting queer identities and gender diversity. For instance, the Malawi and Gambian plans invoke gender equality but frame it exclusively in terms of young women and men, with no acknowledgement of LGBTQI+ communities. Similarly, the Burundi YPS strategy and action plan remain silent on gender diversity, reflecting broader patterns of erasure in policy discourse. Finland's plan stands out as an exception, adopting intersectionality as a cross-cutting principle and

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<sup>16</sup> The publicly available plans on YPS reviewed were Burundi (2024), the Democratic Republic of Congo (2022), Finland (2021), Malawi (2024), Nigeria (2021), and The Gambia (2024).

explicitly recognizing sexual orientation as a factor shaping youth participation in peacebuilding (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2021). However, even in this progressive context, concrete implementation measures for LGBTQI+ inclusion are limited. These gaps underscore the systemic challenges in embedding queer perspectives within peace and security frameworks, where cultural, political, and legal resistance often hinder substantive engagement with LGBTQI+ rights.

Canada's third WPS plan (2023-2029) is among the most progressive frameworks globally for integrating the YPS agenda and LGBTQI+ inclusion. The plan explicitly acknowledges the interconnectedness of the WPS and YPS agendas, recognizing young women's dual identities as youth and women and highlighting the importance of breaking down silos between these frameworks (Leclerc, 2025a; Global Affairs Canada, 2023). It also adopts an intersectional feminist approach, incorporating sexual orientation and gender identity as cross-cutting considerations. Importantly, the plan references 2SLGBTQI+<sup>17</sup> inclusion in its vision and commits to supporting gender-diverse peacebuilders and human rights defenders in both domestic and international contexts. However, while this language marks a significant advancement, some have argued that its commitments risk remaining symbolic in the absence of clear implementation mechanisms or dedicated resources (Bohémier, 2024). From an intersectional perspective, the plan illustrates how efforts to address multiple and overlapping forms of marginalization can disrupt entrenched hierarchies within peace and security spaces. Yet it also reflects the persistent tension between aspirational rhetoric and systemic change,

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<sup>17</sup> The acronym 2SLGBTQI+ is used in a Canadian context to recognize Two-Spirit (2S) individuals, a term that reflects Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality. Placing 2S at the beginning of the acronym honours the place of Two-Spirit people as the first LGBTQI+ identities in these lands and acknowledges the unique cultural and historical experiences of Indigenous communities.

as LGBTQI+ young women must still navigate structures historically resistant to non-binary and queer identities.

**7.4.1.1. Impact on Young Women.** The exclusion of LGBTQI+ perspectives from WPS and YPS policies has profound consequences for young women situated at the intersection of gender, age, and sexual orientation. As Crenshaw's (1989) theorization of intersectionality argues that overlapping systems of oppression create unique vulnerabilities that are often rendered invisible within policy spaces designed to address "women" and "youth" as monolithic categories. As exemplified above, for LGBTQI+ young women, this invisibility translates into exclusionary practices that position their identities as a barrier rather than as an asset in peacebuilding efforts.

The described dynamic reflects what queer and feminist theorists describe as epistemic violence. It is the silencing and devaluation of non-normative ways of knowing and being within security discourse (Hagen, 2016; see foundational text by Spivak, 1988). By privileging binary gender frameworks and heteronormative assumptions, WPS and YPS policies reinforce hierarchies of inclusion where cisgender, heterosexual young women are more readily accommodated, while queer identities remain peripheral. For many LGBTQI+ youth activists, this means navigating spaces where they are either compelled to downplay aspects of their identity to gain legitimacy or excluded entirely from decision-making processes.

Interviewees also pointed to the compartmentalization of advocacy efforts as a key barrier. Rather than integrating LGBTQI+ inclusion into core peace and security frameworks, institutions often relegate these concerns to specialized human rights

initiatives. This separation reflects a politics of respectability (see Puar, 2007; Cohen, 1997) and homonormativity (see Duggan, 2002), as discussed earlier, in which only certain queer identities that align with dominant social norms are granted conditional access (also see Berents & McEvoy-Levy's 2015 critique of the "good youth" explored in Chapter 5). For trans and gender-diverse individuals, these dynamics are even more pronounced, as they are frequently erased from feminist and youth-led spaces that prioritize "women and girls" in binary terms.

As a result, LGBTQI+ young women often expend disproportionate energy justifying the relevance of their work rather than shaping policy. This process not only reinforces their marginalization but also reproduces the very hierarchies that WPS and YPS policies claim to challenge. From an intersectional perspective, these dynamics demonstrate how peace and security policymakers fail to account for the complexity of lived experience, privileging single-axis approaches to oppression that obscure the needs and expertise of those situated at multiple, overlapping margins.

### **7.5. Redefining Meaningful Participation**

The concept of meaningful participation is central to discussions around youth and gender inclusion in peace and security. However, for young LGBTQI+ women, participation in WPS and YPS frameworks has often been reduced to visibility without influence, where presence is mistaken for impact (FitzGerald, 2021). Despite growing recognition of the need to engage marginalized groups in decision-making processes, LGBTQI+ youth frequently find themselves in spaces that claim to be inclusive but fail to provide substantive opportunities for leadership and agenda-setting. Their participation is

often symbolic, performative, or conditional, requiring them to navigate institutional constraints, cultural biases, and political resistance to be heard.

Meaningful participation for young LGBTQI+ women must go beyond representation and ensure access to leadership, decision-making, and policymaking roles. It must acknowledge the expertise and lived experiences that young women bring to peacebuilding, ensuring that their contributions are not confined to storytelling or identity-based advocacy but are recognized as substantive inputs into security governance. Furthermore, meaningful participation must remove the structural obstacles that force LGBTQI+ individuals to justify their legitimacy in these spaces, shifting the burden from activists to institutions that claim to be inclusive.

Many interviewees emphasized that meaningful participation is not simply about having “a seat at the table”—that is, access to rhetorical decision-making spaces or literal boardroom tables as explored in Chapters 5 and 6—but about being able to shape the discussions. The ability to influence decision-making processes, to see tangible outcomes from engagement, and to be regarded as legitimate political actors rather than as beneficiaries of inclusion efforts were recurring themes. While some young women have been able to access meaningful participation through strong civil society networks, intentional feminist mentorship, and institutional support, others continue to encounter tokenization, exclusion, or outright hostility in peace and security spaces.

#### *7.5.1. What Does Meaningful Participation Look Like for Young LGBTQI+ Women?*

The narratives of respondents suggest that meaningful participation for LGBTQI+ young women is characterized by several key elements. First, it requires the ability to participate fully without having to downplay, justify, or erase aspects of one’s identity. In many

instances, and as described above, young LGBTQI+ peacebuilders must navigate double standards, where their contributions are evaluated through a lens of skepticism or conditional acceptance. For participation to be meaningful, engagement should not be contingent on conforming to heteronormative or gender-binary frameworks, nor should it require LGBTQI+ youth to advocate only within predefined “diversity and inclusion” spaces rather than in broader security discussions.

Second, meaningful participation necessitates recognition of young LGBTQI+ women as experts, decision-makers, and political actors, rather than passive participants or beneficiaries. Many respondents expressed frustration at being included only as representatives of a marginalized identity rather than as professionals with expertise in conflict resolution, policy analysis, and peacebuilding strategies. In spaces where gender parity and youth participation are increasingly valued, young LGBTQI+ women are still often expected to serve as symbolic participants, rather than as contributors to substantive decision-making.

Third, meaningful participation must lead to tangible policy outcomes, rather than being limited to consultative discussions without follow-up action. Some respondents described feeling that they were included in conversations but not in implementation, with LGBTQI+ issues treated as secondary or optional components of WPS and YPS policies. Ensuring meaningful participation requires institutional accountability mechanisms that track how LGBTQI+ perspectives are integrated into policy recommendations, resource allocation, and peacebuilding initiatives.

### *7.5.2. Obstacles to Meaningful Participation*

As has been demonstrated, some progress has been made in integrating LGBTQI+ voices into peace and security discussions. Despite this progress, interviewees across regions highlighted persistent barriers that limit their ability to engage in meaningful, sustained ways. These obstacles range from structural and institutional biases to social and cultural pressures that shape how LGBTQI+ individuals are perceived within security governance.

Respondents from North America emphasized that LGBTQI+ issues are often deprioritized in international peace and security spaces, where traditional security concerns continue to dominate. While national-level advocacy efforts in Canada and the United States have led to greater recognition of LGBTQI+ rights (prior to the election of the 47<sup>th</sup> President of the United States in November 2024), these advances have not translated into significant leadership opportunities in global peace and security frameworks.

Some respondents noted that their participation in WPS and YPS policy debates has been largely symbolic, with limited pathways to decision-making roles. The structural hierarchies of international institutions often exclude LGBTQI+ young women from leadership positions, reinforcing the idea that their concerns are peripheral rather than central to security agendas. Others highlighted the politicization of LGBTQI+ advocacy, where participation is sometimes constrained by domestic political shifts that influence funding priorities, institutional support, and diplomatic engagement on queer issues.

For respondents from Latin America, meaningful participation is often contingent on external validation, particularly in spaces where LGBTQI+ inclusion is not yet fully

institutionalized. Many young women described the need to prove their legitimacy through academic credentials, policy expertise, or professional networks, rather than being recognized for their lived experience and grassroots activism.

Another recurring theme was the pressure to downplay LGBTQI+ identity in order to access decision-making spaces. Some respondents noted that while feminist movements in Latin America have been instrumental in advancing gender justice, such as Colombia Diversa in the case of the Colombian WPS action plan, these mechanisms have not always been fully inclusive of LGBTQI+ perspectives. This has resulted in parallel advocacy efforts, where LGBTQI+ inclusion is pursued separately from mainstream WPS and YPS initiatives, limiting opportunities for intersectional engagement.

In Europe, LGBTQI+ representation in formal peace and security policy processes remains low, with respondents highlighting institutional barriers and social stigma that discourage participation. Many young women reported feeling that their presence in high-level discussions was regarded as an exception rather than the norm, reinforcing the perception that LGBTQI+ inclusion is a niche concern rather than a standard policy consideration.

A significant challenge identified by respondents was fear of backlash in institutional settings, particularly in contexts where LGBTQI+ rights are still politically sensitive or contested. Some activists, particularly from Central Asia, described self-censorship or the strategic navigation of peacebuilding spaces, in which they had to moderate their advocacy to avoid alienating potential allies. Others noted that while some progress has been made in LGBTQI+ inclusion at the civil society level, these

advancements have not always been reflected in government-led or UN-supported initiatives.

### *7.5.3. Examples of Progress and Good Practices*

Despite these barriers, several respondents shared examples of successful LGBTQI+ inclusion efforts that have contributed to policy change, institutional reform, and greater recognition of young LGBTQI+ women as peacebuilders. These cases demonstrate that when institutions commit to substantive inclusion, meaningful participation becomes possible.

One such example involved a youth-led consultation process on YPS, in which LGBTQI+ advocates shaped the agenda and contributed to policy drafting. Rather than being relegated to testimonial roles, participants were recognized as experts with insights on security governance, violence prevention, and intersectional peacebuilding. The success of this initiative was attributed by the participant to strong allyship, institutional buy-in, and clear mechanisms for accountability, ensuring that LGBTQI+ contributions translated into concrete policy outcomes.

Another example highlighted the role of feminist mentorship and intergenerational solidarity in advancing LGBTQI+ participation. Some interviewees credited their ability to navigate exclusionary systems to the support of senior peacebuilders who actively created space for young, queer women in decision-making processes. These relationships provided opportunities for skills development, strategic engagement, and institutional access, enabling young LGBTQI+ women to assert their leadership in ways they considered meaningful.

Lessons learned from these initiatives underscore the importance of structural changes in peace and security frameworks. Meaningful participation cannot be achieved through symbolic inclusion alone; it requires policy shifts, accountability mechanisms, and leadership opportunities that enable young LGBTQI+ women to contribute on equal footing with their peers. Until these systemic changes are fully realized, LGBTQI+ participation in WPS and YPS will remain constrained by hierarchical and exclusionary structures that continue to determine whose voices are heard and valued in peace and security governance.

#### **7.6. Literature Gaps: Queer Exclusions in Peace & Security Scholarship**

Although the academic field of peace and security has grown considerably in recent decades, it continues to marginalize sexuality and gender diversity. Feminist security studies have been instrumental in challenging militarized and State-centric frameworks (Enloe, 2014; Tickner, 1992), while youth peacebuilding literature has emphasized young people as political actors (Berents, Bolten & McEvoy-Levy, 2024). Yet both sub-fields often fail to engage substantively with queer perspectives. This gap results in a fragmented academic landscape in which WPS, YPS, and LGBTQI+ studies operate in parallel rather than in conversation. Such fragmentation reflects and reinforces policy silos that exclude young LGBTQI+ women from peacebuilding spaces. Addressing these omissions requires intersectional, queer-informed theories and empirical work that centre diverse lived experiences in shaping security discourse.

### *7.6.1. Feminist and Queer-Critical Security Intersections*

Previous chapters have demonstrated that feminist security studies have made considerable strides in uncovering the gendered dimensions of war, militarization, and displacement (Enloe, 2014; Tickner, 1992). By highlighting how conflict disproportionately affects women, this body of work has been pivotal in shaping the normative frameworks that sustain WPS policies. However, much of this literature maintains a binary view of gender, conceptualizing women's experiences through a cisnormative lens, and leaving queer identities peripheral to mainstream peace and security discourse. This omission reinforces heteronormative assumptions within security studies, constraining the field's capacity to address the full spectrum of gendered insecurities.

Jamie J. Hagen's (2016, 2025) intervention on "queering WPS," now referred to as queering peace and security (QPS) mentioned earlier, challenges the limits of WPS. Hagen (2016, 2025) does so by interrogating how the WPS agenda could integrate non-normative sexualities and genders. Her analysis reveals that WPS frameworks often reinforce restrictive gender norms even while seeking to disrupt patriarchal structures. Queer identities tend to be treated as add-ons to feminist agendas rather than as integral to the rethinking of security itself. Similarly, Jasbir K. Puar's (2007, 2017) concept of homonationalism critically examines how queer lives are instrumentalized in global security narratives, particularly in ways that align with neoliberal and colonial governance structures. These works suggest that inclusion without structural transformation risks reproducing power hierarchies and exclusion within peacebuilding spaces.

### *7.6.2. Youth without Queerness*

Youth peacebuilding research has similarly evolved to recognize young people as agents of change in peace and security processes (Leclerc, Yague & Berents, 2025; Berents, Bolten & McEvoy-Levy, 2024). However, this scholarship largely assumes a heteronormative and cisnormative subjecthood, overlooking how sexual and gender diversity shape young people's experiences in conflict-affected settings. LGBTQI+ youth face unique vulnerabilities, including criminalization, erasure in policy consultations, and heightened risks of violence in post-conflict environments (OutRight International, 2023b). Yet their perspectives remain largely invisible in academic studies of youth engagement in peacebuilding. This absence is particularly concerning given the prominence of the YPS policies, which advocate for inclusive youth participation but often fail to consider the additional barriers faced by queer youth.

The marginalization of LGBTQI+ youth in peacebuilding scholarship echoes the broader institutional silos that separate youth-focused work from feminist and queer studies. Research and policy often compartmentalize youth and LGBTQI+ issues, failing to recognize how these identities intersect in ways that compound exclusion (Leclerc & Bohémier, 2025). Without deliberate efforts to integrate queer perspectives into youth peacebuilding research, scholars risk reinforcing the very hierarchies of marginalization that WPS and YPS frameworks were designed to challenge.

### *7.6.3. Transitional Justice and Post-Conflict Silences*

Transitional justice literature has long documented the gendered dimensions of wartime violence and post-conflict recovery. However, this body of work remains overwhelmingly cisnormative, often universalizing women's experiences through a

binary lens. Dianne Otto (2014) critiques transitional justice frameworks for marginalizing those whose identities challenge normative gender and sexual categories. Such exclusions are not merely conceptual oversights; they have tangible effects on how post-conflict societies address harm and build inclusive peace.

Caitlin Biddolph's (2024) recent analysis pushes this critique further by arguing that even global efforts to include LGBTQI+ communities in transitional justice risk reproducing cis-heteronormative and colonial logics. She proposes a three-point agenda for queering transitional justice: recognizing anti-queer violence, ensuring LGBTQI+ participation in the design and implementation of transitional justice processes, and developing queer decolonial critiques that challenge epistemic violence (also see Spivak, 1988) in global governance. Similarly, insights from the Justice Visions podcast (2025), featuring Pascha Bueno-Hansen and Biddolph, emphasize the need for structural transformation rather than tokenistic "add queer and stir" approaches. They argue that without rethinking foundational assumptions about gender and sexuality, transitional justice mechanisms cannot fully address the layered forms of harm experienced by queer individuals during and after conflict.

This emerging scholarship underscores that the absence of queer perspectives in transitional justice research impoverishes understandings of post-conflict reality and hinders the development of inclusive peace mechanisms. It also reveals how silos between WPS, YPS, and LGBTQI+ studies in both academia and practice perpetuate the marginalization of queer communities in peacebuilding processes. For this study, this gap is directly relevant to questions of meaningful participation, as it demonstrates that even where inclusion is theorized within WPS scholarship, it remains uneven and rarely

extends into YPS frameworks, thereby limiting how participation is conceptualized and operationalized for LGBTQI+ young women across both agendas.

#### *7.6.4. Toward Transformative Queer-Informed Peacebuilding*

While queer scholarship in security studies—spanning feminist theory, human geography, and critical transitional justice—offers important insights (Hagen, 2025; Biddolph, 2024; Puar, 2017; Otto, 2014), these contributions intersect with mainstream WPS and YPS work only to a limited extent. To dismantle epistemic violence (see FitzGerald, 2021; Fricker, 2007) and foster genuine inclusion, researchers must move beyond additive approaches that merely append queer experiences to existing frameworks. Instead, they must champion transformative paradigms that centre queer youth as theorists, practitioners, and stakeholders in peace and security processes.

Such a shift requires conceptual bridges between feminist, youth, and queer studies. It also demands empirical scholarship that foregrounds young LGBTQI+ women's lived experiences alongside critical analyses of how peacebuilding institutions reproduce exclusionary practices. Only by embracing these perspectives can peace and security studies begin to account for the complex, intersecting realities of marginalization and resistance in conflict-affected contexts.

### **7.7. Power, Legitimacy, and Identity in LGBTQI+ Inclusion**

The question of who counts as a legitimate actor in peace and security spaces reflects broader structural inequalities that shape participation for young LGBTQI+ women. While both WPS and YPS policies have advocated for inclusive approaches, as we have seen, young LGBTQI+ women remain marginalized within these agendas. Their presence

in peacebuilding spaces is often contested, as they navigate not only heteronormative and patriarchal biases but also institutional barriers and practices that define legitimacy through narrow, exclusionary criteria. This section critically examines how legitimacy is constructed in WPS and YPS policy debates and how young LGBTQI+ women engage with and resist these power dynamics.

#### *7.7.1. Who Counts as a Peacebuilder? Activist vs. Peacebuilder Identities*

An important insight from this study concerns how LGBTQI+ young women conceptualize their roles within peace and security policy. Although this chapter does not make a specific distinction, several interviewees distinguished between being an “activist” and a “peacebuilder.” A few explicitly resisted the label “peacebuilder.” For these participants, “peacebuilding” was associated with work in conflict or post-conflict environments, often linked to formal, institutional processes led by governments or international organizations. Those living in contexts they perceived as “non-conflict” viewed peacebuilding as inapplicable to their experiences or advocacy.

