



RETHINKING PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES

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Youth Leading Change

Emerging Sites of Knowledge in
Peace and Conflict

Edited by
Katrina Leclerc
Erika Isabel Bulan Yague
Helen Berents

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Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies

Series Editors

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This agenda-setting series of research monographs, now more than two decades old, provides an interdisciplinary forum aimed at advancing innovative new agendas for peace and conflict studies in International Relations and other disciplines. Many of the critical volumes the series has hosted so far have contributed to new avenues of analysis directly or indirectly related to the search for positive, emancipatory, and hybrid forms of peace in the structural and ethical context of global justice and sustainability. Constructive critiques of liberal peace, hybrid peace, everyday contributions to peace, the role of civil society and social movements, international actors and networks, as well as a range of different dimensions, nexuses, and scholarly generations of peace (from peacebuilding and statebuilding, to youth contributions, photography, the arts, gender debates, spatial innovations, embodiment, and emotional aspects, and many case studies) have been explored so far. The series raises important critical and political questions about what peace is, whose peace is, and peace for whom, as well as where peace takes place. In doing so, it offers new and interdisciplinary perspectives on the development of international peace architecture, peace processes, peacebuilding, peacekeeping and mediation, statebuilding, and localised peace formation in practice and theory. It examines their implications for the development of local peace agency and the connection with theoretical advances about emancipatory forms of peace and global justice, which remain crucial in different conflict-affected regions around the world. This is related to the ongoing transition from a so-called liberal international order to a more multipolar and authoritarian version associated with older notions of conflict management and the post-colonial, economic, and environmental challenges against the Eurocentrism and inequalities associated with liberal peace. This series' contributions offer both theoretical and empirical insights into many of the world's most intractable conflicts, also investigating increasingly significant evidence about blockages to peace, counter-peace, the breakdown of the liberal order, and the rise of alternative approaches (for better or worse). Its monographs and edited collections contribute—we hope—to the potential for new innovative and transformative approaches to emerge that may radically improve the international peace architecture or its possible alternatives.

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Katrina Leclerc 
Saint-Paul University
Ottawa, ON, Canada

Erika Isabel Bulan Yague
Griffith University
Brisbane, QLD, Australia

Helen Berents
Griffith University
Brisbane, QLD, Australia

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PRAISE FOR *YOUTH LEADING CHANGE*

“Marking a decade of the Youth, Peace and Security agenda, this ground-breaking volume amplifies the voices of young scholar-practitioners, puts them in conversation with established scholar allies, and offers unique insights from those straddling academic and practitioner spaces. In doing so, it foregrounds lived experiences, challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge production, and provides essential analysis of youth-led peacebuilding. This volume will be an indispensable read for anyone seeking to understand the evolving landscape of peace and security through the lens of those directly shaping it.”

—Dr. Lesley Pruitt, *Associate Professor, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne*

“Anchored by the outstanding scholarship of Katrina Leclerc, Erika Isabel Bulan Yague, and Helen Berents, *Youth Leading Change* offers a critical and timely intervention into the Youth, Peace and Security agenda. The volume’s diverse range of regional case studies highlights the depth and breadth of youth-led research and practice in peacebuilding. It sets a new benchmark for research that challenges hierarchies of knowledge production and advances youth-centered approaches within both academic and policy discourse.”

—Dr. Bahar Baser, *Professor of Political Science and International Relations, School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University*

“*Youth Leading Change*’ recognises the authority of young peacebuilders by amplifying their lived experiences and their innovative approaches to conflict transformation. This ground-breaking volume demonstrates how youth-led initiatives in digital activism, community dialogue, and policy advocacy are reshaping peace processes globally. Through rich case studies spanning multiple continents, these scholar-practitioners persistently demonstrate how the experiences and knowledge of youth are indispensable to sustainable peacebuilding.”

—Professor Katrina Lee-Koo, *Head of the School of Political Science and International Studies, The University of Queensland*

“This volume is a powerful testament to the importance of youth-led knowledge creation in the Youth, Peace and Security space. With young people already at the forefront of driving change, this collection rightly elevates their voices and expertise within academic and policy arenas, ensuring the agenda is informed by those who are shaping its reality.”

