

*The United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) is a ground-breaking legal document that require nations to pay particular attention to the abilities, needs and agency of women in times of conflict and peace. This paper outlines the issues and programmes that apply a more nuanced understanding of UNSCR 1325 in programmes involving young women and girls.*

**UNSCR 1325** which was adopted in 2000, urged governments, international bodies and other relevant stakeholders to take specific action to facilitate women's involvement in peace processes and the rebuilding of government structures. The resolution also urged these bodies to actively work to prevent exploitation as well as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and to provide adequate security and justice for survivors of armed conflict. More than a decade later, only limited progress has been made. Along with an increase in the number of women's peace coalitions, a greater awareness and understanding of how conflict is experienced by each gender is gaining more attention. One area of concern is to determine how women and men are affected by conflict differently, and how they can contribute to its peaceful resolution. A number of new policy directives, toolkits, guide documents, technical experts and training resources now exist to help integrate a gender perspective into the work in this area as well as the appointment of women into key decision making roles.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these examples, progress is difficult to quantify.<sup>2</sup> A major pitfall of the document is that it addresses women and girls as a homogeneous group. Girls, adolescent women, middle-aged women and elderly women may share similar discrimination as females, but have different needs and abilities based on their life stages and their socio-economic class. A group that is frequently overlooked is adolescent women (teenagers).

# Girls in Fragile Context Join Peace Dialogue

by Jenny Becker



The Women's Commission notes that because adolescence is not a period experienced by most young women they are often an overlooked population.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, there is not enough effort to include them into the fold of the peace building process or in decision making roles.

Youth in general are often overlooked as decision makers and active participants in society. This is slowly changing. The global Year of Youth was concluded in August 2011. This initiative shows that multinational institutions such as the United Nations recognise the valuable perspectives and experiences that the youth can contribute to the growth and development of a country. This participation has to be meaningful.<sup>4</sup> The Year of Youth even involves a multilateral taskforce on adolescent girls,<sup>5</sup> yet the focus remains on boys because young men are seen as a potentially destabilising element, particularly when young people make up the majority of the population and men have particularly low levels of educational attainment. This discounts, firstly, the agency youth have in creating change in their society, and secondly, the power young women have to participate in that change.<sup>6</sup> Many projects targeted towards young people are still conceptualised with males in mind, and not particularly women or peace. The international women's fund Mama Cash conducted a study on European funders and found that overall, only 11 percent supported peace initiatives. There is less than 10 percent supporting activities and programs for women and girls, of which an average of 5.8 percent grant support to organisations supporting initiatives for women and girls. Most foundations that have a focus on women and girls place priorities on SGBV, initiatives for women in poverty and access to education.<sup>7</sup> Of the projects and programmes that are funded, there is a question on targeting and retention. Organisations are unsure of good practices to keep young girls involved or to ensure the inclusion of members of the most vulnerable groups. The Population Council found that overall, organisations were not reaching their target populations in youth programmes.<sup>8</sup>

UNSCR 1325 seeks to increase women's participation in all levels of decision making: active prevention of conflict, recognition of the

important peace building work women do and protection from sexual violence and exploitation. All of these three elements are interconnected and rely on balanced implementation to achieve the goals of UNSCR 1325. Yet, there is an overemphasis on programmes addressing sexual violence and exploitation. Young women have specific needs exacerbated by conflict such as early marriage, forced impregnation, abduction and lack of education, among others.<sup>9</sup> The strong focus on sexual and gender based violence and exploitation programming for young girls may have come from the reality that young women do not have control over their own bodies. Adolescent girls and young women lose their opportunity to grow as young adults and are often thrust into marriage and motherhood at a young age without gaining the decision making power of elders in their community.<sup>10</sup> The organisation Kvinna Till Kvinna (2007) argues that until young women have control over their bodies they will not have control over decision making. Therefore, all programmes must focus on giving girls a real agency, not just participation but real power. Projects designed in the spirit of UNSCR 1325 focus on the protection of young women based on the limited control they have over their bodies rather than addressing the core of the problem head on. It is important to recognise these threats, to recognise that young women have agency and understanding of their context, that they can play a role in shaping the provision of their security, and possibly, a unique

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perspective on how to reach other young people in peace building efforts.<sup>11</sup>

This focus is now being extended to other crucial concerns. Initiatives such as Plan International's "Because I Am A Girl" have highlighted not only the needs of girls and young women, but also their experience and their abilities to impart change. In 2008, the project specifically looked into the experience of girls in conflict affected contexts. Media awareness can change the way young people perceive gender roles but also change the community as a whole. Radio programmes, cartoons, comics, and TV shows contribute to popularise the profile of young people as agents for change and peace builders. Some even support young women as peacemakers. Search For Common Ground runs a radio programme in Rwanda that is produced, designed and implemented by young women.<sup>12</sup> Projects such as these see young women as project creators and implementers. These projects do not only increase their public profile but also equip them with life skills. Search for Common Ground also recognises the role that champions and mentors take in bringing and retaining young women in the programmes. A project called Big Sisters connected girls to adolescent role models in post-conflict Angola. It supports both groups in making community decisions and taking leadership roles. The programme also brings girls together to discuss gender issues and promote peaceful conflict resolution.<sup>13</sup> Groups that physically bring girls together provide the venue for rights education, and encourage girls to play active roles in their communities. Recognising that adolescent girls may also be young mothers means allowing for a child friendly programme settings and ensuring exclusive for female participation. Concerns about the mixing of gender and the cultural constructs that gender empowerment and equality is considered a purely "western" ideal.<sup>14</sup> While gender segregated activities is a good way to get more girls to participate, something must be done to change the perception that gender mingling is negative. Greater understanding and respect can only be built if women and men, including boys and girls, are regarded as equals and responsible for their own actions. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, UNICEF brought 1,500