However, this framing omits a broader understanding of violence and peace. Drawing on Johan Galtung’s (1969) concept of negative peace—the absence of direct violence but the persistence of structural and cultural violence—it becomes clear that young LGBTQI+ women’s lives are shaped by deeply embedded systems of harm. These include heteronormative and patriarchal structures, criminalization, and social exclusion that produce a constant state of insecurity even in societies that are nominally “at peace.” From this perspective, their activism in challenging these systems can be understood as a form of peacebuilding, even if it is not recognized as such within dominant institutional or policy frameworks.

This finding reflects a broader issue in the WPS and YPS policies, in which peacebuilding is often narrowly defined through the lens of international security and post-conflict reconstruction (Trithart, 2025). Such frameworks risk erasing the lived realities of LGBTQI+ communities who are navigating violence and insecurity outside of traditional conflict zones. The reluctance of some participants to identify as peacebuilders underscores the need to broaden conceptualizations of peacebuilding to encompass efforts to challenge structural violence across contexts, not only those marked by armed conflict (McClearn et al., 2023).

At the same time, the distinction between activist and peacebuilder identities also reflected political choices. Many interviewees described their own identities as inherently political in this work, recognizing that their presence in peace and security debates challenges dominant norms and structures. It is therefore no surprise that they viewed language through a deeply critical and political lens. For several participants, “peacebuilder” carried heavier political connotations than “activist.” While identifying as an activist was seen as a way to maintain autonomy and resist the depoliticizing tendencies of institutional peacebuilding, peacebuilding itself was viewed as technocratic, bureaucratic, and often co-opted by State-centric priorities. Activism, by contrast, was associated with grassroots mobilization and community-led attempts for justice. Yet this distinction came with trade-offs: those who embraced activist identities often found themselves excluded from formal decision-making spaces, while those who adopted the language of peacebuilding were sometimes granted access but under constrained and conditional terms.

This dynamic highlights how legitimacy in peace and security spaces is socially constructed and institutionally policed. It raises critical questions about whether WPS and YPS policies are genuinely inclusive or whether they reinforce restrictive paradigms that privilege certain actors and forms of engagement over others.

### *7.7.2. LGBTQI+ Gatekeeping and the Politics of Legitimacy*

In many peace and security policy spaces, legitimacy is tethered to markers such as academic credentials, institutional affiliations, and proximity to elite networks (as explored in previous chapters). These markers often exclude young LGBTQI+ women, whose expertise is frequently rooted in lived experience and grassroots mobilization rather than in formal professional trajectories, further explored in Chapter 6. Participants described being perceived as “too young,” “too radical,” or “too niche” to influence policy, with their contributions often confined to diversity panels or testimonial roles rather than substantive policy-shaping.

This mirrors critiques in the academic literature, in which feminist security studies have foregrounded women’s experiences but have largely failed to interrogate how sexuality and gender diversity intersect with systems of power (Hagen, 2025; Otto, 2014). The silencing of queer perspectives in scholarship and practice reflects epistemic violence, as explored by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1988 and earlier in this chapter. Young LGBTQI+ women are not only excluded from peace and security spaces but also from the very epistemologies that define what counts as security knowledge.

### *7.7.3. Strategies for Resisting Exclusion*

Despite these challenges, young LGBTQI+ women employ a range of strategies to navigate and challenge exclusionary systems. Some work within existing institutions, framing LGBTQI+ inclusion as a security imperative rather than a human rights addendum. This reframing seeks to position queer issues as central to peacebuilding rather than as peripheral concerns, echoing calls in critical security studies for a broader conceptualization of security that transcends State-centric and militarized frameworks (Puar, 2017; Enloe, 2014).

Others engage in coalition-building with feminist, youth-led, and human rights organizations to amplify their voices and increase their credibility in peace and security arenas. By embedding their advocacy within broader intersectional movements, LGBTQI+ peacebuilders have leveraged existing networks to gain access to spaces that might otherwise remain inaccessible.

A third strategy involves engaging international mechanisms, such as UN consultations or donor dialogues. For some participants, international recognition provided a pathway to influence national peace and security policies. However, this approach also carried risks: in certain political contexts, LGBTQI+ advocates who aligned with international norms were accused of advancing Western agendas, undermining their legitimacy in local spaces.

### *7.7.4. Structural Change and the Future of Inclusion*

While individual strategies can open doors, interviewees emphasized that meaningful change requires structural transformation within peace and security institutions. Symbolic gestures of inclusion are insufficient; what is needed are institutional reforms that embed

LGBTQI+ concerns into the core of peace and security policies. This includes funding mechanisms that support queer-led initiatives, accountability structures to ensure LGBTQI+ voices are integrated into policy implementation, and cultural shifts within institutions to challenge heteronormative and patriarchal biases.

As queer theorists argue (see Hagen, 2025; Biddolph, 2024), true inclusion is not about adding LGBTQI+ individuals to pre-existing structures but about queering those structures, fundamentally rethinking their assumptions, priorities, and power dynamics. Until such transformations occur, LGBTQI+ young women will continue to face barriers that force them to expend disproportionate energy proving their legitimacy rather than shaping peace and security policies.

## **7.8. Conclusion**

The inclusion of LGBTQI+ young women in peace and security frameworks remains uneven, often characterized by symbolic commitments rather than transformative action. Despite global policy efforts to advance gender-sensitive and youth-inclusive security approaches, queer perspectives continue to occupy the margins of both institutional frameworks and academic scholarship. This chapter demonstrates how systemic barriers—rooted in heteronormative, cisnormative, and patriarchal structures—define whose voices are considered legitimate in peace and security governance. These barriers are not neutral but reflect entrenched power dynamics that privilege certain forms of knowledge and participation while silencing others.

A key finding shaped by analysis is the gap between policy rhetoric and implementation. While some WPS and YPS national policies now reference LGBTQI+ inclusion, such as Colombia's plan, which includes explicit actions across all four WPS

pillars, these commitments rarely translate into meaningful mechanisms for participation. LGBTQI+ concerns are often treated as secondary to broader gender equality frameworks rather than recognized as fundamental to peace and security. This framing reinforces hierarchies within peacebuilding institutions, where access to decision-making spaces is limited to those whose identities and advocacy align with normative categories of gender and political acceptability. As several interviewees noted, their inclusion was often conditional, granted only if they adopted language and strategies deemed acceptable by institutional actors.

The distinction participants drew between “activist” and “peacebuilder” identities highlights how deeply political such dynamics are. For many young LGBTQI+ women, peacebuilding was associated with formal, institutional spaces dominated by State-centric and technocratic approaches that failed to reflect their lived realities. Activism, by contrast, was viewed as more authentic and rooted in grassroots mobilization and community-led struggles for justice. Yet this distinction was not without tension. Those identifying as activists often faced exclusion from formal decision-making, whereas those willing to adopt the language of peacebuilding found their access constrained and conditional.

The dynamics observed above are particularly significant when considered through Galtung’s (1969) concept of negative peace, which recognizes that the absence of open conflict does not mean the absence of violence. Structural and cultural violence persist in societies considered “at peace,” shaping the everyday insecurities young LGBTQI+ women must navigate. Their reluctance to embrace the label of peacebuilder reflects an implicit critique of frameworks that fail to address these deeper, less visible

forms of harm. It also challenges scholars and policymakers to expand their conceptualizations of peacebuilding beyond contexts of armed conflict and to recognize the insecurities embedded in heteronormative and patriarchal social orders.

Despite these challenges, young LGBTQI+ women are not passive in the face of exclusion. As this chapter has illustrated, they employ a range of strategies to assert their presence and legitimacy. Some reframe LGBTQI+ inclusion as a security imperative rather than a marginal human rights concern, working within institutional spaces to challenge restrictive paradigms. Others build coalitions with feminist and youth-led movements, recognizing the power of intersectional advocacy to open spaces for queer voices in peace and security discussions. International mechanisms such as UN consultations and donor dialogues have also provided important avenues for influence, though reliance on these platforms carries risks. In some contexts, LGBTQI+ advocates are accused of advancing Western agendas when engaging with international frameworks, further complicating their efforts to secure recognition at the national level.

Addressing these systemic barriers requires a fundamental shift in how peace and security institutions approach inclusion. Tokenistic gestures and rhetorical commitments must give way to structural reforms that embed LGBTQI+ perspectives into the core of policy and practice. This includes integrating queer concerns into national policies with clear accountability measures, funding mechanisms dedicated to queer-inclusive peacebuilding, and institutional cultures that recognize young LGBTQI+ women as equal stakeholders rather than as secondary actors. Such changes are not only necessary to achieve justice and equity; they are also critical to the legitimacy and effectiveness of peace and security initiatives across diverse contexts.

The struggles and strategies of young LGBTQI+ women in peace and security spaces underscore a central truth: peace is not sustainable when it is exclusionary. The persistence of these advocates demonstrates that legitimacy is not granted by institutions but asserted by those who refuse to be silenced. Their work challenges exclusionary narratives and expands the possibilities of what peacebuilding can mean when grounded in intersectionality and intentional inclusion.

The next chapter builds on the previous chapters' analysis by situating the findings to date within the broader empirical dataset and exploring emerging themes at the intersections of WPS and YPS policies. It offers a synthesis of how WPS-YPS synergies can advance more inclusive approaches to peacebuilding while addressing the systemic exclusions highlighted throughout this study.

## **Chapter 8: Beyond Symbolic Inclusion: Lived Realities of Young Women**

### **8.1. Introduction**

This chapter marks a critical pivot in the dissertation, moving beyond the thematic explorations of young women's experiences in Chapters 4 to 7 toward a deeper theoretical engagement with the dynamics of participation, power, and legitimacy in peace and security governance. While previous chapters have highlighted key barriers and enablers of meaningful engagement, this chapter interrogates the global frameworks that shape these experiences—namely, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) policies—and examines whether these agendas succeed in centring marginalized actors or instead reinforce the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle.

The inclusion of women and youth in peacebuilding has been widely embraced as a normative goal in international policy spaces. However, as feminist and postcolonial scholars argue, inclusion alone does not necessarily lead to influence or justice (Donais & McCandless, 2016; Fraser, 2000, 2007). Instead, it often risks becoming a technocratic exercise in representation, wherein marginalized actors are invited to participate under conditions that prioritize institutional stability over structural transformation. This chapter builds on the analysis of these dynamics in previous chapters through an intersectional lens (see Crenshaw, 1989; 1999), foregrounding how gender, age, sexuality, language, and geography shape young women's engagement in WPS and YPS decision-making.

Drawing on empirical findings from interviews with 24 young women peacebuilders across diverse regional contexts, as well as the global survey, the chapter examines how participation operates not as a neutral act but as a contested process

characterized by power asymmetries. Participants spoke candidly about the conditionality of their inclusion, the emotional and epistemic labour required to remain in policy spaces, and the strategies they deploy to resist tokenization and assert their agency. Their insights challenge dominant narratives that portray youth and women as passive beneficiaries and instead illuminate their roles as active knowledge producers and political actors.

Central to this analysis is the distinction between symbolic and substantive participation (Kwon, 2018; Simpson, 2018). While symbolic participation satisfies institutional demands for diversity, it rarely redistributes power or legitimizes alternative knowledges. Substantive participation, by contrast, requires transforming exclusionary structures and validating historically marginalized voices.

The chapter unfolds in five sections. It begins by conceptualizing inclusion through theoretical and policy debates, engaging feminist critiques of participation, and highlighting how intersectionality reveals the layered exclusions within WPS and YPS policies. The second section interrogates institutional framings of youth participation, drawing on Helen Berents and Richard Fosu's (2025) typology to analyze how youth are constructed as future promise, resources, deficient, and exceptional. The third section explores the emotional and epistemic labour required of young women to access and remain in peacebuilding spaces. It then turns to grassroots strategies for reclaiming participation from below, highlighting how young women leverage informal networks and digital activism to build legitimacy on their own terms. Finally, the chapter examines funding ecosystems and structural inequities, analyzing how donor practices constrain youth-led peacebuilding and proposing decolonial approaches to resourcing inclusion. By

weaving together empirical insights and critical scholarship, this chapter bridges the lived realities of young women peacebuilders with broader theoretical considerations.

## **8.2. Conceptualizing Inclusion: Theoretical and Policy Debates**

The promise of inclusion has become a cornerstone of global peace and security policies, most prominently in the UN Security Council's WPS and YPS resolutions. Both policies seek to centre marginalized voices in decision-making spaces, yet critical scholarship has questioned whether these political commitments can deliver meaningful participation or reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to dismantle. This section examines these debates by engaging feminist critiques of participation, interrogating symbolic and substantive forms of inclusion, and situating these insights within broader analyses of power and legitimacy. It also reflects on meaningful participation as a floating signifier, frequently invoked but not clearly defined, and considers how the temporality of youth participation adds further complexity to efforts at inclusion.

### *8.2.1. Participation, Power, and Legitimacy*

Feminist scholars have long challenged celebratory narratives of participation, noting that inclusion alone does not automatically translate into influence or justice. Nancy Fraser (2007) first highlighted that recognition without redistribution risks entrenching existing inequalities under the guise of progress. In peacebuilding contexts, Timothy Donais and Erin McCandless (2016) argue that the “inclusivity norm” has become a technical requirement rather than a transformative political project. Institutions increasingly equate the mere presence of marginalized actors with success, often sidelining questions about whether these actors can shape outcomes substantively.

This critique is particularly resonant with respect to the WPS and YPS policies. As exemplified in previous chapters, young women are frequently invited to forums and consultations; these invitations are often structured around institutional needs rather than participants' own interests. The resulting spaces tend to privilege voices that conform to dominant expectations of what "good participation" (or Berents and McEvoy-Levy's (2015) "good youth," as explored in Chapters 5-7) entails: apolitical, professionalized, and non-disruptive. As Soo Ah Kwon (2018) observes, global youth participation practices often emphasize consensus-building and depoliticization, creating conditions in which inclusion is contingent on young people's willingness to accommodate existing hierarchies.

The concept of meaningful participation, although central to both WPS and YPS policies, remains contested. Andrea Cornwall (2008) distinguishes between invited spaces, created by institutions and often reproducing existing power relations, and claimed spaces, which emerge organically from grassroots mobilization. In peacebuilding contexts, meaningfulness is often equated with mere presence, obscuring whether participants actually influence decisions or shift institutional priorities. This distinction is particularly significant for young women, who must navigate intersecting gendered and generational hierarchies to access these spaces at all.

This distinction between symbolic and substantive participation is crucial. Symbolic participation entails the presence of marginalized actors in decision-making processes without granting them substantive influence. It is performative, often used to legitimize pre-determined policies or political decisions. Substantive participation, by contrast, requires a redistribution of power (as explored in Chapter 4) that enables those

invited to shape policies, challenge institutional norms, and bring alternative knowledges into political conversations. Graeme Simpson (2018) warns of the violence of inclusion, wherein marginalized actors are absorbed into institutional spaces only on the condition that they adopt the language and priorities of those in power, effectively silencing dissent and erasing difference. Helen Berents and Caitlin Mollica (2021) extend this critique by introducing the concept of “reciprocal institutional visibility.” They argue that institutions and marginalized actors engage in a mutual performance of legitimacy: international organizations gain credibility by including women and youth, while the latter gain symbolic validation through their association with these organizations (Berents & Mollica, 2021). Yet this reciprocity is inherently asymmetrical. Institutions rarely undergo structural change as a result of these encounters, while participants are often expected to conform to institutional norms to maintain access, as explored in Chapters 5-7.

These asymmetries emerged clearly in the data collected for this research. Many participants described their inclusion in global and national peacebuilding spaces as contingent on pre-existing institutional relationships, professionalized credentials, or the ability to navigate dominant linguistic and cultural codes. For young women in particular, access often required years of demonstrating technical expertise, emotional resilience, and deference to hierarchical structures. However, this hard-won legitimacy frequently coincided with participants nearing the upper age limits of YPS spaces (approaching 30 or 35), creating a temporal contradiction: just as they were finally invited to policy tables, they began to “age out” of the youth category entirely.

This dynamic underscores a central tension between WPS and YPS. While womanhood in WPS is conceived as a stable identity, youth in YPS is inherently

transient. The bounded nature of youth participation produces a revolving door of actors, limiting continuity and often leaving young women in an institutional limbo when they transition out of YPS but are not yet integrated into WPS spaces. This dynamic will be explored further later in the chapter.

### *8.2.2. Intersectionality and Exclusion*

To understand these exclusions more fully, as was done throughout this dissertation, it is necessary to adopt an intersectional lens. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality draws attention to how multiple and overlapping systems of oppression—such as gender, age, race, sexuality, class, and language—shape experiences of marginalization. Within WPS and YPS policies, intersectionality reveals that categories such as “youth” and “women” are far from homogeneous. Instead, these categories mask deep hierarchies and reproduce structural exclusions.

Luisa Kern (2025b) critiques global youth programming for privileging certain subject positions—urban, cisgender, English-speaking youth—while marginalizing others who are deemed too radical, too inexperienced, or insufficiently professionalized. Samuel Ritholtz, José Fernando Serrano-Amaya, Jamie J. Hagen, and Melanie Judge (2023) similarly highlight the conditionality placed on queer peacebuilders, who are celebrated as evidence of institutional inclusivity while being subjected to heightened scrutiny and expectations of gratitude. These dynamics resonate strongly with empirical findings analyzed in previous chapters.

Several participants described how their identities compounded barriers to meaningful participation. Young LGBTQI+ women reported navigating spaces that erased or marginalized their experiences, where they felt pressure to silence aspects of

their identity to avoid alienating institutional actors. For some, this meant withdrawing from policymaking spaces altogether and focusing their energies on grassroots activism, where they could engage more authentically and safely, as further reflected in Chapter 7.

Linguistic hierarchies also emerged as a recurring theme. While WPS and YPS policies present themselves as global, the dominance of English as the primary language of engagement limits access for youth peacebuilders from non-Anglophone contexts. Participants from Francophone Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America described struggling to secure translation services in international forums, often resorting to self-translation or relying on colleagues to bridge linguistic gaps. Kern (2025a) identifies this as an “epistemic hierarchy” that privileges Global North knowledge systems and excludes non-English perspectives. This reinforces the themes discussed in Chapter 6.

An intersectional analysis underscores the insufficiency of inclusion efforts that focus narrowly on increasing the number of young women in peacebuilding spaces. Meaningful participation requires more than access; it demands structural transformation that dismantles the intersecting barriers of power, privilege, and marginalization embedded within institutional frameworks.

### **8.3. Conditionality and Institutional Compliance in the YPS Agenda**

The YPS resolutions emerged as a landmark policy framework to recognize young people as essential actors in peacebuilding. Yet, as Berents and Fosu (2025) argue, this recognition is far from straightforward. The inclusion of youth within institutional peace and security spaces is structured by a set of conditionalities that simultaneously invite and constrain their participation. This section critically engages with Berents and Fosu’s typology of four dominant framings—youth as future promise, resources, deficiency, and

exceptionalism—to examine how these narratives shape institutional practices (2025). Building on this analysis, it examines how technocratic inclusion often reinforces rather than dismantles power hierarchies and draws on empirical insights from interviews with young women to illustrate how these dynamics manifest across regions and contexts.

### *8.3.1. Youth as Future Promise*

Within international policy discourse, young people are frequently framed as future leaders whose primary value lies in their potential to contribute at a later stage. This framing positions youth as investments to be nurtured for future returns rather than as legitimate actors in the present. Berents and Fosu (2025) caution that, while this narrative is rhetorically uplifting, it risks indefinitely deferring youth agency.

This dynamic was evident in several interviewees' testimonies. Young women engaged in national policy consultations often described being treated as apprentices rather than experts. Despite extensive grassroots experience, their contributions were valued only as long as they aligned with institutional visions of what youth should aspire to become. This orientation towards the future justified their exclusion from present-day decision-making processes, reinforcing generational hierarchies that privilege older actors as the true bearers of authority.