—João Scarpelini, *first-ever UN Youth Advisor in Somalia (2015–2019) and Programme & Technical Specialist, Inclusive Peace and Security & Humanitarian Action at UNFPA*

“This powerful volume repositions young peacebuilders not just as participants, but as essential knowledge producers whose lived experiences and academic insights challenge traditional hierarchies in peace and conflict studies. By centering youth voices, this work offers an urgent, compelling reframing of the Youth, Peace and Security agenda and charts a path toward more inclusive and transformative peacebuilding.”

—Erike Tanghøj, *Senior Specialist, Inclusive Peace and Security at Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA)*

“This powerful volume challenges the very foundations of peace and conflict studies, urging us to rethink whose voices are heard and whose knowledge is valued. By focusing on the lived experiences of young peacebuilders, this book is a vital contribution for scholars, practitioners, and anyone committed to more inclusive and peaceful societies.”

—Sofia Biscuola, *Co-Director of the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY)*

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Khaleem Ali is an attorney-at-law with over a decade of experience working in civil society and international human rights organizations representing the Caribbean. A recent graduate of the Hugh Wooding Law School and the University of the West Indies, Khaleem has worked with UNESCO Caribbean on its YPS programming and continues to work on YPS in an individual capacity.

Helen Berents is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University. She holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Queensland. Her research draws on peace studies, feminist international relations, and critical security studies to consider representations of children and youth in crises and conflicts and engagements with lived experiences of violence-affected young people.

Celina Del Felice serves as the president of Agency for Peacebuilding, a non-profit Italian think-and-do organization. She is a member of the Code of Good Practice Panel of Experts of the Irish Development Education Association and co-editor of the 2015 Peace Education Evaluation volume. Celina has a PhD in International Relations from Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

Simone Mbodé Diouf is the African Union Youth Ambassador for Peace for West Africa. She has a master's degree in peace studies, international

security, and defense and development economics, as well as a bachelor's degree in history and geography.

Valeriu Drăgălin is the Center for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development's research coordinator for Moldova and Eastern Europe. He is a former president of the National Youth Council of Moldova (CNTM) and has worked in the legal development sector.

Efetobor Stephanie Effevottu received her PhD from the Department of History (Development Studies) at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. She holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in history from the University of Benin and the University of Ibadan, respectively.

Lynrose Jane D. Genon is a PhD candidate at the Digital Media Research Center of Queensland University of Technology (QUT). She is also a faculty member at Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU-IIT), who is presently on study leave.

Lani Mireya Anaya Jiménez is a PhD candidate at the UN-mandated University for Peace in Costa Rica, focusing on YPS and power relations in the Latin America and Caribbean region. Lani has 15 years of experience in research, training, and advocacy with young people, national governments, and international organizations in to advance the YPS resolutions at national, regional, and global levels.

Daria Larionov is an associate for Central Asia, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus Peacebuilding Programs at the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders. She is a member of the European Youth Democracy Network chapter in Moldova, a 2022 OSCE-UNODA Peace and Security Scholar, and a Youth for Disarmament Initiative representative.

Katrina Leclerc is a PhD candidate and part-time professor in Conflict Studies at Saint-Paul University. Her research focuses on gender- and age-sensitive peacebuilding, youth engagement, and inclusive policy in conflict-affected contexts. Katrina is a policy specialist advising governments and UN agencies on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas, including in Canada, Chad, the DRC, Kenya, Lebanon, Nepal, and Rwanda.

Sally M. Mboumien holds a PhD in Applied Logistics from the University of Bamenda. Sally is a gender and peacebuilding consultant in

Cameroon. She is the founder and executive director of Common Action for Gender Development (COMAGEND).

Siobhán McEvoy-Levy is the director of the Desmond Tutu Peace Lab and professor of political science and peace & conflict studies at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA. She has published numerous articles, book chapters, and books on how young people conceptualize violence and peace and participate in (everyday) peacebuilding.

Caitlin Mollica is a lecturer at the University of Newcastle. Her research interests include youth political participation, gender-inclusive justice, transitional justice, and human rights. Her sole-authored book, *Agency & Ownership in Reconciliation: Youth and the Practice of Transitional*, was published by SUNY Press in April 2024.