youth together, half of them are girls. Sixty schools participated and the age range was 18 to 23. Girls were given leadership roles and many commented that it was the first time that someone had entrusted them with an important task. They have been empowered and want to continue working with their peers.<sup>15</sup> Bringing youth together, so that boys and girls interact with each other from a young age is important to combat gender stereotypes.

Access to technology plays a key role in empowering women. The cellphone in particular, is an important tool to connect girls together. It can provide services such as banking and financial aid, serve as information channel for things of interest to young women, and may be used as an early warning device or notification systems in precarious situations. Systems like Hollaback and Harrasmap provide these services, even publicly putting to shame individuals who sexually harass or assault women. These tools are effective methods of empowering young women to actively stand-up against sexual violence in their communities.<sup>16</sup> Greater access to computers using websites such as the Si Jeunesse Savait project in the DRC and Take Back the Tech, along with more mainstream social media such as Facebook and Twitter provide wider venue





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for young women to act and connect with other young people in their own countries as well as globally.<sup>17</sup> Still, the internet café can be a very male dominated location where young women are not always permitted to go. These places may also be discomforting for women.<sup>18</sup> Creating women's sections in cafés, women only cafés or setting-up of women centres and child friendly online spaces can help increase internet use among women.

Young women still face a number of barriers in their integration to the public sphere, including low levels of education and lack of opportunities for employment. A UNAIDS study this year reported that forty percent of the unemployed are youth and young women from developing areas

who have harder time finding employment than young men. Correspondingly, a pitfall of UNSCR 1325 is that it does not recognise the economic barriers that women face, and how these can impede their civic engagement and involvement in peacemaking. Girls face even greater barriers with less prospects and support in finding formal employment, as well as limited decision making power because families worry about the security and marriageability of their daughters if they work outside the home. Kishori Abhijan, a livelihood programme for adolescent girls run by BRAC in Bangladesh rely on programme employees to encourage fathers' to let their daughters attend training programmes. Yet when parents see that their daughters can travel without any problems, they are more likely to allow them to continue to attend the programme's activities.<sup>19</sup> Some industries only have a brief window of opportunity for recruitment such as the security sector which recruits youth in their late teens and early twenties. These are prime childbearing years where young women may not be able to separate from their family or delay marriage or childbirth in order to enter police service or other security institutions.<sup>20</sup> This has a direct bearing on the aim of UNSCR1325 to include more women in the security sector. Governments need to address these barriers but women must bring such concerns to their attention. Empowerment through associations that motivate young women to have a voice makes women's participation in the security sector possible.

The inclusion of adolescent girls in decision and peacemaking could have an overall positive effect on their society. Barakat and Urdal (2009) state that studies on educational attainment, high youth population and conflict, has focused solely on men. However one will likely find a greater causal link between the educational attainment of both men and women and the reduction of violent conflict. Greater empowerment of young women generates a spiralling effect that improves a number of different social systems in addition to peace and security. HIV/AIDS is one area in particular where the empowerment and confidence building of young women address issues like early marriage, forced sexual encounters, use of sexual protection methods and the confidence to demand