This framing also intersects with gendered expectations in WPS spaces. While the WPS resolutions conceptualize gender identity as a stable category, YPS approaches often cast youth participation as transitional and temporary. The resulting asymmetry amplifies the precariousness of young women's inclusion in institutional policies. This has direct implications for meaningful participation, as it positions young women's

engagement as conditional and time-bound, limiting their ability to exercise sustained influence, build authority, and shape long-term policy outcomes.

### *8.3.2. Youth as Resources*

A second dominant framing constructs youth as resources to be harnessed for institutional objectives. This utilitarian approach describes young people as vehicles for disseminating messages, mobilizing communities, and extending the reach of peacebuilding programs. While recognizing youth as resources suggests they are valuable contributors, it also instrumentalizes their participation by subordinating it to pre-existing agendas.

Empirical interview data highlighted how this framing manifests in tokenistic invitations to global forums and events (see Leclerc & Wong, 2024; and Chapter 4 for more in-depth exploration of tokenism). Participants reported being asked to speak on panels or attend consultations not to shape policy but to provide legitimacy to processes already underway. A young woman from Tunisia, for instance, noted how regional UN offices often engaged youth in extractive ways, soliciting testimonials and good practices for reports while offering little opportunity for co-creation or influence.

This phenomenon reflects the larger theme of language and knowledge production (see Leclerc & Rouhshahbaz, 2025; 2021) outlined in Chapters 4 and 5. Even when young women were asked to contribute, their knowledge was often framed as anecdotal or representative of “the youth perspective” rather than as substantive expertise.

### *8.3.3. Youth as Deficient*

The framing of youth as deficient positions them as lacking the knowledge, skills, or maturity required to contribute meaningfully to peace and security. This narrative

frequently underpins gatekeeping practices, with access to policymaking spaces restricted to acceptable youth (and as Berents & McEvoy-Levy 2015 call the “good youth”; also see Berents, 2024) who conform to institutional norms. Berents and Fosu (2025) argue that this framing often coexists with a discourse of capacity-building that centres on fixing youth deficits rather than transforming exclusionary structures.

An interviewee from Jordan described how young women in her context were invited into national coalitions only after demonstrating exceptional expertise and professionalism, standards rarely applied to their older counterparts, including being required to hold advanced degrees, demonstrate prior engagement with international organizations, and consistently perform in formal policy settings before being considered credible participants. Similarly, an interviewee from Senegal highlighted how participation in African Union initiatives was mediated by linguistic and educational barriers that privileged Anglophone, urban youth over those from Francophone or rural communities. These barriers reinforce a hierarchy of participation in which only young people already institutionally aligned are granted entry.

This dynamic underscores how knowledge production and concepts of belonging often intersect (UN & FBA, 2021). The ability to produce knowledge in institutionally recognized ways—through language, credentials, and policy fluency—shapes who is seen as legitimately “belonging” within peace and security spaces, and whose perspectives are excluded or devalued. Additionally, participants navigating linguistic hierarchies and heteronormative institutional cultures experienced compounded marginalization, even as they were told their inclusion was evidence of progress.

#### *8.3.4. Youth as Exceptional*

Paradoxically, even when young people overcome these barriers, they are often framed as exceptional cases rather than indicative of systemic inclusivity, as mentioned by the Jordanian interviewee above. The celebration of “exceptional” youth, as Berents and Fosu (2025) term it, can mask broader patterns of exclusion by positioning these individuals as outliers whose success does not challenge institutional norms.

This framing was a recurring theme in interviewees’ reflections. A North American interviewee, for instance, spoke of the pressure to represent an entire community as the lone queer youth voice in certain global peacebuilding spaces. While her presence was celebrated, it reinforced her sense of isolation and the conditionality of her inclusion. Similarly, a Central Asian participant described being thrust into a leadership role in a major peacebuilding initiative in the United States, only to realize that her visibility served institutional interests more than her own personal agency. These experiences reveal how institutions co-opt young women’s achievements to signal progress while leaving exclusionary practices intact. Together, these accounts suggest that participation is often structured as symbolic visibility rather than substantive influence, raising questions about the extent to which inclusion translates into meaningful authority, agency, and the ability to shape outcomes.

#### **8.4. Temporality and the Politics of Aging Out**

The temporal framing of participation within the YPS resolutions introduces unique dynamics that shape young women’s experiences of inclusion. Unlike WPS, which treats womanhood as a lifelong identity, the category of youth is bounded by age limits, typically 30 or 35 years. This temporal threshold creates a paradox for young women

peacebuilders: by the time they have accumulated the experience, networks, and legitimacy required to access policy spaces, they are often approaching the point of being too old to “sit at the table.”

Interviewees spoke of how institutional gatekeeping initially constrained their access to peacebuilding spaces, requiring them to “prove their worth” through sustained performance and alignment with institutional norms. Those who succeeded in navigating these barriers often did so after years of effort, only to find their participation time-bound by political age limits. This dynamic underscores the difference between YPS and WPS policies. In WPS, womanhood is conceptualized as a stable category; in YPS, youth is transient. The institutionalization of age thresholds in YPS creates a revolving door of participation, limiting continuity and undermining the long-term leadership of young women. Moreover, it reinforces hierarchies between older and younger women, as those who “graduate” out of youth spaces are often not welcomed into WPS spaces, leaving them in a form of institutional liminality (Lindsay, 2010).

These findings align with Berents and Fosu’s (2025) analysis of youth as “future promise,” a framing that positions young people’s value in their potential rather than their current contributions. However, as interviewees emphasized, the constant turnover of youth actors impedes the accumulation of expertise and the development of sustained movements. It also produces emotional strains, as young women grapple with the precariousness of their inclusion and the knowledge that their presence in these spaces is conditional and temporary.

Addressing these dynamics requires rethinking inclusion beyond fixed demographic categories toward approaches that recognize the fluidity of identities and

the need for intergenerational continuity in peacebuilding work (Lee-Koo & Pruitt, 2024). At the same time, such approaches must remain attentive to the risk that inclusion becomes concentrated in a small number of individuals, reinforcing gatekeeping dynamics rather than broadening access.

#### *8.4.1. From YPS to WPS: Intergenerational Continuities and Ruptures*

This institutional liminality underscores a broader challenge: the lack of synergy between YPS and WPS policies, in that neither framework provides a coherent pathway for sustained engagement, revealing how participation is structured in fragmented and discontinuous ways across the policy lifecycle. Participants described how aging out of YPS rarely coincided with a transition into WPS communities. Instead, young women often found themselves excluded from both frameworks, caught between youth-centred programming and women-centred policymaking (Pruitt & Yague, 2025b).

This disconnect reflects institutional silos that undermine intergenerational leadership. As Rita M. Lopidia and Lucy Hall (2020) note, WPS spaces, while rhetorically committed to inclusivity, often remain resistant to the radical potential of youth voices. The absence of deliberate bridges between YPS and WPS policymaking perpetuates hierarchies in which older women are positioned as the real experts while younger women are treated as transient contributors (Yague & Nong, 2025; Leclerc, 2025b; Leclerc et al., 2023; Berents & Mollica, 2021).

Some interviewees, notably from Colombia and the Czech Republic, described moments of intergenerational solidarity where older feminists intentionally created space for younger women to lead. However, these instances were exceptions rather than the norm (Valladares Gonzalez, 2024). As Berents (2018) argues, genuine intergenerational

peacebuilding requires structural changes that disrupt age and gender hierarchies, not merely gestures of inclusion.

### **8.5. Emotional and Epistemic Labour in Peacebuilding Spaces**

The institutionalization of inclusion in peacebuilding spaces often obscures the heavy emotional and intellectual labour required of young women to navigate these environments. While their participation is celebrated rhetorically, in practice it frequently entails forms of self-regulation, adaptation, and overperformance that exact high personal costs. This section examines the emotional burdens young women shoulder to access and remain in peacebuilding spaces and explores how their experiential knowledge is often devalued, constituting a form of epistemic violence (Brunner, 2021; Spivak, 1988; see more exploration of epistemic violence in Chapter 7). It argues that these dynamics are not incidental but reflect deep structural inequities within WPS and YPS policies that privilege institutional logics over relational and transformative approaches.

#### *8.5.1. Performing Belonging: Emotional Burdens of Participation*

If there is one takeaway from this dissertation so far, it is that participation in peace and security decision-making is rarely neutral. It is mediated by unspoken expectations about how young women should present themselves and what types of contributions are acceptable. As Sara Ahmed (2012) observes in her analysis of the “feminist killjoy,” marginalized actors are often cast as disruptive when they refuse to accommodate institutional norms or challenge dominant narratives. In peacebuilding, this dynamic places young women in a double bind: they are invited to speak as representatives of their

communities but are expected to do so in ways that do not unsettle existing hierarchies (Stainback, Roberts & Biswas, 2024).

Helen Berents, Catherine Bolten, and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy in their 2024 edited volume similarly identify the violence of inclusion—as opposed to the more widely discussed concept of violence of exclusion established by Simpson (2018)—a process whereby marginalized actors are admitted into institutional spaces only on the condition that they leave behind aspects of their identity or politics that might appear threatening to the status quo (also explored in Berents, 2024 and Chapter 7 of this dissertation). This conditionality creates a psychological toll for young women who must constantly weigh the risks of authenticity against the need for acceptance.

Empirical insights gathered throughout the interviews reveal how these dynamics operate in practice. Several interviewees described a pervasive sense of exhaustion from having to perform beyond their peers to be taken seriously. This labour often involved meticulously curating their public personas, avoiding overt expressions of dissent, and aligning their contributions with institutional expectations of “professionalism.” This dynamic was highlighted in Chapters 5 and 6, where young women with access to higher education or who spoke English as a secondary language were compelled to conform to participate in certain policy discussions. For LGBTQI+ young women, explored in Chapter 7, this burden was compounded by the additional work of navigating spaces where their identities were either rendered invisible or explicitly silenced.

One interviewee from North America, for example, reflected on the isolation of being the only person consistently advocating for queer inclusion in WPS and YPS policymaking. She described the emotional fatigue of carrying this responsibility alone,

noting that even in rooms with other queer activists, discussions of LGBTQI+ issues were often deprioritized. This resonates with the theme of queerness and belonging explored in Chapters 4 and 7, highlighting how institutional spaces often fail to accommodate multiple, intersecting identities.

Another interviewee from Europe echoed these sentiments. She recounted moments where senior figures in peacebuilding organizations questioned the relevance of LGBTQI+ inclusion, asking her to “pick one or the other”—gender equality or queer rights—as though they were mutually exclusive. This pressure to compartmentalize her advocacy underscored the emotional precarity of participating in spaces that profess inclusivity while marginalizing certain identities. These accounts illustrate how the promise of participation often masks the unequal emotional labour demanded of young women, particularly those whose identities challenge dominant heteronormative, Anglophone, and Eurocentric paradigms.

#### *8.5.2. Epistemic Violence and the Devaluation of Experiential Knowledge*

Beyond the emotional toll, young women in peacebuilding spaces often encounter epistemic violence, which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) termed the systemic devaluation of their experiential knowledge. Miranda Fricker (2007) defines epistemic violence as harm done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. In institutional peacebuilding, this manifests when young women’s contributions are dismissed as anecdotal, emotional, or lacking rigour, even as their presence is leveraged to signal inclusivity.

Several interviewees reported being asked to share their stories as representatives of youth while being excluded from technical discussions where substantive decisions

were made. A young woman from Brazil described this dynamic as a reduction of young women's participation in storytelling, with institutions privileging their narratives as testimonials rather than recognizing them as valid forms of expertise. This framing relegates young women to the role of witnesses rather than actors in peacebuilding processes, echoing Andrea Cornwall's (2008) critique of invited spaces that reproduce existing power asymmetries.

A young woman living in the United States but with Ukrainian heritage highlighted how the devaluation of young women's knowledge often intersects with broader hierarchies of gender, age, and sexuality. She noted that in Eastern European WPS advocacy communities, older, more conservative actors continue to dominate, leaving younger, queer peacebuilders feeling marginalized. Even when invited into policymaking forums, she felt compelled to "curve herself"—adopting a more cautious, less confrontational stance—to avoid jeopardizing her inclusion. This self-censorship illustrates the profound epistemic and emotional costs of navigating spaces that are nominally inclusive but substantively exclusionary (Arko, 2019).

### *8.5.3. Navigating Isolation and Building Resilience*

The emotional and epistemic challenges described above often lead young women to withdraw from institutional spaces or seek alternative forms of engagement. However, some also described moments of resilience and solidarity that enabled them to navigate these environments. For instance, an interviewee in Colombia described gaining confidence through the support of older feminists, who intentionally ceded space for her to lead in WPS action plan processes in the country. This mentorship model created a rare

context in which her contributions were valued as expertise rather than as anecdotes, allowing her to participate without the burden of constant self-justification.

Such instances demonstrate the importance of intergenerational solidarity in mitigating the emotional costs of participation. Yet these moments remain exceptions. For many participants, the structural dynamics of peacebuilding spaces continue to demand emotional and epistemic labour (see Wilson, 2024) that is unequally distributed and insufficiently acknowledged. Epistemic labour refers to the work marginalized individuals perform to have their knowledge, experiences, and ways of knowing recognized as legitimate within dominant systems of power (Wilson, 2021; Pohlhaus, 2020; Dotson, 2014; Fricker, 2007). Recognizing this burden is not only descriptive but analytical, as it reveals how participation is sustained through unequal forms of labour that shape who is able to remain engaged, whose contributions are taken up, and whose are dismissed or overlooked. Recognizing the burden is therefore essential to rethinking participation not as a neutral act of inclusion but as a contested and relational process that imposes high costs on those invited.

### **8.6. Informal Pathways and Grassroots Resistance**

The limitations of institutional inclusion have led many young women peacebuilders to forge alternative pathways outside formal spaces. These informal and grassroots strategies are not merely fallback options; rather, they constitute intentional acts of resistance and creativity that challenge exclusionary structures and reimagine what participation can entail. This section explores how young women leverage informal networks, digital spaces, and community-centred initiatives to assert their legitimacy and build peace on their own terms.

By focusing on these alternative sites, the analysis shifts from the constraints of tokenistic inclusion to the generative potential of grassroots action. As Roger Mac Guinty (2014) argues, informal spaces can become critical sites of agency and innovation, particularly for actors excluded from institutional frameworks. Similarly, Helen Berents and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy (2015) highlight how young people enact “everyday peace” practices that are often invisible to, or undervalued by, formal peacebuilding institutions. These everyday practices disrupt the narrative of participation as something granted from above, reframing it as a relational and contextually grounded process of claiming space.

#### *8.6.1. Organic Sites of Participation*

While international policies like WPS and YPS aspire to inclusion, their highly procedural and hierarchical structures frequently marginalize young women’s voices. In contrast, grassroots spaces often provide more flexible and responsive environments in which young women can bring their full identities to peacebuilding work. These organic sites of participation are characterized by their horizontal structures, community-centred approaches, and openness to alternative knowledges.

Interviewees described creating informal networks that became vital arenas for solidarity and action. For many, these networks emerged precisely because institutional spaces were inaccessible or inhospitable. Young LGBTQI+ women, in particular, spoke of relying on peer-led initiatives to sustain their engagement in peace and security work. A Brazilian interviewee reflected on her experiences of developing local youth collectives in Southern America to counteract the exclusion she encountered in national-level policy spaces. These collectives prioritized horizontal decision-making and treated

lived experience as a form of expertise, disrupting the hierarchies that had previously marginalized her.

These networks also served as sites of healing and affirmation. A young woman from North America described how her involvement in grassroots spaces enabled her to more fully integrate her identity as a queer woman into her activism. In institutional settings, her contributions were often reduced to representing a youth or gender perspective, thereby erasing the intersectional realities of her experience. By contrast, grassroots initiatives provided room for multi-faceted engagement.

**8.6.1.1. Digital Activism and Transnational Networks.** Digital activism was a prominent informal strategy. Interviewees described how online platforms enabled them to build transnational networks, share knowledge, and advocate for issues sidelined in formal forums. One young woman spoke of a virtual community of practice focused on “queering peace and security” (see more in Chapter 7) as a critical space for collaboration and mutual support. This initiative enabled her and others to experiment with framing LGBTQI+ concerns as central to peacebuilding rather than ancillary, thereby creating a discursive space in which institutional gatekeeping was less prevalent.

Such digital spaces illustrate the theme of language and knowledge production, as they often prioritize multilingual engagement and alternative epistemologies (see Lynrose Jane D. Genon, whose doctoral work explores this intersection; Genon, 2025a; 2025b). By decentring English and creating content in diverse languages, these spaces countered the hierarchies entrenched in formal peacebuilding institutions.

However, digital activism also carries risks. Interviewees noted that online spaces were vulnerable to surveillance, hacking, and targeted harassment, particularly for activists advocating queer rights or critiquing powerful State actors (Genon, 2025b). These challenges highlight the precarity of informal participation in an increasingly securitized digital environment.

**8.6.1.2. Self-Authorized Legitimacy and Hybrid Participation.** These grassroots efforts highlight the importance of self-authorized legitimacy (von Billerbeck, 2022). In many cases, young women recognized that waiting for validation from formal institutions was counterproductive. Instead, they cultivated legitimacy through their actions and relationships within their communities. A young Czech woman described the High-Level Global Conference on Youth Inclusive Peace Processes, held virtually in Doha, Qatar, as a rare instance in which youth participants were afforded meaningful control over both the process and substance of the event (Grizelj & Saleem, 2022). However, she contrasted this with the more frequent reality of institutional spaces, where young women's agency was tightly circumscribed. For her, informal settings provided opportunities to engage authentically without fear of tokenization.

The distinction between institutional and organic community gatherings is not always clear-cut. Some participants noted moments of hybrid participation, where they leveraged informal networks to influence formal decision-making. An American-born Ukrainian interviewee, for instance, spoke of building coalitions among grassroots youth organizations in Eastern Europe to pressure national governments to adopt YPS in policy documents. These hybrid strategies illustrate how young women can act as brokers

between informal and formal arenas, expanding the possibilities for meaningful engagement.

Yet these hybrid roles are not without tension. While they offer avenues for influence, they can also expose young women to new forms of co-optation and emotional labour, as they must constantly negotiate between grassroots accountability and institutional expectations.

**8.6.1.3. Challenges and Opportunities for Participation.** While these organic sites offer critical avenues for participation, they are not without challenges. Grassroots efforts often operate with limited resources, placing a heavy burden on young women to sustain them over time. Interviewees also noted the fragility of informal networks, which depend on trust and shared commitment but can be disrupted by burnout or external pressures.

Nonetheless, the resilience and creativity displayed by young women underscore the potential of these spaces to incubate alternative peacebuilding paradigms. As Zeynep Başer and Ayşe Betül Çelik (2014) argue, the cumulative impact of everyday practices can produce meaningful change even in the absence of institutional support. These alternatives are proving to be the only recourse for young women to find some form of power and agency.

### *8.6.2. Reimagining Inclusion from Below*

Grassroots movements led by young women are not only responses to exclusion; they are sites of innovation that challenge dominant peacebuilding paradigms and offer blueprints for more inclusive and just systems. These movements demonstrate that inclusion need

not be framed as an act of institutional benevolence but can instead emerge from the collective agency of those historically marginalized. As Lesley Pruitt and Erika Isabel Yague (2025) argue in their analysis of young women peacebuilders in the Asia-Pacific region, grassroots actors are not merely resisting institutional exclusion but also offering transformative, community-rooted approaches to peacebuilding that centre justice and dignity. As Marisa O. Ensor (2021) argues, the securitization of youth has often limited their roles to objects of intervention. However, grassroots actors invert this framing by positioning themselves as autonomous agents of change, advancing peace on their own terms.

This section draws on feminist and decolonial critiques to explore how young women are not only resisting exclusionary logics but actively reimagining what participation and legitimacy can look like outside of formal frameworks. In this sense, their work reflects what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014a) calls epistemologies of the South: practices and knowledges that emerge from contexts of marginalization and offer alternatives to dominant, often Eurocentric, models of peacebuilding.