Linh Nong is a senior program manager at the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) with expertise in Southeast Asia. Linh received a Fullbright Scholarship, an Australian Award, a Rotary Peace Fellowship, and a United Nations Association Graduate Fellowship. She has a Master of Arts in International Development from American University and a dual Master of International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Queensland.

Shadi Rouhshahbaz is an Associate Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization and a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne. Shadi is a Women PeaceMaker Fellow at the Kroc Institute of the University of San Diego and a Nuclear Disarmament Fellow at the Next Generation Foresight Practitioners Programme of the School of International Futures. She was previously Lead Editor of the *Journal of YPS*.

Marie-Rose Tshite is a PhD student in political science at the University of Cincinnati, concentrating on feminist comparative and international politics. She is a Fulbright and Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) alumna, co-founder of the Congolese Coalition on YPS, member of the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) DRC Youth Caucus, and previously served as the National Coordinator of the YPS Secretariat in DRC.

Shayne Wong is a PhD candidate in peace and conflict studies at the University of Manitoba. Her research focuses on the intersections of gender, forced displacement, and peacebuilding in Myanmar. Shayne is

a co-founder of the Canadian Coalition for YPS and a board director at the Rohingya Human Rights Network.

Erika Isabel Bulan Yague is a PhD candidate at Griffith University. She specializes on young people's engagement in emergencies, peace-building and disaster risk reduction. She has over a decade of experience working with the UN, governments, and civil society, including roles with UNICEF, UN DPPA-DPO and UNFPA. Her work and research are grounded in feminist and Global South perspectives on youth leadership and participation.

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Young People as Movers and Shakers of Peace and Security

*Katrina Leclerc[✉], Erika Isabel Bulan Yague,
and Helen Berents*

Abstract This brief introductory chapter sets the context for this volume. Youth have long been positioned as beneficiaries of peace interventions rather than as architects of knowledge about peace and security. Their expertise—shaped by frontline experiences, grassroots activism, and community leadership—has too often been dismissed as anecdotal rather than recognized as critical knowledge production. This book challenges that exclusion. This introduction outlines the rationale for creating a volume that centres young practitioner-scholars’ insights, and provides an outline of the structure of the book.

K. Leclerc (✉)
Saint Paul University, Ottawa, ON, Canada
e-mail: kleclerc@ustpaul.ca

E. I. B. Yague · H. Berents
Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia
e-mail: erikaisabel.yague@griffithuni.edu.au

H. Berents
e-mail: h.berents@griffith.edu.au

Keywords Youth · Peace and security · Knowledge production · Youth leadership · Peacebuilding · Exclusion · Local peacebuilding

Young peacebuilders around the world work on the frontlines to prevent, respond, and recover from conflict. However, their contributions are often overlooked, dismissed, or appropriated in practice, due to deeply ingrained assumptions about young people's (in)capacity and passivity (McEvoy-Levy 2006; Berents and Mollica 2022; Simpson 2018). At the same time, scholarship in this space has largely been written about youth, not by them, reinscribing hierarchies of knowledge production (Berents et al 2024; Leclerc and Roushahbaz 2021). This volume responds to both these issues by bringing together young scholar-practitioners who draw on their own lived expertise and academic practice to examine how youth navigate complex socio-cultural and political conflicts to bring about social and cultural change, creating space for positive peace despite decades of compounding crises.

Young people have always been working as peacebuilders, conflict mediators, and to secure their communities (see, among others, Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015; Lee-Koo and Pruitt 2020; Del Felice and Wisler 2007; Berents et al. 2024; Iwilade and Ebiede 2022). Youth themselves have monitored, evaluated, and reported on their own advocacy and activism (see illustratively, Alsakkaf 2021; Ally Project 2022; Tshite and Mungala 2024; Leclerc and Bohémier 2025; Ragandang (ed) 2021; OGIP 2019).