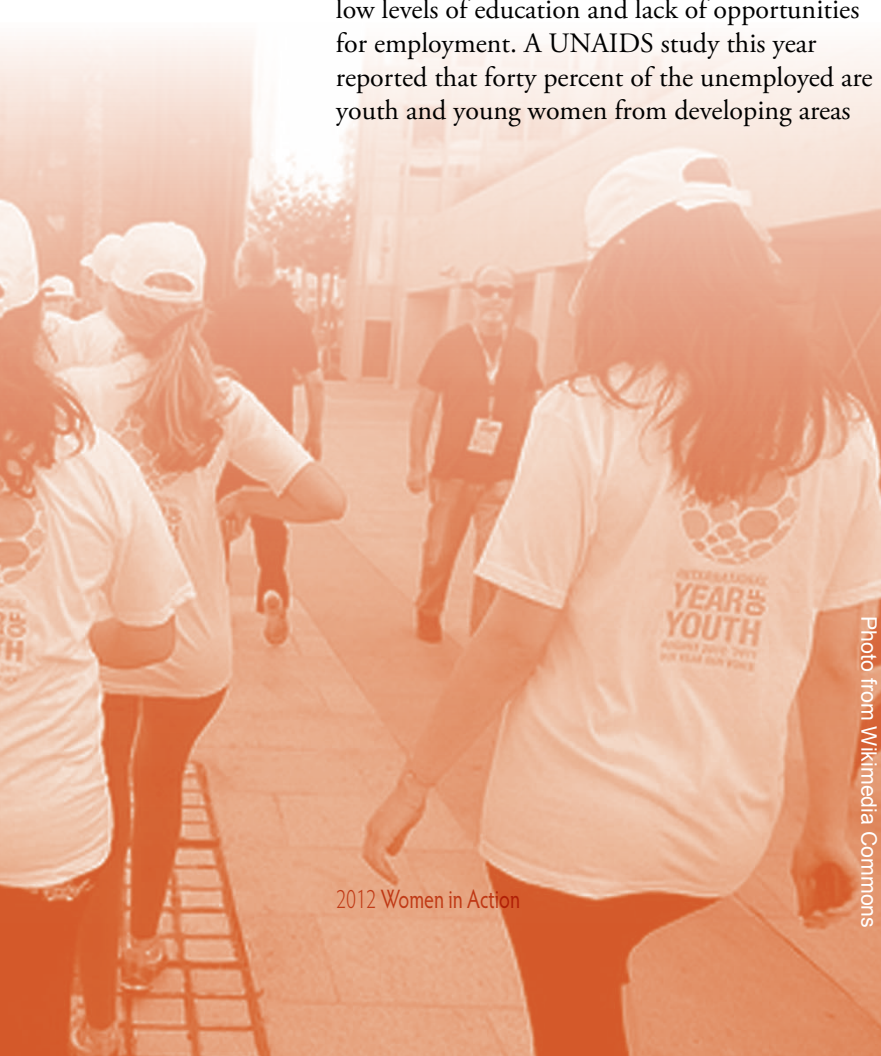


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**Yet, mixed gender dialogues and programmes should also be created** to break gender stereotypes and build tolerance and equality. It is important to actively engage the community as a whole through meetings with parents, public awareness and education in order to breakdown community barriers in engaging active participation of young girls.

these. Globally, women account for 60 percent of all HIV/AIDS cases, 72 percent of which are in sub-Saharan Africa. Greater independence and confidence of women could reduce the number of people infected and living with HIV/AIDS.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, including adolescent girls in the design and tapping them as programme implementers could increase the number of girls reached.<sup>22</sup> UN estimates that on the average, 16 million adolescent women give birth each year.<sup>23</sup> It has been shown that women with greater knowledge of their reproductive health, sex education and rights, are more likely to have handy information that could thwart unwanted sexual advances. They are also more predisposed to practice safe sexual choices and report sexual and gender based violence.<sup>24</sup> An emphasis of programmes on sex and reproductive health education and awareness of rights could prevent the incidence of sexually transmitted illnesses. It also provides knowledge and information on how young women can take back control of their bodies.<sup>25</sup> Finally, it is estimated by the UN that an average of 16 million girls give birth each year.<sup>26</sup> Young women who have been empowered as peace and decision makers in their communities have gained the confidence to demand more for their children, to equip future generations with the same confidence, and to engage in peaceful mechanisms in resolving conflict instead of resorting to violence.

What can be deduced from all this information and how can it impact on future policies and programmes created to further the goals of

UNSCR 1325? We can take a positive view of the fact that there is a growing recognition that adolescent girls and young women are left out of programming globally, and are affected by conflict differently than others. Another recognition is that they have valuable contribution to the peace building and state building process. This means, allowing them meaningful participation and empowering them in the process of community peace building and development, can lead to a number of positive effects on the health, education and status of women in particular. However, there is a lot more that needs to be done. Adolescent women need to be viewed by policymakers not just as victims in need of protection, but as important decision makers who can participate in community decision making and peace building. Projects and programmes should be participatory in nature so that young women can have a free hand in realising initiatives and gaining leadership and other life skills. Women only spaces, as well as adolescent women only spaces must be created so that young women can safely congregate, learn, advocate and grow as a critical mass.

Yet, mixed gender dialogues and programmes should also be created to break gender stereotypes and build tolerance and equality. It is important to actively engage the community as a whole through meetings with parents, public awareness and education in order to breakdown community barriers in engaging active participation of young girls. Governments and organisations that implement projects for the youth should assess who are actually taking part in programmes and ensure that projects reach its target groups, including the most vulnerable.<sup>27</sup> Finally, governments at all levels and international institutions need to provide more support for programmes and projects that focus and actively involve young women in decision making and peace building. Starting young and maintaining the involvement of young women through their adolescence is important. Retaining them in projects and programmes needs to be further explored. How can women be expected to believe in themselves and take on challenges within their communities if they are not socialised from a young age into believing that they have the right to choose their own path and take leadership positions. ■

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## About the Author

Jenny Becker is a Canadian researcher with The North-South Institute's Fragile and Conflict Affected States team. She has field experience working with humanitarian assistance organisations and government agencies in developing the conflict-affected areas in West Africa and the Middle East. She has a background in youth peace-building programming. She has also worked in the fields of protection, emergency education, gender-based violence prevention and survivor assistance. She holds a graduate degree from the University of Manchester's Institute for Development Policy and Management (International Development) and a bachelor's degree from McGill University (International Development; Economics).