**8.6.2.1. Subverting Exclusionary Spaces.** Several interviewees described diverse strategies for navigating, resisting, and subverting exclusionary peacebuilding spaces. Many recognized that formal institutions often maintain rigid boundaries around who is considered a legitimate actor. Rather than seeking validation within these structures, they cultivated alternative forms of authority through grassroots mobilization and peer-led initiatives.

An interviewee from Central Asia's reflections illustrated this dynamic. Confronted with institutional pressures to suppress her identity as a queer woman in order to retain professional opportunities, she redirected her energy towards community-led projects. These initiatives, while operating outside formal policy circles, provided critical platforms for marginalized voices and reframed peacebuilding as a process that begins within communities rather than at policy tables (considered elite or out of touch). Her activism resonates with Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2012) call to "refuse the settler gaze," to reject frameworks that position marginalized actors as needing to be developed or "empowered" by external institutions.

Similarly, a Brazilian interviewee described resisting the "testimonial framing" imposed by national-level actors in Latin America, who sought youth input only as personal stories rather than as expertise. In response, she co-created networks of young women peacebuilders that prioritized co-leadership and collective decision-making. These networks offered opportunities to engage substantively with peace and security issues while fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility.

**8.6.2.2. Building Alternative Forms of Authority.** Grassroots approaches often reject hierarchical models of leadership, instead embracing relational and horizontal modes of organization. Başer and Çelik (2014) describe this as everyday agency: the small, cumulative actions that, while often overlooked by formal institutions, constitute vital forms of peacebuilding (also see Berents, 2018, on young people and everyday peace). Interviewees echoed this ethos, viewing authority not as tied to formal positions but as emerging from lived experience and community trust.

A young woman from North America, for example, described developing a digital platform to amplify LGBTQI+ voices in peace and security debates. While initially conceived as an informal support network, the platform has evolved into a recognized space for critical knowledge production and advocacy. This evolution reflects how grassroots initiatives can gain legitimacy through consistent engagement and impact, even in the absence of institutional endorsement.

In some cases, participants strategically engaged with formal institutions while retaining a critical distance. One interviewee recounted that, during Colombia's WPS action plan process, described in Chapter 7, she navigated tensions between older feminists in leadership positions and younger activists advocating intersectional approaches. By cultivating relationships across generations and advocating for power-sharing models, she contributed to incremental shifts in the valuation of young women's expertise. This hybrid approach exemplifies how grassroots actors can occupy grey spaces that allow them to influence formal processes without being fully absorbed into them.

Yet interviewees also highlighted the risks of co-optation in these hybrid spaces. While institutional engagement sometimes opened opportunities, it often required careful negotiation to avoid being instrumentalized or tokenized. These insights underscore the importance of maintaining autonomous spaces where young women can engage on their own terms, free from institutional constraints.

**8.6.2.3. Reframing Inclusion as Transformation.** The grassroots practices shared by interviewees suggest that inclusion need not be limited to institutional logics of

representation. Instead, it can be reimagined as a transformative process rooted in principles of justice, reciprocity, and accountability (Berents, 2024). Rather than asking how young women can enter existing spaces, these movements ask how peacebuilding spaces themselves must be reconfigured to centre those historically excluded (Leclerc, 2025a).

Participants frequently expressed frustration with the tendency of institutional actors to treat inclusion as an endpoint rather than an ongoing negotiation. For many, the goal was not simply to “have a seat at the table,” talking about the figurative and literal policy discussion tables, but to redefine the table itself. They argued that the objective should be to create spaces in which diverse knowledges and experiences are not only welcomed but also recognized as essential to building sustainable peace.

The commentary from one of the interviewees on the High-Level Conference in Doha, Qatar, mentioned above, captures this vision. She described the painstaking process of ensuring diversity among youth participants and facilitating difficult conversations about representation without descending into tokenism. This intentionality created a model for what participatory peacebuilding could look like when designed from the ground up by those most affected.

As de Sousa Santos (2014b) argues, transformative inclusion requires “ecologies of knowledges.” He contends that no single epistemology holds a monopoly on truth (de Sousa Santos, 2014b). For young women peacebuilders, this means building systems that validate local, experiential, and intersectional knowledges as integral to peacebuilding processes.

**8.6.2.4. Challenges and Opportunities for Grassroots Activism.** While these grassroots efforts are powerful, interviewees acknowledged the challenges they face, including limited resources, burnout, and the risk of co-optation by institutions seeking to appear inclusive. However, they also spoke of the possibilities that emerge when young women build solidarity across differences, engage in critical reflection, and experiment with alternative forms of participation.

These practices highlight a fundamental truth: meaningful inclusion is not granted but claimed. It is constructed through the sustained work of those who refuse to accept the constraints imposed by institutional frameworks and instead create spaces in which their voices and contributions are fully recognized.

## **8.7. Funding, Legitimacy and Structural Inequities**

Financial resources are a cornerstone of peacebuilding, yet access to them is highly uneven and often structured in ways that marginalize the very actors global agendas claim to support. For youth-led initiatives, particularly those led by young women and LGBTQI+ activists, funding mechanisms frequently reproduce the hierarchies they seek to dismantle. The precariousness of funding was cited by almost all interviewees as a significant hindrance to meaningful participation. In that regard, this section examines how donor practices constrain youth participation, how legitimacy is constructed within funding ecosystems, and how these dynamics exacerbate Global North-Global South inequities.

### *8.7.1. Donor Practices and the Constraints on Youth Participation*

International donors increasingly emphasize the importance of youth inclusion in peacebuilding efforts. However, as Thania Paffenholz (2015) argues, funding structures often reinforce top-down relationships between donors and recipients, prioritizing technical efficiency and measurable outputs over relational and transformative approaches. Similarly, Helen Cahill and Babak Dadvand (2018) critique neoliberal framings of youth participation, in which young people are positioned as instruments of resilience and development rather than as rights-holders in their own right.

Interviewees described how these dynamics manifest in practice. Many recounted how funding flows are dominated by large, Global North-based organizations with the capacity to meet donors' stringent reporting requirements. Youth-led initiatives, particularly those operating at the grassroots level, struggle to access resources because they lack the institutional infrastructure to meet bureaucratic requirements (Gaston et al., 2025; Claeson, Ghanem & Howell, 2023). This creates a paradox: young women peacebuilders are celebrated rhetorically but excluded from financial systems that would enable their work.

Some interviewees reflected on how these dynamics specifically affect LGBTQI+ initiatives. One young woman from North America described how funders often perceive queer-focused peacebuilding as too politically sensitive, leading to chronic underfunding of LGBTQI+ organizations. Even when funds are available, they are often tied to narrow programmatic outcomes that leave little room for holistic, community-centred approaches.

### *8.7.2. The Politics of Legitimacy in Funding Ecosystems*

Access to resources is not simply about financial capital; it is also about how legitimacy is constructed within global funding ecosystems. Donors often privilege organizations that align with Western professional and technical norms, equating legitimacy with fluency in English, formal accreditation, and proximity to international networks. This dynamic systematically disadvantages youth-led groups in the Global South, whose expertise is often framed as local knowledge rather than as a source of policy innovation (Gaston et al., 2025).

One interviewee from Central Asia's experience highlights this imbalance. As a young woman of Afghan descent working in the United States, she observed how funding institutions valorized Global North expertise while treating activists from conflict-affected regions as objects of intervention rather than as equal partners. When she attempted to advocate for youth-led approaches within a large international organization, she encountered resistance from senior leadership, who questioned the capacity of youth to manage significant resources. For her, this skepticism reflected a broader mistrust of grassroots actors that pervades donor cultures (OSGEY & UNOY, 2023).

One interviewee, working between Brazil and Canada, similarly noted how institutional hierarchies shape whose knowledge is considered valuable. In Brazil, youth-led organizations struggled to secure funding because they were seen as lacking the technical sophistication of larger organizations. Yet in Canada, she encountered a different but related dynamic: young women peacebuilders were welcomed into consultative spaces but rarely trusted to lead or manage resources. This pattern suggests that the exclusion of youth from financial ecosystems is not simply a question of capacity but of entrenched biases about who is deemed capable of leadership (Ozcelik et al.,

2021). This reinforces the argument that meaningful participation is not defined by access to spaces alone, but by the ability to exercise authority, control resources, and shape decision-making processes.

### **8.8. Structural Inequities and Global Power Dynamics**

The funding landscape is shaped by broader structural inequities that reflect global power imbalances. Resources for peacebuilding are heavily concentrated in the Global North, with funding decisions often made in capitals far removed from the communities they affect. Caitlin Mollica (2022) critiques the chronic underfunding and short-term grant cycles that limit youth-led organizations' ability to sustain meaningful peacebuilding practices. She argues for participatory grant-making and multi-year, flexible financing models that recognize youth as political actors and co-creators of funding systems, rather than passive recipients of aid (Mollica, 2022). This centralization reinforces dependency relationships and limits local actors' ability to set their own priorities.

Participants expressed frustration with how funding systems reinforce Global North dominance. Several described how donors impose pre-packaged solutions that leave little room for contextual adaptation. Others noted that “capacity-building programs,” while well-intentioned, often replicate colonial hierarchies by assuming that expertise flows unidirectionally from the North to the South.

For LGBTQI+ youth, these dynamics are even more pronounced. One participant noted that in Colombia's WPS implementation processes, queer issues were routinely deprioritized by both donors and governments. LGBTQI+ organizations were invited into discussions only when funding was available for short-term visibility campaigns, while sustained investments in queer peacebuilding infrastructure remained elusive. This

episodic engagement created a sense of instability and precarity, undermining long-term planning and community trust.

### *8.8.1. Decolonizing Funding and Participation*

These insights demand a fundamental rethinking of how funding operates in peacebuilding. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) argue, efforts at inclusion often replicate colonial power relations by framing marginalized actors as beneficiaries rather than as co-creators of knowledge and policy (Leclerc & Picón Martínez, 2026). To decolonize funding practices, donors must move beyond performative gestures and adopt models that recognize the expertise and leadership of youth-led initiatives on their own terms. Pruitt and Yague (2025a) underscore the importance of funding models that prioritize relational and intersectional approaches, highlighting how young women peacebuilders in the Asia-Pacific are advancing inclusive, community-led peace despite systemic constraints. This also resonates with de Sousa Santos' (2014b) calls for an ecology of knowledges in which different ways of knowing are valued equally.

Interviewees themselves proposed alternative funding models that centre equity and justice. Some described creating mutual aid networks and community-based funding pools to bypass traditional donors altogether. These initiatives, while modest in scale, demonstrate the potential for self-sustaining peacebuilding efforts that are accountable to communities rather than to distant institutions.

By centring equity and justice in funding practices, there is an opportunity to not only resource youth-led peacebuilding more effectively but also to dismantle the structural inequities that have long constrained it. This requires rethinking reporting mechanisms to make them accessible to grassroots organizations, investing in the long-

term sustainability of local movements, and challenging the implicit biases that equate professionalism with Western norms.

## **8.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined how global frameworks for inclusion, such as the WPS and YPS policies, shape young women's participation in peace and security governance.

While these frameworks have opened doors for historically excluded actors, this analysis has shown that they often impose conditionalities that limit the transformative potential of participation.

Empirical findings revealed that young women are frequently invited into peacebuilding spaces as symbols of progress. Yet their inclusion is often contingent on their ability to meet institutional expectations of professionalism, gratitude, and conformity. Many participants described how their contributions were valued only as long as they aligned with pre-existing agendas, reinforcing what Berents and Mollica (2022) call reciprocal institutional visibility. In this dynamic, institutions gain legitimacy through the presence of women and youth, while these actors derive symbolic validation from their association with international organizations; however, there is rarely a redistribution of power or a restructuring of hierarchies.

The emotional and epistemic labour required of young women underscores that participation is not a neutral act of presence but a deeply contested process. As Ahmed (2012) argues, marginalized actors are often expected to leave parts of themselves behind in order to be deemed acceptable in institutional spaces. LGBTQI+ interviewees, in particular, described the exhaustion of navigating environments where their identities were either erased or instrumentalized. This aligns with Fricker's (2007) concept of

epistemic injustice, where young women's knowledge was dismissed as anecdotal even as their presence was leveraged to signal inclusivity.

Yet this chapter has also illuminated how young women resist and reimagine inclusion on their own terms. Through grassroots networks, digital activism, and self-authorized forms of legitimacy, they create spaces in which their agency and forms of knowledge are valued. These practices illustrate that meaningful inclusion is not granted by institutions but claimed through persistent, relational, and community-rooted efforts.

The analysis of funding ecosystems further highlighted how structural inequities perpetuate Global North dominance in peacebuilding. Donor practices often reinforce colonial hierarchies, privileging organizations that conform to Western professional norms while excluding youth-led groups in the Global South. As Mollica (2022) argues, short-term grant cycles and rigid reporting requirements undermine the sustainability of youth-led peacebuilding. Decolonizing funding practices requires a shift toward participatory grant-making and multi-year, flexible financing models that centre equity and justice.

Taken together, these insights challenge the notion of inclusion as an endpoint. Instead, they position inclusion as an ongoing negotiation that demands a reconfiguration of peacebuilding spaces themselves. Moving beyond tokenistic gestures requires a critical engagement with the power relations that structure participation and a commitment to dismantling the hierarchies embedded within global peace and security policy.

This chapter has bridged empirical findings with critical theory to interrogate the complexities of young women's participation in WPS and YPS decision-making. The next chapter expands on these insights by situating them within broader theoretical

debates in conflict studies. It considers how young women's lived experiences destabilize dominant paradigms of peace and security and explores the implications of these disruptions for advancing more inclusive and transformative approaches to conflict resolution.

## **Chapter 9: Implications for Conflict Studies and Interdisciplinary Fields**

### **9.1. Introduction**

This chapter situates the dissertation's findings within ongoing debates in conflict studies and related interdisciplinary fields. While a substantial body of scholarship has advanced participation and inclusion as central principles of peacebuilding, the analysis developed here questions how participation is understood and operationalized in practice. Across interviews and empirical material (including survey findings and qualitative interview data), young women peacebuilders consistently emphasized that participation becomes meaningful not through presence alone, but through relational conditions, specifically, when it enables agenda-setting, influence over decisions, and sustained accountability over time. These conditions are relational in that they depend on ongoing interactions between actors, the recognition of authority across institutional and community contexts, and the ability to negotiate and reshape power dynamics within those relationships. These findings build on feminist and decolonial critiques that have highlighted how participation is often treated procedurally, assessed through indicators and outputs, and mobilized as evidence of progress, even as underlying power relations remain essentially unchanged.

The chapter proceeds by examining the limits of procedural approaches to participation and the uneven burdens associated with tokenistic inclusion. It then critically engages with dominant orientations within conflict studies, particularly the tendency to privilege State-centric and institutional sites of peacebuilding, thereby marginalizing grassroots, everyday, and intersectional practices. It further considers intergenerational and intersectional spaces of engagement, where the absence of

reciprocity, alongside the shifting demographics of “youth,” creates challenges for continuity, legitimacy, and sustained influence. Throughout, the contributions of young women peacebuilders are treated not as illustrative cases, but as central sites of theoretical insight and disciplinary critique.

The chapter culminates in the articulation of the Triangle of Meaningful Participation, a conceptual model that synthesizes three enabling conditions repeatedly identified by participants: co-creation, the ability to influence, and a feedback loop. Rather than conceptualizing inclusion primarily in terms of numerical representation or visibility, the triangle reframes participation as an iterative and relational process grounded in accountability and shared authority. Through this framework, the chapter advances two contributions. First, it offers conflict studies a means of moving beyond narrowly procedural understandings of participation by foregrounding the relational dynamics through which participation acquires political significance. Second, it provides interdisciplinary fields—including feminist international relations, political science, and development studies—with an analytic tool for theorizing participation as a contested and power-laden practice.

In doing so, the chapter reinforces a central argument of this dissertation: meaningful participation cannot be reduced to presence, metrics, or visibility alone. Instead, it emerges through relationships that redistribute authority, sustain reciprocity, and recognize diverse forms of knowledge. By grounding this argument in the lived experiences of young women peacebuilders, the chapter both extends existing critical debates and lays the groundwork for future scholarship that approaches participation as a dynamic and transformative process.

## **9.2. From Procedural Inclusion to Relational Participation**

Participation occupies a central place in peacebuilding theory and practice, frequently framed as both an ethical commitment and a procedural requirement for inclusive and sustainable peace. Global policies such as Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) position participation as foundational, while donors and institutions often cite inclusive processes as indicators of legitimacy and progress. Within this landscape, participation is commonly operationalized through formal mechanisms designed to demonstrate representation and consultation.

At the same time, feminist and critical scholars have cautioned against treating participation as inherently meaningful or uniformly beneficial (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018; Cornwall, 2008). Rather than rejecting participation as a principle, this scholarship interrogates how it is enacted, by whom, and to what effect. Laura J. Shepherd (2017) highlights the performative dimensions of inclusion, whereby the visible presence of diverse actors may coexist with largely unchanged power relations. Similarly, Andrea Cornwall's (2008) distinction between "invited" and "claimed" spaces illustrates how participation can be structured in ways that legitimise decisions already taken, narrowing the scope for substantive influence. When participation is assessed primarily on the basis of presence or process, questions of authority, agenda-setting, and accountability risk being sidelined. This reinforces the central argument of this thesis: that meaningful participation must be understood not as inclusion within existing structures, but as the capacity to shape those structures, redistribute power, and sustain influence over time.

The accounts of young women in this study resonate with these critiques. Respondents described being invited into peace and security debates in which priorities

were already established and the parameters of engagement were tightly defined. Their participation was often valued for its symbolic or narrative function—demonstrating inclusivity or providing experiential testimony—rather than for its capacity to shape outcomes. In such contexts, inclusion was experienced less as a pathway to influence than as a form of visibility that served institutional needs.

These dynamics point to the limits of procedural approaches to participation. As Oliver Richmond (2011a) suggests, participation can operate as a legitimizing ritual within liberal peace frameworks, affirming the credibility of externally driven processes without redistributing decision-making power. The findings presented here do not dismiss participation as irrelevant; rather, they underscore the need to distinguish procedural inclusion from forms of participation that are relational, negotiated, and politically consequential. This distinction provides the foundation for the chapter’s broader argument: that participation becomes meaningful not through its formal invocation, but through the relationships, power-sharing practices, and accountability mechanisms that sustain it over time.

### *9.2.1. The Limits of Procedural Inclusion*

The limitations of procedural approaches to participation have been extensively analyzed within peacebuilding scholarship. Richmond (2016) observes that the “local turn” in peacebuilding was rapidly incorporated into liberal institutional frameworks, often operationalized through technocratic forms of consultation rather than through shifts in decision-making authority. Roger Mac Ginty (2011) similarly shows how inclusion becomes folded into the liberal peace toolkit as measurable evidence of legitimacy, frequently assessed through indicators such as the number of meetings convened or

participants consulted. Séverine Autesserre's work (2014, 2021) further illustrates how international interventions can conflate consultation with empowerment,<sup>18</sup> equating visibility with voice while leaving underlying power relations largely intact.

Respondents' experiences reflect these dynamics in practice. Young women described invitations to policy dialogues that followed a familiar pattern: sharing testimony, being photographed, and receiving little subsequent engagement. While their presence was welcomed, their contributions were rarely treated as authoritative inputs into decision-making processes. Participation, in these cases, was experienced less as an opportunity for influence than as a moment of symbolic inclusion, valued for what it signalled rather than for what it enabled.

These patterns align with David Chandler's (2014, 2017) critique of resilience governance, in which participation is increasingly framed as a managerial technique oriented toward adaptation and self-management, rather than as a space for political contestation. Within such frameworks, participation functions as an input to governance processes, rather than as a site where priorities, resources, or authority are meaningfully negotiated. The issue, then, is not participation itself, but the ways in which it is configured and contained.