However, it has only been recently that their positive contributions have been recognized by the formal peace and security architecture. In 2015, the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda was established through the landmark adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250. This was the first time the positive and essential contributions of young people to peace and security have been formally recognized, and was achieved thanks to the work of youth advocates themselves in partnership with youth-serving allies (Simpson 2018). The agenda is grounded in five key pillars: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration. It calls on Member States and international actors to ensure that youth are included in peace processes, protected from violence, and supported as agents of

conflict prevention and peacebuilding (UNSC 2015). Subsequent resolutions—UNSCR 2419 in 2018 and UNSCR 2535 in 2020—further emphasized the need for youth participation in peace negotiations and peacebuilding frameworks. Yet, despite these global commitments, young people continue to face exclusion from decision-making spaces and are often treated as subjects of intervention rather than as leaders and knowledge producers in their own right.

Over the past ten years, the YPS agenda has generated global policy commitments and inspired national and regional action plans. Yet, the conversations and knowledge shaping its implementation have often remained within institutional policy circles, rarely centering those most directly engaged in peace work—young peacebuilders themselves. Youth have long been positioned as beneficiaries of peace interventions rather than as architects of knowledge about peace and security. Their expertise—shaped by frontline experiences, grassroots activism, and community leadership—has too often been dismissed as anecdotal rather than recognized as critical knowledge production (Leclerc and Roushahbaz 2021). This book challenges that exclusion.

WHO HAS KNOWLEDGE ON YOUTH-LED PEACEBUILDING?

In centering the work of young scholar-practitioners, this volume offers a resounding answer to the question: *whose knowledge has guided the implementation of the YPS agenda, and whose voices have shaped its trajectory?* Every author in this volume straddles and navigates both academic and practitioner spaces and their lived experiences of peacebuilding deeply inform their research and analysis. Collectively, their work contests the persistent hierarchies of knowledge production in peace and conflict studies, where the authority of ‘expertise’ has been defined predominantly by academic credentials rather than by lived experience. These chapters emerge from a plurality of methodologies—discourse analysis, digital ethnography, and participatory action research—each informed by practice. In doing so, the volume reclaims space for practitioners as knowledge producers within academic discourse.

This book also includes reflective commentaries from scholar-allies. These reflections position the chapters within the broader literature on peace and conflict, highlighting how practitioner-informed research disrupts, extends, and deepens academic discourse. By inviting established scholars to engage in this dialogue, we aim not only to validate

the expertise of practitioner-scholars but also to demonstrate how their work enriches and expands the boundaries of academic inquiry.

STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

The volume's structure reflects the breadth of youth peacebuilding efforts and the critical themes that emerge from their work. The first section, *Emerging Trends in Youth and Peacebuilding*, demonstrates young people's innovative approaches to peacebuilding within their communities and beyond. Lynrose Jane D. Genon's chapter explores the everyday digital peacebuilding of young women in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), Philippines, illustrating how social media become sites for intersectional feminist peace work. In Iran, Shadi Rouhshahbaz examines how young people engaged in feminist peacebuilding through digital and grassroots activism amidst State suppression. In Northwestern Cameroon, Sally M. Mboumien and Katrina Leclerc offer a discourse analysis of youth peacebuilding narratives to show how young people address radicalization and identify early warning signs of conflict. Turning to Eastern Europe, Daria Larionov and Valeriu Drăgălin analyze the involvement of Moldovan youth in peacebuilding initiatives and their responses to the Transnistrian conflict and regional instability. In reflecting on these chapters, Siobhán McEvoy-Levy contextualizes these emerging trends within broader academic discussions on digital activism, intersectional peacebuilding, and grassroots youth leadership.

The second section, *Youth and States—Challenges and Collaboration?*, explores the fraught relationships between youth and State structures, examining both conflict and collaboration. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Marie-Rose Tshite highlights how youth-led peacebuilding organizations address community-level violence and navigate challenges of advocacy in a protracted conflict zone. In Myanmar, Shayne Wong analyses youth resistance and peacebuilding following the military coup of 2021, emphasizing the urgent need for protection and prevention measures to safeguard young activists. In Nigeria, Stephanie E. Effevottu foregrounds youth leadership and agency in post-conflict peace processes. Drawing these themes together, Caitlin Mollica reflects on the complexities of State-youth engagement and the ways institutional peacebuilding frameworks can both support and undermine youth-led initiatives.