Taken together, these insights point to the conceptual limits of procedural inclusion. When participation is treated primarily as a formal requirement or a static indicator, it risks obscuring the relational dimensions through which power operates.

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<sup>18</sup> I have intentionally avoided the use of the term "empower" or "empowerment" throughout this dissertation. As Naila Kabeer (1999) and others have subsequently argued, empowerment is frequently framed in ways that individualise responsibility, obscure structural inequalities, and imply that agency is conferred rather than claimed. In peacebuilding discourse, this risks reducing participation to a benevolent gift rather than recognizing it as a political right and a relational process.

Rather than suggesting that conflict studies has failed to account for participation, this analysis highlights the need to move beyond procedural logics and toward approaches that attend to how participation unfolds over time, how influence is exercised, and how accountability is sustained. This shift provides the analytical grounding for the relational framework developed later in the chapter.

### *9.2.2. Tokenism and the Epistemic Burdens of Engagement*

Procedural forms of participation can limit influence while also generating significant emotional and epistemic labour for those invited to engage (see Ahmed, 2012; Fricker, 2007; and Chapters 4 and 8). Young women interviewees described the cumulative exhaustion of repeatedly sharing personal experiences in spaces where outcomes were uncertain, delayed, or opaque. They emphasized the effort required to translate community realities into institutional language, to perform professionalism in ways that would be recognized as credible, and to navigate the risks associated with visibility and exposure.

These accounts resonate with Miranda Fricker's (2007) early concept of epistemic injustice, particularly the tendency for marginalized knowledge to be acknowledged symbolically while being treated as insufficiently authoritative. Respondents described situations in which their insights were welcomed as illustrative or emotive, yet sidelined when decisions were made. As Andrea Cornwall (2008) notes in her analysis of invited spaces, participation can be mobilized to demonstrate openness and legitimacy, even as epistemic authority remains tightly controlled. In such contexts, the appearance of inclusion does not necessarily translate into shifts in whose knowledge shapes outcomes.

Respondents further highlighted the pressure to demonstrate what Helen Berents and Caitlin Mollica (2021) describe as institutional fluency. Participation required familiarity with technical language, professional norms, and organizational expectations that were rarely made explicit. Young women interviewees noted that adopting these norms was often necessary to be heard, yet doing so involved suppressing alternative modes of expression or analysis. Those unable—or unwilling—to conform risked being marginalized, not through formal exclusion, but through diminished recognition.

This labour reflects what Mac Ginty (2021) characterizes as the everyday costs of engagement: the often-invisible work required to remain legible within participatory processes that offer limited scope for influence. Participation, in these instances, was not neutral. It drew upon the emotional, cognitive, and relational resources of young women, while leaving underlying distributions of power largely unchanged. The burden, therefore, did not stem from participation itself, but from participatory arrangements that rely on the extraction of knowledge and affect without corresponding shifts in authority or accountability.

### *9.2.3. Metrics and the Politics of Power*

Quantitative metrics have become a central mechanism through which participation is rendered legible within peacebuilding practice. Participation is frequently assessed through numerical indicators: the proportion of women at negotiating tables, the number of youth consulted, or the volume of community workshops conducted. Such measures offer apparent clarity and comparability, aligning with institutional demands for accountability, reporting, and evaluation.

However, as foundational feminist thinker Nancy Fraser (2000, 2007) has argued, recognition without redistribution risks reproducing existing inequalities. Metrics may document presence, but they do not capture the distribution of agency, influence, or authority within participatory spaces. Young women interviewees consistently pointed to this gap. Being counted did not necessarily translate into being heard, and recognition within reports or frameworks did not guarantee the ability to shape priorities or outcomes. In this sense, numerical indicators often privilege visibility over substance, framing participation as an object of administrative assessment rather than as a site of political negotiation.

Critical scholarship within conflict studies has raised similar concerns. As Audra Mitchell (2014) observes, methodological preferences within the field have at times favoured extensive numerical analyses and quantifiable indicators, reflecting broader disciplinary and funding incentives. While such approaches have generated important insights, their prominence can marginalize relational, process-oriented, and qualitative dimensions of peacebuilding. Respondents' accounts underscore the limits of metrics' capacity to capture, highlighting forms of participation that unfold over time and depend on continuity, reciprocity, and accountability.

The issue, therefore, is not the use of metrics *per se*, but their elevation as proxies for meaningful participation. When numerical indicators become the primary measure of success, they risk obscuring the power relations that shape whose participation matters and how influence is exercised. Both scholarship and practice are challenged, then, to attend more carefully to the relational dynamics that young women identified as central

to participation, rather than relying on metrics that document inclusion without interrogating its consequences.

#### *9.2.4. Toward a Relational Understanding of Participation*

Taken together, the findings of this study, alongside feminist and critical scholarship, point toward a relational understanding of participation. This perspective does not reject procedural approaches outright, but highlights their limits when detached from the relationships through which participation is experienced and enacted. Participation, from a relational standpoint, is shaped less by numerical inclusion or formal mechanisms than by trust, reciprocity, continuity, and accountability over time. Scholarship on hybridity and everyday peace (see Mac Ginty, 2021, 2011; Richmond, 2016) has similarly drawn attention to these dynamics, emphasizing how legitimacy is negotiated in practice rather than conferred solely through institutional design. Feminist scholars further argue that inclusion must be assessed not by presence alone, but by whether authority is redistributed and whether diverse forms of knowledge are recognized as legitimate (Shepherd, 2017; Puechguirbal, 2010).

Young women interviewees articulated this relational understanding with particular clarity. They did not define participation primarily in terms of attendance, consultation, or recognition, but through their capacity to shape agendas, influence decisions, and remain engaged across multiple moments of a process. Meaningful participation in their accounts was inseparable from continuity and responsiveness. Where feedback loops were absent, participation felt extractive; where co-creation was constrained, inclusion was experienced as symbolic rather than substantive. Reciprocity emerged as a critical element of participation, requiring that engagement involve not only

contribution but also recognition, response, and tangible shifts in decision-making processes. These accounts underscore that participation is not a discrete event, but a process that unfolds through sustained interaction.

Reframing participation in relational terms also has implications for how participation is studied and evaluated within conflict studies. It draws attention to forms of engagement that are difficult to capture through static indicators, including the quality of relationships, the durability of influence, and the presence of reciprocal accountability. Rather than privileging a single methodological orientation, a relational approach invites analytical pluralism, combining attention to lived experience, narrative, and everyday practice with an awareness of institutional structures. In doing so, it positions participation as a dynamic and iterative phenomenon, shaped over time and across relationships, rather than as a condition that can be fully assessed at a single moment.

#### *9.2.5. Beyond Procedure, Toward Relational Engagement*

The critiques of proceduralism, tokenism, epistemic injustice, and quantitative bias converge on a shared concern: participation that is detached from influence and accountability offers limited insight into how power operates in peacebuilding contexts. More precisely, such forms of participation reveal the persistence of traditional power structures and their capacity to absorb and reframe inclusion in ways that leave underlying hierarchies largely intact. When participation is approached primarily through procedures or indicators of presence, essential questions about authority, reciprocity, and decision-making can recede from view. Feminist and decolonial scholarship has long drawn attention to these dynamics, emphasizing that inclusion, when stripped of its

political dimensions, may reproduce rather than unsettle existing exclusions (see Haastrup & Hagen, 2021; Mignolo, 2007; Mohanty, 2003).

The findings of this dissertation align with and extend these critiques by foregrounding how young women themselves conceptualize participation. Respondents did not describe participation in terms of representation alone, nor did they frame recognition as sufficient. Instead, they emphasized relational processes through which participation acquires meaning: co-creation of agendas, the ability to influence outcomes, and sustained engagement over time. Participation in these accounts was understood as unfolding through interaction and continuity, rather than as a status conferred by inclusion.

This relational framing clarifies why existing approaches to participation, while important, are often insufficient for capturing the forms of engagement that young women identify as politically consequential. It also establishes the conceptual groundwork for rethinking participation beyond procedural inclusion, by centring the configuration and redistribution of power, accountability, and reciprocity as core analytic concerns. These insights inform the subsequent analysis in this chapter and provide the foundation for the conceptual framework advanced later, which brings these relational dimensions together in a more systematic way.

### **9.3. Conflict Studies and its Limits**

Conflict studies emerged from multiple intellectual traditions, including peace research and conflict resolution, as well as analyses of interstate relations, national security, and state-building (Buzan & Hansen, 2009; Paris, 2004). Early scholarship in the field engaged directly with questions of conflict prevention, mediation, and reconciliation,

often grounded in a normative commitment to reducing violence and fostering peaceful change. As the field became increasingly institutionalized within international relations and security studies, however, the State came to occupy a central position in much of its theoretical and empirical work (Duffield, 2001). This orientation has shaped not only the sites of analysis that are prioritized, but also the forms of knowledge that are most readily recognized as authoritative.

Within these dominant frameworks, participation has often been conceptualized in relation to institutional access: who is included in formal negotiations, how non-State actors are incorporated into governance arrangements, and the extent to which State structures reflect broader social constituencies (Paffenholz, 2015; Willett, 2010). These approaches have generated important insights into inclusion in peace processes, particularly with respect to representation and institutional design. At the same time, they can underplay the relational and everyday dimensions of peacebuilding that unfold beyond formal institutions. As Richmond (2011b, 2016) argues, the liberal peace framework continues to exert significant influence, positioning the State as both the primary agent and reference point of peacebuilding, while casting other actors and practices as supplementary.

Young women peacebuilders in this study encountered these dynamics in practice. Their contributions were more readily recognized when articulated through State-aligned or donor-supported frameworks, but were often marginalized when grounded in community-based practices of trust, care, and relational accountability<sup>19</sup> (see Genon,

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<sup>19</sup> Relational accountability refers to forms of responsibility grounded in relationships rather than solely in formal institutional mechanisms. It emphasizes ongoing mutual obligation, trust, care, and responsiveness between actors, particularly in contexts where power asymmetries exist.

2025a; Berents, 2018; Chapters 4 and 8). Forms of engagement that did not align with institutional logics—particularly those embedded in everyday peacebuilding—were frequently treated as informal, apolitical, or lacking strategic relevance.

These patterns point not to a failure of conflict studies as a field, but to enduring analytical blind spots shaped by its historical development and institutional location. As feminist scholars have long argued (see Shepherd, 2021; Puechguirbal, 2010), the privileging of State-centric frameworks has gendered effects, marginalizing forms of political action more commonly associated with women and youth, and reproducing assumptions about where authority and expertise reside. Attending to these limits does not require abandoning conflict studies' foundational insights; rather, it calls for greater analytical openness to forms of peacebuilding that operate relationally, outside, alongside, and sometimes in tension with State-centred paradigms.

### *9.3.1. The Marginalization of Grassroots and Everyday Peace*

The privileging of the State within conflict studies has also shaped the field's engagement with grassroots and everyday forms of peacebuilding. While early scholarship often focused on formal negotiations and institutional design, subsequent work has sought to expand this analytical lens. Mac Ginty's (2011) concept of "everyday peace" emerged as a corrective, drawing attention to the micro-level practices through which ordinary people navigate, manage, and mitigate conflict in their daily lives. Autesserre (2014, 2021) similarly demonstrates how international interventions frequently overlook local agency, privileging technical solutions over the lived realities of communities. Mitchell (2014) extends this critique by arguing that peace should be theorized relationally, as an ongoing

process embedded in social interactions rather than as an outcome secured through institutional arrangements alone.

Young women in this study echoed these insights through their own experiences of peacebuilding. They described cultivating legitimacy not through formal endorsement, but through everyday practices of accountability within their communities. For example, by organizing and sustaining local mutual aid initiatives, facilitating dialogue between community members in moments of tension, and remaining accessible and responsive to those they represented over time. These included sustaining mutual aid networks, mediating disputes informally, and maintaining trust through consistent relational presence. Such practices were central to participants' understanding of peacebuilding, yet they were rarely recognized as legitimate within institutional or policy-oriented spaces, where formal negotiations and State-centric processes continued to be valorized.

The relative marginalization of grassroots peacebuilding reflects deeper epistemological hierarchies. Knowledge generated within communities is often treated as anecdotal or contextual, while institutional expertise is framed as objective and transferable (Clapton, 2023; Sen, 2023; Smith, 2012). This hierarchy mirrors what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014a) describes as “epistemicide”: the systematic devaluation and erasure of alternative knowledge systems, as explored in Chapter 8. Within conflict studies, this dynamic is visible in the tendency to position grassroots actors as sources of data or case material, rather than as theorists of peacebuilding in their own right.

### *9.3.2. Gendered and Generational Exclusions*

The exclusions embedded within conflict studies are not only epistemological but also structural, particularly in relation to gender and age. Feminist scholars, such as Cynthia Enloe (2014) and Laura J. Shepherd (2021) have long documented how women are rendered visible within narratives of victimhood while their political agency is sidelined or depoliticized. Similarly, young people are frequently framed either as threats to security or as passive beneficiaries of protection, rather than as active agents shaping peace processes (Pruitt, 2016).

The findings of this study illustrate how these exclusions intersect in practice. Young women peacebuilders described being positioned as symbolic representatives: invited to share experiences or embody diversity, yet constrained in their ability to influence decisions. Their participation was often celebrated rhetorically while remaining tightly bound in practice, reflecting what Shepherd (2021) terms the “politics of presence,” where visibility does not translate into authority.

These dynamics reflect broader disciplinary patterns. Conflict studies’ emphasis on formal authority privileges actors aligned with State-centric and institutional forms of power, thereby disproportionately occupying positions held by older, male, and elite actors. As a result, young women’s peacebuilding practices, often grounded in intersectional identities and everyday forms of agency, fall outside the field’s primary analytical focus. This exclusion not only narrows the scope of conflict studies but also reinforces hierarchies of legitimacy that shape whose knowledge is treated as politically consequential.

### *9.3.3. The Problem of Legitimacy in Conflict Studies*

Legitimacy is a central concern within conflict studies, yet it is frequently conceptualized in narrow institutional terms. Within the liberal peace paradigm, legitimacy is often assumed to flow from States, formal institutions, or internationally endorsed processes (see Mac Ginty, 2011; Richmond, 2011a; Paris, 2004). While these frameworks have generated important insights into governance and peace agreements, they can obscure the ways legitimacy is constructed relationally within communities.

Young women interviewees offered a different account. For them, legitimacy was not derived primarily from institutional recognition but from community trust, continuity of engagement, and accountability over time. Participants emphasized the importance of showing up consistently, maintaining reciprocal relationships, and earning credibility through lived experience. These accounts resonate with Mac Ginty's (2011) discussion of hybridity, where local actors generate their own forms of legitimacy that may intersect with, diverge from, or resist institutional frameworks.

By equating legitimacy with formal authority, dominant approaches within conflict studies risk overlooking these alternative sources of political validity. This narrow conceptualization contributes to the marginalization of grassroots actors and reinforces the epistemological hierarchies identified by feminist and decolonial critiques (see Haastrup & Hagen, 2021; Mignolo, 2007; Mohanty, 2003). Attending to relational forms of legitimacy, therefore, expands how participation, authority, and peacebuilding are understood, without dismissing the role of institutions altogether. This expands how participation, authority, and peacebuilding are understood by recognizing informal practices of trust-building, accountability, and community engagement as constitutive of

political authority, and by highlighting how influence can be exercised outside formal decision-making structures while still shaping peacebuilding outcomes.

#### *9.3.4. Methodological Limitations and Quantification Bias*

The exclusions identified above are further shaped by methodological tendencies within conflict studies. Historically, the discipline has been strongly influenced by quantitative approaches, privileging indicators, datasets, and measurable variables as markers of rigour and policy relevance (Buzan & Hansen, 2009; Tickner, 2006). Within this context, participation is frequently operationalized through numerical indicators: the proportion of women included in peace agreements, the number of consultations conducted, or the presence of youth within policy processes.

While such measures provide evidence of access and representation, they offer limited insight into the quality or consequences of participation. As a foundational thinker, Nancy Fraser (2000, 2007) argues, recognition without redistribution risks reproducing inequality. Counting presence does not capture whether participants can shape policies, whether their knowledge is treated as authoritative, or whether engagement translates into sustained influence. Young women in this study repeatedly underscored this disjuncture: they described being counted but not being heard, recognized but not empowered to affect outcomes.

This quantification bias reflects what Mitchell (2014) identifies as an ontological limitation within dominant approaches to conflict studies. By prioritizing what can be measured, the discipline risks sidelining relational, affective, and everyday dimensions of peacebuilding that resist standardization. Feminist and decolonial critiques (see Hastrup & Hagen, 2021; Mignolo, 2007; Mohanty, 2003) have long emphasized the value of

qualitative and participatory methods that foreground lived experience and challenge epistemological hierarchies. Yet such approaches remain unevenly integrated, leaving key dynamics of participation under-theorized and under-evaluated.

### *9.3.5. Emerging Critical Directions*

Despite these limitations, conflict studies is not static. In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has sought to challenge State-centric and technocratic paradigms by foregrounding hybridity, everyday peace, and local agency. Autesserre (2021), Mac Ginty (2021), and Richmond (2020) have advanced analyses that complicate linear models of peacebuilding and draw attention to the practices through which peace is negotiated beyond formal institutions. Feminist scholars (Shepherd, 2021; Kirby & Shepherd, 2016) and decolonial thinkers (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012) have similarly exposed the power relations embedded in participation and called for more reflexive, accountable forms of engagement.

These interventions signal an important critical momentum within the discipline. Rather than rejecting conflict studies' foundational concerns, they seek to expand its analytical scope by incorporating relational, intersectional, and historically grounded perspectives. The findings of this dissertation contribute to this trajectory by centring the strategies and reflections of young women peacebuilders. Their experiences illuminate the costs of procedural inclusion, the constraints of State-centric frameworks, and the epistemic hierarchies that shape whose knowledge is taken seriously. At the same time, their practices—cultivating grassroots legitimacy, sustaining relational accountability, and creating claimed spaces of engagement—point toward alternative ways of conceptualizing participation.

### *9.3.6. Rethinking the Discipline*

Taken together, these dynamics suggest the need for a careful rethinking of how participation is theorized within conflict studies. The discipline's reliance on State-centric frameworks, institutionalized notions of legitimacy, and quantitative measures has produced enduring blind spots. These blind spots marginalize grassroots actors, obscure everyday practices of peacebuilding, and reproduce gendered and generational exclusions. While critical currents within the field (see Mac Ginty, 2021; Autesserre, 2021; Shepherd, 2021; Haastrup & Hagen, 2021; Richmond, 2020) have begun to address these limitations, they continue to operate alongside dominant paradigms rather than fully reshaping them.

The findings of this dissertation underscore the importance of approaching participation as more than institutional presence or numerical recognition. Participation emerges, instead, as a relational process shaped by power, legitimacy, and accountability over time. By engaging seriously with feminist and decolonial critiques (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Mignolo, 2007; Mohanty, 2003), and by centring the insights of young women peacebuilders, conflict studies can deepen its engagement with questions of inclusion without abandoning its core analytical concerns. This reorientation provides a foundation for the next section, which situates these findings more explicitly within feminist and decolonial theoretical traditions to advance a relational and justice-oriented approach to participation.

#### **9.4. Feminist and Decolonial Interventions in Conflict Studies**

Feminist and decolonial scholarship has played a foundational role in expanding the analytical scope of conflict studies by drawing attention to forms of power, exclusion, and knowledge production that fall beyond State-centric and institutional frameworks. Feminist research (see Shepherd, 2021; Kirby & Shepherd, 2016) has illuminated the gendered dimensions of conflict and peacebuilding, demonstrating how authority and legitimacy are produced not only through formal political processes but also through everyday practices that shape who is heard, valued, and recognized. Decolonial scholarship (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012) similarly interrogates how peacebuilding and global governance frameworks are embedded in longer histories of colonial domination, privileging Eurocentric epistemologies while marginalizing knowledge produced in the Global South.

Together, these traditions offer critical tools for analyzing participation. Feminist perspectives foreground how gendered power relations shape the terms of inclusion and exclusion, while decolonial critiques expose the structural and epistemic hierarchies that persist even within ostensibly inclusive processes. This dissertation builds on these interventions by situating young women peacebuilders at the intersection of feminist and decolonial analysis, showing how gendered, generational, and colonial exclusions overlap in shaping their experiences of participation.

##### *9.4.1. Foregrounding Difference as a Resource*

A central contribution of feminist theory has been its insistence on taking difference seriously as an analytical starting point rather than a problem to be managed. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, discussed across earlier chapters of this

dissertation, has been widely taken up in peace and conflict studies to illuminate how gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, and age to produce layered forms of marginalization. Cornwall (2008) similarly emphasizes how participatory spaces are shaped by identity, with inclusion and influence distributed unevenly across social positions.

Young women interviewees reflected these insights in their own accounts. Many described being invited into youth forums where their gendered experiences were sidelined, or included in women's spaces where their age was treated as a liability. Their participation was thus mediated through multiple, intersecting expectations. At the same time, several participants framed difference not as an obstacle but as a source of insight. Their situated experiences enabled forms of analysis and practice that were not available to more privileged actors.

This reframing resonates with Fraser's (2007) critique of recognition. When recognition is decoupled from redistribution of power, it risks reproducing inequality. Yet when difference is understood as an epistemic contribution, it can expand the horizons of peacebuilding theory. For conflict studies, this implies moving beyond the management of diversity toward an engagement with epistemic plurality, in which difference is treated as a resource rather than a deviation from presumed norms.

#### *9.4.2. The Coloniality of Participation*

Decolonial scholarship extends feminist critiques by interrogating the structural foundations of participation itself. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2012) concept of "moves to innocence" captures how inclusion can be mobilized to signal progress without altering underlying relations of power. In peacebuilding contexts, participation may

function as such a move when marginalized actors are invited to validate processes while remaining excluded from decision-making authority.

Young women interviewees described this dynamic with clarity. Many recalled being celebrated for their visibility—invited to share testimonies, featured in reports, or photographed at events—while substantive decisions remained unchanged. Their knowledge was solicited yet positioned as supplementary rather than authoritative, reflecting what Miranda Fricker (2007) identified as epistemic injustice. Rather than being recognized as political actors, they were often positioned as contributors to processes designed elsewhere.

These dynamics are embedded within broader structures of global governance. As Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) argues, peacebuilding is entangled with the coloniality of power, through which authority and knowledge production remain concentrated in the Global North. When conflict studies aligns uncritically with these frameworks, it risks reproducing rather than challenging colonial hierarchies of legitimacy.

#### *9.4.3. Knowledge, Funding, and Epistemicide*

The coloniality of participation is further reinforced through funding and donor practices. Interviewees described how youth and women's inclusion was frequently celebrated rhetorically, while meaningful authority over resources remained tightly controlled. Thania Paffenholz (2014) notes that donor systems often privilege technical efficiency and quantifiable outputs, marginalizing relational and transformative approaches to peacebuilding.

These material dynamics intersect with epistemic hierarchies. De Sousa Santos' (2014) concept of epistemicide captures how knowledge systems that fall outside

Eurocentric paradigms are systematically devalued or erased. In peacebuilding practice, this was reflected in participants' accounts of how community-based practices of trust-building, relationship maintenance, and informal mediation were overlooked in favour of technical "best practices."

LGBTQI+ youth initiatives provided a particularly sharp illustration. While queer inclusion was sometimes affirmed discursively, sustained investment in queer-led infrastructure was rare. Donor requirements for institutionalization and reporting capacity privileged organizations aligned with Global North norms, reinforcing dependency rather than supporting autonomy and reproducing the epistemic hierarchies decolonial scholars critique.

#### *9.4.4. Toward an Ecology of Knowledges*

Despite these exclusions, interviewees articulated alternative pathways that resonate with de Sousa Santos' (2014a) call for an "ecology of knowledges." This approach rejects epistemological hierarchy in favour of recognizing the plurality and complementarity of different ways of knowing. Rather than privileging institutional expertise, an ecology of knowledges values local, indigenous, and community-based practices alongside formal analysis.

Young women described cultivating legitimacy through relational accountability rather than institutional validation. They emphasized consistency, trust, and responsiveness to local constituencies as markers of credible engagement. These practices align with Philip Onguny and Taylor Gillies' (2020) analysis of community-led peacebuilding in Africa, which highlights forms of authority that often remain invisible within international frameworks.

Digital activism also emerged as a site of epistemic innovation (Genon, 2025a). Interviewees described using online platforms to amplify priorities, build solidarities, and bypass institutional barriers. These hybrid spaces complicate distinctions between local and global, suggesting that knowledge is produced dynamically across scales rather than confined to formal institutions.

#### *9.4.5. Challenging Global North Agendas*

A recurring theme in interviewees' reflections was the conditional nature of institutional access. Berents and Mollica (2021) critique global youth participation frameworks for embedding participation within systems of compliance, where legitimacy depends on speaking English, adopting technical language, and performing professionalism. Participants confirmed these dynamics, noting that those unable or unwilling to conform were frequently excluded.

This conditionality reflects what Fraser (2000) conceptualizes as misrecognition: the imposition of dominant norms as the criteria for legitimacy. It also reproduced hierarchies within youth spaces themselves, privileging those with institutional fluency. When conflict studies adopts similar criteria in research design and evaluation, it risks reinforcing the exclusions it seeks to analyze.

By contrast, Lesley Pruitt and Erika Isabel Yague (2025) advocate funding models grounded in relational and intersectional approaches. Interviewees echoed this perspective, pointing to mutual aid networks and participatory grant-making as alternatives that reimagine legitimacy as accountability to communities rather than compliance with external norms.

#### *9.4.6. Reimagining Legitimacy and Reciprocity*

Feminist and decolonial critiques converge on the need to reimagine legitimacy and reciprocity in participation (Shepherd, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Mignolo, 2007; Mohanty, 2003; Fraser, 2000). Legitimacy, in this view, emerges through relationships of trust, care, and accountability, rather than institutional endorsement alone. Reciprocity is central: participation must involve not only contributions from marginalized actors, but institutional responsiveness in return.

Interviewees' strategies exemplified this reimagining. By creating claimed spaces, cultivating self-authorized legitimacy, and sustaining community-centred accountability, young women enacted forms of participation that resisted assimilation into dominant institutional logics. Their practices foregrounded relationality and reciprocity, challenging both patriarchal and colonial assumptions embedded in peacebuilding frameworks.

#### *9.4.7. Feminist and Decolonial Pathways Forward*

Feminist and decolonial scholarship provides essential resources for rethinking participation within conflict studies (Shepherd, 2021; de Sousa Santos, 2014a; Mignolo, 2007; Mohanty, 2003). By foregrounding difference as epistemic contribution (see Fricker, 2007; Mohanty, 2003), exposing the coloniality of participation (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Mignolo, 2007), and envisioning an ecology of knowledges (see de Sousa Santos, 2014a), these traditions challenge the discipline to confront its exclusions.

The findings of this dissertation contribute to these debates by centring the experiences of young women peacebuilders navigating intersecting hierarchies of gender, age, and coloniality. Their strategies—cultivating community legitimacy, building transnational solidarities, and resisting institutional compliance—offer grounded

illustrations of feminist and decolonial praxis. For conflict studies, the implication is not abandonment but reorientation: participation must be understood as contested, relational, and situated, and as a site of both exclusion and political possibility.

### **9.5. Intergenerational and Intersectional Spaces**

Intergenerational dialogue is frequently framed in peacebuilding discourse as a progressive mechanism for bridging generational divides, ensuring leadership continuity, and fostering mutual learning. In particular, within YPS policy debates, intergenerational collaboration is routinely presented as an unqualified good, featuring prominently in policy frameworks, donor strategies, and evaluative reports (Valladares Gonzalez, 2024). Such framings assume that bringing generations together is sufficient to redistribute authority and sustain participation over time.

The accounts of young women in this study complicate this assumption. While participants recognized the potential value of intergenerational engagement, they described how such spaces often positioned young people as learners, observers, or symbolic representatives rather than as equal partners. More established actors were treated as repositories of expertise, while younger participants were expected to perform gratitude, deference, and compliance. This dynamic reflects what Shepherd (2021) describes as the “politics of managed inclusion,” where participation is carefully choreographed to appear progressive without disrupting existing hierarchies of power. Cornwall’s (2008) critique of invited spaces is instructive here: young people were invited to dialogue, but the terms, tempo, and boundaries of participation were largely predetermined by older actors and institutions.

### *9.5.1. Structural Barriers to Reciprocity*

A central theme across interviewees' accounts was the absence of reciprocity within intergenerational spaces. Dialogue was rarely experienced as a two-way exchange. Instead, young women were expected to provide testimony, symbolic presence, or emotional labour without corresponding shifts in authority, decision-making power, or recognition. Several participants described how their contributions “disappeared into the void,” with no feedback, follow-up, or accountability mechanisms.

These dynamics are reinforced by broader social norms around age and authority. In many contexts, respect for elders is deeply embedded, making it difficult for young women to question or challenge senior figures without being perceived as disrespectful or insubordinate. Interviewees described the political risks of speaking back in such settings, particularly where gendered expectations of deference intersected with age-based hierarchies. Tuck and Yang's (2012) critique of “moves to innocence” is relevant here: invoking intergenerational collaboration can function as a signal of inclusivity while leaving underlying asymmetries of authority intact.

Geneviève Parent's (2022) analysis of post-conflict Bosnia underscores the importance of reciprocity in sustaining intergenerational trust. She demonstrates that dialogue alone is insufficient; meaningful engagement requires mechanisms that translate interaction into shared authority. Young women in this study similarly emphasized that without structures for reciprocity—such as shared decision-making or accountability—intergenerational collaboration risks reinforcing, rather than unsettling, generational hierarchies.

### *9.5.2. Intersectionality and the Limits of Diversity Agendas*

Intersectional identities further shape how young women experience intergenerational spaces. Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality underscores how gender, age, class, sexuality, and race intersect to produce distinct forms of marginalization. While these dynamics are explored in depth in earlier chapters, interviewees' accounts illustrate how intersectionality operates within participation spaces themselves.

Participants described being invited to represent youth while being silenced as women, or included as women while marginalized on the basis of sexuality or class. These experiences expose the limits of diversity agendas that rely on categorical inclusion. As Shepherd (2021) and Cornwall (2008) argue, such approaches reduce complex identities to checkboxes, flattening difference rather than engaging with it. For interviewees, this meant being asked to speak from a single identity position while other dimensions of their experience were rendered invisible.

This flattening not only constrained participation but also undermined the quality of engagement. By failing to account for intersecting identities, intergenerational and diversity frameworks reproduced the exclusions they sought to address, reinforcing hierarchies of legitimacy within participation spaces themselves.

### *9.5.3. Toward Femtorship and Co-Learning Spaces*

Alongside these critiques, young women articulated alternative models of intergenerational engagement grounded in care, reciprocity, and solidarity. Many described relationships that departed from hierarchical mentorship in favour of mutual learning and shared accountability. The concept of *femtorship*—intentional feminist mentorship—offers a useful lens for understanding these practices.

Femtorship differs from conventional mentorship by rejecting top-down models of knowledge transfer. Instead, it emphasizes co-learning, reciprocity, and the recognition of lived experience as a form of expertise. Interviewees described femtorship relationships as spaces where they were treated not as *protégées* to be shaped, but as collaborators whose insights carried weight. Such practices disrupted age-based hierarchies and enabled young women to participate as equals in shaping peacebuilding strategies.

Co-learning spaces provided additional examples. Participants highlighted peer networks, solidarity groups, and digital forums as sites where knowledge circulated horizontally rather than vertically. These spaces offered continuity and accountability often absent from institutional intergenerational initiatives, demonstrating how young women themselves are constructing alternative models of participation.

#### *9.5.4. Where Are We Going? The Triangle*

The dynamics of intergenerational and intersectional participation underscore the limitations of existing frameworks. While intergenerational collaboration is widely celebrated, it often positions young women as symbolic representatives, denies reciprocity, and relies on age-based inclusion that undermines continuity. At the same time, interviewees' practices—femtorship, co-learning, and claimed spaces—point toward alternative understandings of participation grounded in relationships rather than categories.

These insights provide a bridge to the conceptual framework developed in the following section. By foregrounding co-creation, influence, and accountability as relational processes rather than procedural outcomes, the Triangle of Meaningful

Participation synthesises the conditions under which participation becomes meaningful in practice. Rooted in the experiences of young women peacebuilders, it offers a way of rethinking participation in conflict studies as dynamic, relational, and power-conscious.

### **9.6. New Directions for Conflict Studies**

The central theoretical contribution I propose with this dissertation is a Triangle of Meaningful Participation: a model that captures the three enabling conditions consistently identified by young women peacebuilders—co-creation, the ability to influence, and a feedback loop. This triangle reframes participation not as presence or representation, but as a relational and iterative process grounded in power-sharing and accountability. The use of a Triangle is intentional; it is to demonstrate the interdependent nature of the three conditions to participation becoming *meaningful*.

The findings invite a fundamental rethinking of how participation is conceptualized within conflict studies. While the discipline has made important strides in recognizing inclusion as a normative principle, it has too often relied on procedural and quantitative logics: counting participants, cataloguing the presence of marginalized actors, or celebrating representational diversity. What is missing from these approaches is an account of what makes participation meaningful. This research demonstrates that young women peacebuilders do not define meaning in terms of numeric presence or symbolic recognition, but rather in terms of their ability to shape agendas, influence decisions, and remain engaged through processes of accountability.

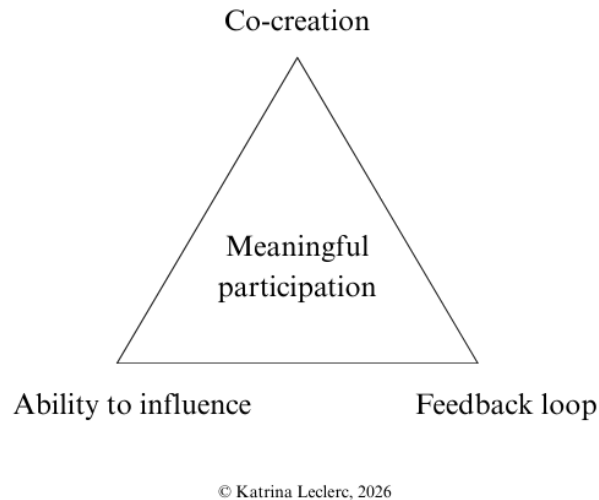
The Triangle of Meaningful Participation synthesises these insights into a model for analyzing participation in peace and security. It shows that meaningfulness is not reducible to access but depends on the quality, impact, and sustainability of the process.

Significantly, its relevance extends beyond conflict studies, offering interdisciplinary fields—from feminist international relations to political sociology and development studies—a framework for theorizing agency, legitimacy, and accountability in participatory practices.

#### *9.6.1. The Triangle of Meaningful Participation*

The Triangle of Meaningful Participation (see Figure 1 below) captures the three enabling conditions that young women peacebuilders consistently identified as central to making their engagement meaningful: co-creation, ability to influence, and a feedback loop. Each dimension reflects not only a practical condition for engagement, but also a theoretical reorientation of how conflict studies and related fields should conceptualize participation. Taken together, the triangle illustrates that meaningfulness is not achieved by access alone but by the quality, depth, and sustainability of engagement. Co-creation speaks to shared authority in shaping agendas, the ability to influence reflects actual decision-making power, and feedback loops ensure continuity and accountability over time, collectively demonstrating that participation must be iterative, reciprocal, and embedded in ongoing processes rather than limited to one-off inclusion.

## The Triangle of Meaningful Participation



*Figure 1. The Triangle of Meaningful Participation*

**9.6.1.1. Co-creation.** Participation becomes meaningful when actors are engaged at the earliest stages of agenda-setting and process design, rather than being invited into pre-defined frameworks. Co-creation requires that institutions and practitioners treat young women as knowledge producers and political actors, rather than as merely beneficiaries or symbolic representatives. From this perspective, co-creation disrupts procedural logics of inclusion and centres justice by recognizing diverse knowledges as foundational to peacebuilding practice.

**9.6.1.2. Ability to influence.** Young women interviewees consistently stressed that inclusion without impact felt hollow or tokenistic. The second dimension of the triangle, therefore, concerns whether contributions shape substantive decisions, policies, or outcomes. A focus on influence highlights that acknowledgement of identity or presence is insufficient if it is not accompanied by the ability to shift agendas and

outcomes in meaningful ways. Within conflict studies, this challenges the field to move beyond counting participants to examining whether marginalized actors can effect change in both discourse and practice.

**9.6.1.3. Feedback loop.** The third dimension underscores the importance of accountability and continuity. Many interviewees described the frustration of contributing to consultations or forums where their input seemed to “disappear into a void.” Meaningful participation requires mechanisms through which institutions return to participants evidence of how their contributions were integrated, or transparency about why they were not. Such feedback sustains trust, builds intergenerational continuity, and creates conditions for iterative learning. It also reminds us that participation is not a one-off event but an ongoing relationship that must be maintained.

Taken together, the three dimensions are interdependent: co-creation without influence risks tokenism; influence without feedback erodes trust; feedback without co-creation confines participants to processes they did not shape. The triangle, therefore, provides a framework that is both analytic—for assessing when participation is meaningful—and normative, offering guidance for designing participatory processes that are relational, power-conscious, and accountable.

### *9.6.2. Applying the Triangle in Conflict Studies*

The Triangle of Meaningful Participation has important implications for conflict studies and for policymaking more broadly. Each corner of the triangle opens new pathways for theorizing participation, while their interconnections suggest a more holistic paradigm for analyzing agency, legitimacy, and power in peacebuilding. Importantly, the triangle also

speaks to practitioners and policymakers, offering concrete guidance on how to design, resource, and sustain participation in ways that avoid tokenism and foster transformation.

Co-Creation: Co-creation requires a fundamental reorientation of how conflict studies and peacebuilding practice understand knowledge and legitimacy. Participation is meaningful only when actors help shape policies and frameworks from the beginning, rather than being invited into processes that have already been defined without them. This demands recognizing the expertise of young women as authoritative, not anecdotal, and valuing lived experience and community-based knowledge alongside institutional or technical expertise. For conflict studies, this means broadening epistemological horizons: interrogating whose knowledge is considered legitimate in theory-building, how frameworks are designed, and how scholarship engages with grassroots expertise.

At the policy level, co-creation calls for moving beyond consultative approaches that involve young women only at the implementation or validation stages. It requires institutionalizing participatory agenda-setting, in which communities are not merely consulted but share equal power in defining priorities. This could include embedding youth representatives in policy design committees, funding participatory research to inform government or UN strategies, or adopting community-led needs assessments as a foundation for national action plans. In intergenerational and intersectional spaces, co-creation is equally vital: interviewees stressed the frustration of being confined to “youth-only” forums with no bridge to broader governance, or of being asked to represent one aspect of their identity while silencing others. Meaningful participation requires

designing spaces in which young women are equal partners and in which intergenerational collaboration is framed as co-learning rather than as a hierarchy.

For policy purposes, this implies creating mechanisms to ensure continuity across age thresholds, such as transition pathways for youth leaders “aging out” of YPS categories into broader peace and security processes. It also suggests investing in mentorship models that promote intergenerational reciprocity and challenge traditional age and authority hierarchies. Ultimately, co-creation positions youth not as symbolic representatives but as political actors whose knowledge and priorities shape the very foundations of peacebuilding policy and practice.

Ability to Influence: The second dimension of the triangle underscores that co-creation must translate into actual influence on outcomes. Many young women described how inclusion felt hollow when it did not lead to changes in agendas, decisions, or resource allocation. In conflict studies, this highlights the need to study participation not only as presence but also as agency: the capacity to shape political and institutional processes in substantive ways. Grassroots initiatives provide essential lessons here. Young women often shape peacebuilding processes on their own terms, drawing on locally defined legitimacy and hybrid strategies that straddle formal and informal spaces. These practices show that influence is not limited to institutional tables but is also exercised through community organizing, mutual aid networks, and digital mobilization.

From a policy perspective, influence requires creating mechanisms through which participation has a demonstrable impact on decisions. This could involve setting quotas for youth-led recommendations in peace agreements, requiring governments to publish

reports on the integration of consultation inputs, or embedding youth co-chairs in national coordination mechanisms. Influence also depends on structural support: without resources, participation risks becoming a burden rather than an opportunity. Interviewees highlighted donor practices that rhetorically celebrated youth inclusion but withheld meaningful authority over budgets or program design.

This raises key policy considerations: donors and governments must move away from project-based, short-term funding models that perpetuate dependency and instead adopt approaches like participatory grant-making or multi-year core support for youth-led organizations (UNOY & OSGEY, 2023). These models enhance legitimacy by granting young women the authority to set priorities, allocate resources, and establish their own institutions. For conflict studies, the implication is clear: influence cannot be theorized in abstraction from material support. For policy, the lesson is that structural change requires resourcing participation in ways that embed accountability and legitimacy, rather than reinforcing dependency or symbolic inclusion.

Feedback Loop: The third dimension of the triangle highlights the importance of accountability and continuity in making participation meaningful. Interviewees frequently described the frustration of contributing to consultations or forums where their input “disappeared into a void.” Without mechanisms to demonstrate how contributions were used—or why they were not—trust erodes, and engagement becomes unsustainable. For conflict studies, this underscores that participation is iterative rather than one-off, requiring ongoing relationships of accountability between institutions and communities. Feedback loops create the continuity necessary for intergenerational trust-building,

prevent the loss of institutional memory, and allow participation to evolve over time rather than being confined to single events.

At the policy level, feedback can be operationalized through transparent reporting mechanisms, accessible summaries of outcomes, or institutionalized monitoring frameworks that track the integration of youth contributions. For example, governments or UN agencies could be required to respond publicly to youth recommendations within a set timeframe, or to create online dashboards that map how inputs from consultations are reflected in policies. Feedback mechanisms also need to be reciprocal, allowing youth actors to evaluate institutions in turn, creating mutual accountability rather than top-down reporting.

Digital platforms offer both opportunities and risks in this domain. They can facilitate immediate feedback by connecting communities directly with decision-makers, amplifying youth voices, and enabling transnational solidarities. Yet young women interviewees also pointed out the risks of surveillance, performative engagement, and co-optation in digital spaces, where visibility is not always matched with accountability. For conflict studies, this invites new theorization of how digital tools reshape the boundaries of local and global participation. For policy, it highlights the need for safeguards against digital exploitation, as well as investments in inclusive digital infrastructure that expands, rather than narrows, participation.

Ultimately, feedback is what sustains participation over time. It is the dimension that transforms one-off consultations into lasting relationships of trust and legitimacy. For conflict studies, this reframes participation as a dynamic process rather than a static event. For policymakers, this is a reminder that, without accountability, inclusion risks

becoming symbolic, whereas with feedback, it becomes a continuous negotiation of agency and responsibility.

### *9.6.3. Towards a Transformative Peacebuilding Paradigm*

The Triangle of Meaningful Participation provides conflict studies with a conceptual anchor for moving beyond proceduralist models of engagement. By centring co-creation, influence, and feedback, the field can reimagine participation as a dynamic negotiation of agency, legitimacy, and accountability.

This model does not present a universal solution but rather an orientation—one that foregrounds relationality, reflexivity, and justice as central to meaningful participation. The three directions outlined here illustrate how the triangle can inform analyses of epistemic justice, grassroots legitimacy, resourcing, accountability, and digital activism. Taken together, they chart a pathway for conflict studies to embrace a more reflexive and power-conscious paradigm: one that recognises participation not merely as presence, but as the co-creation, influence, and iterative accountability that make peacebuilding transformative in theory and practice.

## **9.7. Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that dominant approaches to participation within conflict studies remain constrained by procedural, State-centric, and metric-driven logics that obscure how power operates in practice. Across its sections, the analysis has demonstrated how participation is frequently treated as an unquestioned good—documented through presence, consultation, or representation—without sufficient attention to whether such inclusion enables agency, influence, or accountability. For young women peacebuilders,

these limitations are not abstract. They are experienced as epistemic marginalization, extractive engagement, and the persistent gap between visibility and authority.

At the same time, the chapter has shown that these constraints are neither inevitable nor uncontested. Feminist and decolonial interventions provide critical resources for rethinking participation as a relational and power-laden process rather than a procedural outcome. By foregrounding intersectionality, interrogating the coloniality of the involvement, and challenging epistemological hierarchies, these traditions illuminate how young women already navigate, resist, and reshape participatory spaces. Their practices—cultivating legitimacy within communities, sustaining relational accountability, leveraging digital solidarities, and creating claimed spaces—demonstrate that institutions do not simply grant participation; rather, they are actively produced through relationships, continuity, and struggle.

The Triangle of Meaningful Participation synthesizes these insights into a conceptual framework that clarifies what has often remained implicit or fragmented in both scholarship and practice. By centring co-creation, influence, and a feedback loop, the triangle reframes participation as an iterative and relational process grounded in shared authority and accountability. Each dimension responds directly to deficits identified throughout the chapter: the marginalization of agenda-setting, the disconnection between inclusion and impact, and the absence of mechanisms that sustain trust over time. Taken together, the triangle offers both an analytic lens for assessing participation and a practical reference point for identifying when inclusion risks becoming tokenistic rather than transformative.

The implications of this argument extend beyond conflict studies. For interdisciplinary fields concerned with legitimacy, agency, and democratic practice, the triangle provides a way of theorizing participation that is attentive to power, context, and relationality. It also opens space for comparative and longitudinal analysis, enabling scholars to examine how meaningful participation is enacted differently across settings while remaining anchored in principles of reciprocity, continuity, and justice. Ultimately, this chapter advances a central claim of the dissertation: young women are not only participants in peacebuilding processes, but theorists of participation itself. By taking their analyses seriously and situating them within feminist and decolonial traditions, the chapter contributes to a broader reimagining of participation as a site of political contestation and possibility. This reorientation is not simply conceptual. It is an invitation for conflict studies to engage more reflexively with its own assumptions, to expand whose knowledge counts as theory, and to take seriously the relational conditions under which participation becomes meaningful.

## **Chapter 10: Conclusion – Participation as Relational, Conditional, and Uneven**

### **10.1. Introduction**

Taken together, the findings of this dissertation demonstrate that participation, as it is currently operationalized within peace and security frameworks, is far more conditional, uneven, and constrained than dominant policy narratives suggest. This is not solely because policy frameworks misrepresent participation, but because they often leave its boundaries and conditions of realization under-specified, allowing for interpretations that do not fundamentally challenge existing power structures. While the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) resolutions formally position participation as central to sustainable peace, young women peacebuilders' experiences reveal a persistent gap between inclusion as articulated in principle and participation as lived in practice. This gap is not incidental. It is produced through intersecting institutional, epistemic, material, and relational dynamics that shape who is able to participate, on what terms, and with what effects.

Across chapters, participation emerges not as a stable or universally accessible condition, but as something that must be continuously negotiated. Young women were often present in peace and security spaces, yet presence alone did not translate into authority, influence, or continuity. Instead, participation was frequently time-bound, conditional, and contingent on compliance with institutional norms. Invitations to engage were extended selectively, often framed as opportunities, while the costs of participation—financial, emotional, linguistic, and professional—were borne disproportionately by those already marginalized. In this sense, participation functioned

less as a right and more as a privilege, one that could be withdrawn, circumscribed, or rendered symbolic.

A central finding of the dissertation is that procedural inclusion routinely substitutes for meaningful engagement. Participation was commonly organized around discrete moments—consultations, panels, workshops, or advisory meetings—rather than sustained relationships. Young women described being invited to speak, to share testimony, or to provide experiential insight, yet being excluded from agenda-setting, decision-making, or follow-up processes. This pattern mirrors critiques articulated by Andrea Cornwall (2008) of “invited spaces,” in which inclusion is managed by institutions without relinquishing control over outcomes. Participation, in these contexts, became extractive: drawing on young women’s experiences to legitimize processes, while offering little in return in terms of influence or accountability.

The findings also demonstrate that participation is deeply shaped by institutional ecosystems that privilege certain forms of legitimacy over others. Educational credentials, institutional affiliation, and proximity to donors or international organizations played a significant role in determining whose voices were heard and whose were sidelined. Degrees and professional experience were necessary but insufficient; credibility was often “borrowed” from recognized institutions rather than grounded in substantive expertise or community accountability. This dynamic was particularly visible in Global North-Global South asymmetries, where knowledge associated with institutions in the Global North travelled more easily and was treated as universally applicable, while locally grounded expertise required translation or validation.

Language further structured these hierarchies of participation. As explored in detail in Chapter 6, English dominance shaped not only who could participate confidently, but whose knowledge was treated as authoritative, coherent, and professional. Fluency, accent, and speed of response influenced which interventions were taken seriously, producing an uneven tempo of participation that advantaged some and marginalized others. Importantly, linguistic inequality did not operate in isolation. It intersected with class, education, race, and nationality, compounding existing exclusions. Participation thus became a site where epistemic authority was continuously negotiated, often to the detriment of those working across languages or cultural registers.

Material conditions further narrowed the field of participation. Unpaid or underpaid internships, self-funded travel, and expectations of availability filtered participation by class and caregiving responsibilities. Young women repeatedly described declining opportunities that were framed as prestigious or career-enhancing because they could not afford the personal costs. Others accepted such roles at significant expense, accumulating debt or burnout in the process. These dynamics produced what this dissertation conceptualizes as conditional inclusion: young women were invited to participate, but only if they could subsidize their own involvement. Over time, this resulted in cumulative disadvantage, shaping who remained visible in peace and security debates and who quietly exited them.

The dissertation also highlights how participation unfolds over time, rather than in isolated moments. Early barriers—limited access to extracurricular activities, networks, or mentorship—had cascading effects, shaping future opportunities for fellowships, consultancies, and recognition as “experts.” Participation was thus not simply blocked by

overt exclusion, but redirected through the slow accumulation of missed opportunities. This temporal dimension complicates linear models of inclusion and underscores how inequality is reproduced through layered constraints rather than single points of entry. For young women, these trajectories are further shaped by intersecting gendered, racialized, and socio-economic expectations, which influence access to resources, the distribution of unpaid labour, and the recognition of expertise, producing patterns of exclusion that are both cumulative and distinct in their impact.

Importantly, the findings challenge the assumption that participation is experienced uniformly across categories such as “women” or “youth.” Intersectionality (see Crenshaw, 1969; 1999) emerged not as an abstract analytical tool, but as a lived reality. Young women described being included as youth but marginalized as women, or included as women while excluded on the basis of age, sexuality, class, or nationality. Diversity agendas that relied on categorical representation often flattened these experiences, inviting individuals to speak as representatives of a single identity while erasing the complexity of their positionality. Participation, in these cases, became a performance of diversity rather than a redistribution of power. For example, when young women were invited to consultations or panels to signal inclusion, yet had limited opportunity to shape agendas, influence decisions, or represent the full scope of their intersecting experiences.

Intergenerational participation, frequently celebrated within YPS discourse, was similarly ambivalent in practice (see Valladares Gonzalez, 2024). While framed as collaborative and mutually beneficial, intergenerational spaces often positioned young women as learners or symbolic figures rather than as equal partners. The absence of

reciprocity—where young people were expected to contribute insight without corresponding shifts in authority—undermined the transformative potential of dialogue. Reciprocity, in this context, extends beyond influence over decisions to include shared authority, mutual recognition of expertise, and the redistribution of responsibility across generations. Age-based thresholds within YPS frameworks further exacerbated these dynamics, producing a revolving door of participation in which young women aged out of youth spaces without clear pathways into broader decision-making arenas. Continuity, institutional memory, and accountability were casualties of this model.

Despite these constraints, young women were not passive recipients of exclusion. Across chapters, they articulated and enacted alternative understandings of participation rooted in relational accountability. Legitimacy, for them, was earned through sustained engagement within communities, trust built over time, and responsiveness to local needs. Digital spaces, peer networks, *femtorship*, and mutual aid emerged as sites where participation was practised differently: horizontally rather than hierarchically, and relationally rather than procedurally. These practices did not replace institutional engagement, but they exposed its limitations and demonstrated that participation could be imagined otherwise.

Taken together, the findings of this dissertation show that participation cannot be understood as a binary condition: present or absent, included or excluded. Instead, it is a relational process shaped by power, context, and continuity. Young women peacebuilders navigate participation as a terrain of negotiation, where visibility does not guarantee influence, and inclusion does not ensure accountability. By centring their experiences, this dissertation reframes participation not as an institutional offering, but as a contested

practice that reflects broader struggles over authority, legitimacy, and knowledge in peace and security governance.

## **10.2. Theoretical Contributions: Reframing Participation in Conflict Studies**

This dissertation makes several interrelated theoretical contributions to conflict studies and adjacent interdisciplinary fields concerned with participation, legitimacy, and power. Rather than positioning itself in opposition to existing scholarship, it builds on feminist, decolonial, and critical peace research to refine the conceptualization, analysis, and evaluation of participation. Its central contribution lies in shifting participation from a procedural or representational concern to a relational one, grounded in power, continuity, and accountability.

First, the dissertation contributes to ongoing debates about participation by clarifying what participation is not. Participation, as demonstrated in this study, does not operate uniformly; it unfolds along a continuum and at multiple levels, with distinct implications for different actors, and is experienced in particularly constrained and conditional ways by young women. Across conflict studies and policy frameworks, participation is frequently treated as a proxy for inclusion, legitimacy, or progress. This tendency is visible in both scholarly and practitioner-oriented work that equates participation with institutional access, presence at decision-making tables, or representation within formal structures (Pruitt, 2016). While such approaches have expanded who is visible within peace processes, they have also narrowed how participation is understood. By foregrounding young women peacebuilders' experiences, this dissertation demonstrates that participation cannot be reduced to access alone.

Presence without influence, recognition without accountability, and inclusion without continuity do not constitute meaningful participation.

This reframing extends and deepens feminist critiques of participation articulated by scholars, such as Laura J. Shepherd (2021), who have highlighted how inclusion can coexist with persistent hierarchies of power. It also resonates with Cornwall's (2008) distinction between invited and claimed spaces, while pushing the analysis further by examining how participation unfolds over time and across institutional ecosystems. Rather than treating participation as a discrete event or outcome, this dissertation conceptualizes it as an ongoing relational process shaped by unequal access to resources, networks, and legitimacy.

Second, the dissertation contributes to conflict studies by centring young women as theorists of participation rather than as illustrative cases (Leclerc & Rouhshahbaz, 2021; 2025). Much of the literature treats the experiences of women and youth as empirical material to be explained through existing theoretical frameworks. In contrast, this study takes seriously the analytical insights offered by participants themselves. Young women articulated clear criteria for what made participation meaningful: the ability to shape agendas, to influence decisions, and to receive feedback over time. These criteria were not derived from policy documents or academic theory, but from lived experience. By elevating these insights to the level of theory, the dissertation challenges conventional hierarchies of knowledge production within the discipline.

This move aligns with decolonial critiques articulated by scholars such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014a) and Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), who argue that knowledge produced outside dominant institutional centres is routinely devalued or

treated as contextual rather than theoretical. By treating young women's analyses as contributions to theory, the dissertation disrupts the tendency to locate theoretical authority exclusively within the Global North or within academic institutions. It also responds to feminist calls to recognize situated knowledge as analytically generative rather than merely descriptive.

Third, the dissertation advances a relational understanding of power within participation debates. Much of conflict studies has conceptualized power in terms of formal authority, institutional mandate, or state capacity. While peacebuilding scholars such as Oliver Richmond (2011b) and Roger Mac Ginty (2014) have challenged these assumptions through concepts such as hybridity and everyday peace, participation itself has often remained tied to institutional benchmarks. This dissertation builds on these critiques by demonstrating how power operates relationally within participatory spaces: through agenda-setting, control over tempo, access to follow-up mechanisms, and the ability to translate participation into sustained influence.

By analyzing participation through education, language, institutional reputation, and intergenerational dynamics, the dissertation shows how power circulates through seemingly neutral criteria. Credentials, fluency, professionalism, and availability function as filters that shape who is recognized as credible and whose knowledge travels. These dynamics are not incidental; they are constitutive of how participation is organized and evaluated. Theoretically, this shifts attention away from whether participation occurs and toward how authority is produced and maintained within participatory processes.

Fourth, the dissertation contributes to feminist and decolonial debates by linking participation explicitly to epistemic justice. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's (2007) earlier

work on epistemic injustice and Sara Ahmed's (2012) analysis of institutional inclusion, the study demonstrates how participation often demands emotional and epistemic labour from marginalized actors. Young women were expected to translate lived experience into institutional language, to perform professionalism, and to manage the risks of visibility, all while their knowledge was treated as supplementary or anecdotal. This insight extends feminist critiques of tokenism (see Leclerc & Wong, 2024; Hart, 1992) by showing how participation itself can become extractive, drawing on marginalized knowledge without redistributing authority.

At the same time, the dissertation avoids positioning feminist and decolonial scholarship as external correctives to conflict studies. Instead, it situates these traditions as integral to the field's evolution, acknowledging that conflict studies has always been shaped by multiple intellectual lineages, including peace research, conflict resolution, and critical security studies. The contribution here lies in clarifying how participation has remained under-theorized even as the field has expanded its analytical scope. By bringing feminist and decolonial insights into sustained dialogue with participation debates, the dissertation strengthens the discipline's capacity to analyze power beyond the State.

Fifth, the dissertation introduces the "Triangle of Meaningful Participation" as a conceptual synthesis rather than a prescriptive model. The triangle does not claim to resolve the tensions identified in participation debates. Instead, it provides a way of holding together three conditions that repeatedly emerged as necessary for participation to be experienced as meaningful: co-creation, the ability to influence, and a feedback loop. Each dimension corresponds to a specific gap in existing frameworks: agenda-

setting without shared authority, inclusion without impact, and engagement without accountability.

The theoretical value of the triangle lies in its relational orientation. Rather than measuring participation through static indicators, it directs attention to processes, relationships, and temporal dynamics. It allows scholars to ask not whether participation occurred, but how it was structured, sustained, and contested. In this sense, the triangle contributes to conflict studies by offering a language for analyzing participation that is attentive to power without collapsing into proceduralism or idealism.

Finally, the dissertation contributes to interdisciplinary conversations about legitimacy, governance, and democratic practice. Participation is a central concern not only in conflict studies, but also in feminist international relations, political sociology, and development studies. By theorizing participation as relational and power-conscious, the dissertation provides conceptual tools that travel across these fields without flattening context. It also underscores the importance of continuity and accountability, dimensions often neglected in participation research that prioritizes access or representation.

In sum, the theoretical contributions of this dissertation lie not in rejecting existing scholarship but in refining the understanding and analysis of participation. By centring young women peacebuilders as knowledge producers, foregrounding relational power, and synthesizing insights into a coherent conceptual framework, the study advances conflict studies toward a more reflexive, inclusive, and analytically robust engagement with participation. In doing so, it lays the foundation for rethinking not only who participates in peacebuilding but also how participation itself is theorized.

### **10.3. Revisiting the Triangle of Meaningful Participation**

The Triangle of Meaningful Participation (see Chapter 9) is best understood not as a standalone model introduced in the final analytical chapter of the dissertation, but as a synthesis that crystallizes patterns visible across the empirical chapters. Its value lies in making explicit what young women peacebuilders consistently identified as missing from existing participatory frameworks. Rather than proposing participation as an ideal to be achieved, the triangle offers a way of understanding why participation so often fails to feel meaningful, even when inclusion appears robust on paper.

The triangle brings together three interdependent conditions: co-creation, the ability to influence, and a feedback loop. These dimensions did not emerge as abstract principles, but as recurring reference points in interviewees' reflections on what distinguished hollow participation from engagement that mattered. Importantly, participants rarely articulated these conditions in isolation. Instead, they emphasized that meaningful participation depended on their interaction. Where one dimension was present without the others, participation remained fragile, symbolic, or extractive.

Co-creation addresses the persistent problem of agenda-setting. Across the dissertation, young women described being invited into processes after priorities had already been defined. Their participation was often limited to consultation rather than collaboration. Co-creation, as articulated by interviewees, did not mean simply contributing ideas within pre-existing frameworks. It meant being involved in shaping the questions being asked, the problems being defined, and the parameters of action. Without this shared ownership of priorities, participation was experienced as reactive rather than generative.

This insight challenges dominant participatory logics that treat consultation as a “check box exercise” or as sufficient. It also complicates claims that participation can be assessed solely by the presence of individuals at figurative or literal “decision-making tables.” The triangle makes clear that presence without co-creation reproduces hierarchies of authority, even when representation appears diverse. Co-creation, in this sense, is less about inclusion into existing structures and more about reconfiguring how authority is exercised at the outset of participatory processes.

The second dimension—the ability to influence—responds to the gap between inclusion and impact that runs through the findings. Young women were often and increasingly visible in peace and security dialogues, yet struggled to trace how their contributions shaped decisions, policies, or outcomes. Influence, as participants understood it, was not synonymous with being listened to politely or with symbolic acknowledgment. It referred to the capacity to affect direction, priorities, and resource allocation.

This distinction is analytically significant. Many participatory frameworks assume that voice naturally leads to influence, yet the experiences documented in this dissertation show that voice can coexist with powerlessness. The triangle, therefore, foregrounds influence as a separate and necessary condition. It invites analysis of how decisions are made, whose inputs carry weight, and how authority circulates within participatory spaces. By doing so, it shifts attention away from performative inclusion toward the substantive dynamics of decision-making.

The third dimension—the feedback loop—addresses the temporal fragility of participation. Across chapters, young women described how engagement often ended

once a consultation or event concluded. Contributions disappeared into reports or recommendations without follow-up, leaving participants uncertain whether their involvement had mattered. The absence of feedback not only undermined trust but also discouraged future engagement, reinforcing cycles of disengagement and skepticism.

The feedback loop captures the importance of accountability and continuity. It recognizes that participation unfolds over time and that meaningful engagement requires mechanisms that allow participants to see how their contributions were used, challenged, or revised. Without feedback, participation becomes extractive: drawing on lived experience without returning anything of substance. The triangle thus situates accountability not as an add-on, but as integral to participatory legitimacy.

Crucially, the triangle is not additive. Co-creation without influence risks becoming collaborative theatre. Influence without feedback yields short-term gains but not sustained trust. Feedback without co-creation reinforces top-down processes that remain unresponsive to participants' priorities. The triangle's analytic strength lies in holding these dimensions together and making visible the relational conditions under which participation becomes meaningful.

Revisiting the triangle here in the dissertation's conclusion also clarifies what it does not claim. It does not provide a checklist of best practices, nor does it assume that meaningful participation can be fully institutionalized. Rather, it provides a language for analyzing participation as contested and uneven. It allows scholars and practitioners to identify where participation breaks down and why, without reducing complex dynamics to binary judgments of success or failure.

Importantly, the triangle is grounded in the specific positionality of young women peacebuilders. Their experiences of gendered, generational, linguistic, and institutional exclusion shaped how participation was understood and enacted. Yet the analytic contribution of the triangle extends beyond this group. By centring relational dynamics rather than identity categories alone, it offers a framework that can be applied across contexts while remaining attentive to power and difference.

In this sense, the triangle contributes to conflict studies by offering a framework for theorizing participation that does not rely on idealized assumptions about inclusion. It acknowledges that participation is always situated, shaped by unequal resources and authority, and subject to contestation. Rather than resolving these tensions, the triangle makes them visible, enabling more reflexive engagement with participation as a political practice.

#### **10.4. Implications for WPS and YPS Policy and Practice**

The findings of this dissertation carry significant implications for how participation is conceptualized and operationalized within WPS and YPS policies. While both agendas have made participation a central pillar, the analysis demonstrates that participation is often implemented in ways that prioritize visibility, representation, and compliance over power-sharing, continuity, and accountability. The result is a persistent gap between normative commitments and lived experience.

One implication is the need to reconsider how participation is designed and evaluated within policy processes. As has been established in previous chapters, WPS and YPS initiatives frequently emphasize inclusion at discrete moments—consultations, advisory roles, or stakeholder meetings—without embedding mechanisms that enable co-

creation or sustained influence. My findings show that participation structured around one-off engagements rarely translates into meaningful impact. When agendas are pre-defined and timelines externally imposed, participation becomes reactive rather than generative. This suggests that participation must be embedded earlier in policy cycles, including in problem definition and priority-setting, rather than confined to implementation or validation stages. These dynamics operate across both WPS and YPS agendas, where participation is often structured in parallel but uncoordinated ways, further limiting continuity, influence, and the ability to sustain engagement across policy frameworks.

A second implication concerns the reliance on metrics to demonstrate progress. Counting participants, documenting attendance, or disaggregating data by age and gender may provide evidence of access, but these measures reveal little about whether participation enables agency. Young women's experiences underscore that being counted does not equate to being heard, and recognition does not guarantee influence. For WPS and YPS policies, this raises questions about how success is defined and whose perspectives shape evaluation criteria. If participation is assessed primarily through quantitative indicators, relational dimensions such as trust, accountability, and continuity remain invisible, even though they are central to participants' evaluations of meaningful engagement.

The findings also highlight the importance of addressing the material conditions that shape participation. Unpaid labour, self-funded travel, linguistic expectations, and institutional credentialism function as filters that determine who can remain "available" for participation over time. Within WPS and YPS initiatives, these dynamics risk

reproducing narrow pools of participants who are already privileged (theorized as “the good youth” by Helen Berents and Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, 2015), while excluding those whose perspectives may be most grounded in community realities. Recognizing participation as a form of labour—and accounting for its costs—has implications for how programs are funded, resourced, and sustained.

Intergenerational participation represents another area where policy assumptions warrant closer scrutiny. While intergenerational dialogue is widely promoted within YPS discourse, the findings suggest that such spaces often reproduce age-based hierarchies rather than dismantling them (Valladares Gonzalez, 2024). Young women were frequently positioned as learners or symbolic representatives, with limited influence over decisions. Age thresholds further undermined continuity, creating a revolving door of participation that disrupted institutional memory and accountability. For WPS and YPS policies, this points to the need for participatory models that support long-term trajectories of engagement rather than treating youth participation as temporary or transitional.

The dissertation also underscores the risks of treating WPS and YPS as parallel agendas without addressing their points of intersection. Throughout my doctoral studies, I have written extensively about how young women frequently fall between these frameworks: recognized as youth but marginalized as women, or included in women’s spaces while dismissed as inexperienced. This fragmentation limits the capacity of both agendas to respond to intersecting forms of exclusion. A relational understanding of participation highlights that inclusion cannot be managed through categorical approaches alone; it requires attention to how gender, age, language, class, and institutional legitimacy intersect in practice.

Importantly, the implications of this research do not suggest abandoning participation as a policy goal. Rather, they call for a shift in how participation is understood and pursued. Participation that is meaningful from the perspective of young women peacebuilders is not defined by access alone, but by the quality of relationships it enables. Co-creation, influence, and feedback are not add-ons; they are conditions that determine whether participation redistributes power or simply legitimizes existing arrangements.

For practitioners and policymakers working within WPS and YPS frameworks, this means engaging participation as an ongoing relationship rather than a procedural requirement. It involves asking different questions: Who sets agendas? How are decisions made? What happens after participation occurs? Whose knowledge is treated as authoritative, and whose is treated as contextual? These questions shift attention from inclusion as an outcome to participation as a process that unfolds over time.

Ultimately, the implications of this dissertation suggest that the transformative potential of WPS and YPS depends not on expanding participation numerically but on rethinking its relational foundations. Without confronting how power operates within participatory spaces, well-intentioned inclusion risks reproducing the exclusions it seeks to address. Taking participation seriously, as young women peacebuilders urge, requires moving beyond symbolic engagement toward practices that sustain accountability, redistribute authority, and recognize participation as a political act rather than a technical exercise.

### **10.5. Participation as Political Practice: Implications and Pathways Forward**

This dissertation has demonstrated that participation is not a neutral or technical exercise, but a deeply political practice shaped by power, legitimacy, and relational accountability. Reframing participation in this way has implications that extend beyond analytical refinement. It calls for a shift in how participation is designed, evaluated, and valued within peace and security practice, policy frameworks, and scholarly inquiry.

The findings challenge institutions to move beyond inclusion as a symbolic or procedural commitment. Across the chapters, young women peacebuilders consistently distinguished between being present and being able to shape outcomes. Participation, from their perspective, becomes meaningful only when it redistributes authority, enables sustained engagement, and generates visible consequences. This insight raises uncomfortable questions for existing participation efforts within WPS and YPS policy circles. While these frameworks have expanded the rhetorical space for inclusion, they often fall short of addressing how power circulates within participatory processes. Without confronting who sets agendas, who controls resources, and who defines legitimacy, participation risks remaining performative rather than transformative.

The dissertation also highlights the costs of participation when it is not accompanied by reciprocity. Young women described participation as labour: emotional, epistemic, linguistic, and material. When institutions invite participation without accountability, this labour becomes extractive. Recognizing participation as a political practice, therefore, requires institutions to take responsibility not only for who is included, but for how participation is sustained, supported, and acted upon. This includes resourcing participation adequately, creating feedback mechanisms that close the loop

between consultation and decision-making, and acknowledging community-based expertise as authoritative rather than supplementary.

For conflict studies as a discipline, the implications are equally significant. The findings underscore the limitations of State-centric, technocratic, and quantitatively driven approaches to participation. They call for greater engagement with feminist, decolonial, and everyday peace scholarship (see Chapter 9) that centres lived experience and relational dynamics. Taking participation seriously as a political practice requires recognizing marginalized actors not only as participants or beneficiaries, but as theorists whose analyses can reshape the field itself. This dissertation contributes to that reorientation by treating young women's reflections as conceptual interventions rather than illustrative anecdotes.

At the same time, I want to caution against romanticizing participation or positioning young women as inherently transformative actors. Participants themselves were acutely aware of the constraints they faced, the compromises required to access institutional spaces, and the emotional toll of sustained engagement. Recognizing participation as political practice therefore also means acknowledging its limits. Transformation is not guaranteed by inclusion alone, nor should responsibility for change be placed disproportionately on those already marginalized.

Moving forward, the dissertation argues that participation is an ongoing site of contestation rather than a settled policy goal. Meaningful participation must be continually negotiated, defended, and reworked in response to shifting power relations. This requires attentiveness to context, commitment to accountability, and openness to forms of participation that may challenge institutional comfort. It also requires scholars

and practitioners alike to reflect on their roles in producing participatory spaces and in generating knowledge with or about them.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that participation matters not because it is inclusive in name, but because it has the potential to reshape how peace and security dynamics are imagined and practiced. When participation is treated as relational, power-conscious, and accountable, it becomes a vehicle for rethinking authority, legitimacy, and knowledge production. Recognizing participation as a political practice is, therefore, not an abstract theoretical move. It is a necessary step toward more just, responsive, and grounded approaches to peacebuilding.

## **10.6. Conclusion**

This dissertation has advanced a sustained and critical examination of participation in peace and security through the lived experiences of young women peacebuilders. Across six empirical and theoretical analysis chapters, it has been demonstrated that participation cannot be understood as a technical input, a numerical achievement, or a symbolic gesture. Instead, participation emerges as a relational process through which power, legitimacy, and accountability are negotiated over time. By centring the voices and analyses of young women, the dissertation contributes to rethinking participation not only as a policy objective, but as a political practice that shapes whose knowledge counts and whose futures are imagined.

Empirically, the dissertation contributes original insights into how young women experience participation across multiple, intersecting sites of exclusion and possibility. Chapters 4-7, examining higher education, language, sexuality, and institutional engagement, reveal that inclusion is often conditional, uneven, and costly. Young women

described navigating professionalization pressures, linguistic hierarchies, unpaid labour, and expectations of representation, while simultaneously carrying responsibility toward their communities. These experiences complicate dominant narratives that frame education, visibility, or consultation as inherently *empowering*. Instead, the findings show how access can coexist with marginalization, and how inclusion without influence can reproduce rather than dismantle inequality.

Conceptually, I hope to make a significant contribution by articulating the Triangle of Meaningful Participation in Chapter 9. Grounded in participants' own analyses, the triangle identifies three enabling conditions—co-creation, the ability to influence, and a feedback loop—that together define when participation becomes meaningful. Rather than offering a universal model, the triangle provides a relational framework that foregrounds power-sharing, continuity, and accountability. It responds directly to gaps identified in WPS and YPS policy debates, where participation is frequently invoked but rarely theorized beyond access or representation. By synthesizing empirical insights into a coherent conceptual tool, the dissertation offers a way to assess participation without collapsing it into metrics or procedural checklists.

These contributions underscore a central claim: young women peacebuilders are not only subjects of participation frameworks, but theorists of participation itself. Their reflections reveal how participation operates in practice: where it falters, where it extracts, and where it holds transformative potential. By situating these insights within broader theoretical debates and synthesizing them into an original conceptual framework, the dissertation repositions young women as knowledge producers whose analyses can reshape how participation is understood across policy, practice, and scholarship.

In closing, this dissertation does not offer participation as a solution in itself. Instead, it insists on asking harder questions about the conditions under which participation matters. Meaningful participation, as shown throughout, is not guaranteed by inclusion alone. It requires shared agenda-setting, the capacity to influence outcomes, and mechanisms that sustain accountability over time. Recognizing this shifts attention away from counting participants and toward examining power relations, institutional responsibilities, and the relational work that peacebuilding demands.

By advancing this argument, the dissertation invites conflict studies to engage more reflexively with participation, not as a settled norm, but as an ongoing site of political struggle and possibility. It also affirms the importance of grounding theory in lived experience, particularly the experiences of those most often positioned at the margins. In doing so, I hope to contribute to a more critical, relational, and justice-oriented understanding of participation in peace and security.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Interview Questionnaire

1. Please tell me what comes to mind when we say “meaningful participation” in the context of the WPS and/or YPS resolutions.
2. Do you consider that your participation in WPS and/or YPS policymaking in your context to be meaningful?
  - a. Why or why not?
3. Do you consider your participation in WPS and/or YPS implementation in your context to be meaningful?
  - a. Why or why not?
4. Can you give me an example of an action that led to meaningful participation for you or another young woman based on your experience?

*Rotating question based on theme of interview:*

For theme 1: First-generation to access higher education

- a. How has navigating high education as a first-generation scholar affected your ability to contribute to activism in peace and security?
- b. Has your educational journey affected your ability to meaningfully participate in WPS and/or YPS policymaking?
  - i. If so, how?
- c. Has your education been a barrier to meaningfully participate in WPS and/or YPS implementation?
  - i. If so, how?

For theme 2: Linguistically diverse

- a. How has navigating English as a second (or other) language affected your ability to contribute to your activism in peace and security?
- b. Has your comfort level in English affected your ability to meaningfully participate in WPS and/or YPS policymaking?
  - ii. If so, how?
- c. Has your comfort level in English been a barrier to meaningfully participate in WPS and/or YPS implementation?
  - iii. If so, how?

For theme 3: Marginalized sexual identity and orientation

- a. How has navigating your sexual orientation or identity affected your ability to contribute to your activism in peace and security?
- b. Has your sexual orientation or identity affected your ability to meaningfully participate in WPS and/or YPS policymaking?
  - iv. If so, how?
- c. Has your sexual orientation or gender identity been a barrier meaningfully participate in WPS and/or YPS implementation?
  - v. If so, how?

## Appendix 2: Global Survey Questionnaire

1. Do you identify as a young woman between the ages of 18 to 30 years old?  
[Yes/No]
2. Please share three words that come to mind when you hear “meaningful participation” in the context of the WPS and/or YPS resolutions.
3. Please upload a photo, painting or drawing of what “meaningful participation” in WPS/YPS represents to you. *Note: This can be something found on the internet. Respecting copyright laws will be the responsibility of the researcher should this visual be used in the published thesis.*
4. What does activism mean to you and how does that define/align with your involvement in WPS and YPS?
5. On a scale of 1-5 (one being terrible, five being outstanding), what is your perceived level of influence in decision-making on matters related to WPS/YPS policymaking in your context?
  - a. Please specify if by “in your context” you are referring to [multiple choice]:
    - i. Local (community)
    - ii. National
    - iii. Regional (eg. in regional bodies such as the African Union)
    - iv. Global (eg. at the United Nations)
6. Where do you think you have the most potential to influence WPS/YPS?
  - a. Please select all that apply [multiple choice]:
    - i. Policy advocacy
    - ii. Programmatic implementation
    - iii. Neither
    - iv. Both
7. What is one example of an action that led to meaningful participation for you or another young woman based on your experience?
8. [Optional] Do you identify as a young woman who is the first in your family to access higher education?
  - a. If yes, how has this affected your ability to contribute to activism in peace and security?
9. [Optional] Do you identify as having English as a second (or other) language?
  - a. If yes, how has your comfort level in English affected your ability to meaningfully participate in WPS/YPS discussions or decision-making?
10. [Optional] Do you identify as an individual with a marginalized sexual identity and/or orientation?
  - a. If yes, how has your sexual orientation or gender identity affected your ability to meaningfully participate in WPS and/or YPS policymaking and implementation?

Appendix 3: Ethics Certificate of Approval



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**CERTIFICAT D'ÉTHIQUE  
ETHICS CERTIFICATE**

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**SPU-Ethics Certificate Number: 1360.3/24**

**Katrina Leclerc  
Student number: 300211571**

**" Where participation and tokenism meet: An analysis of  
'meaningful participation' in decision-making on matters  
of peace and security"**



**June 10, 2024**

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CERTIFICAT D'ÉTHIQUE | ETHICS CERTIFICATE

SPU-REB Number: 1360.3/24

Table with 4 columns: Last name, Name, Affiliation, Role. Rows for Leclerc and Eaton.

Type of project: Doctoral Thesis
Title: Where participation and tokenism meet: An analysis of 'meaningful participation' in decision-making on matters of peace and security.

Table with 3 columns: Approval date, Expiry Date, Decision. Row for 10-06-2024, 09-06-2025, 1 (Approved)

Approved:

The Saint Paul University Research Ethics Board (SPU-REB) approved the project. Recruitment and data collection may begin as outlined in the application. Please use SPU-REB Protocol 1360.3/24. The SPU ethics approval applies for one year. However, any modification to Research Project must be approved by the REB before the changes can be implemented.

- In accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans – TCPS 2 and other applicable laws and regulations, the Saint Paul University Research Ethics Board (REB) has examined and approved the application for an ethics certificate for this project for the period indicated and subject to the conditions listed above.



Louis Perron, Ph.D.
Chair
Saint Paul University
Research Ethics Board (REB)