

DEDEKEN

Essay Contest: Enhancing the role of women in peace and security  
Leiden University

**At one's mother's (or father's) knee:**  
Strengthening the agency of local women in peace and  
security

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*“That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”*

- *Preamble UNESCO Constitution*

### Executive summary

Peace begins at home. This paper argues that in order to strengthen peacebuilding, and in particular conflict prevention, peace education programmes for caregivers that teach about and promote peace at home are crucial. These initiatives would both empower local women, in particular mothers, as well as contribute to sustainable peaceful societies. Furthermore, this paper highlights the importance of also including men in these initiatives, in order to prevent further stereotyping of men and women as well as refrain from inadvertently putting an additional burden on women.

### Introduction

The goal of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is twofold: (1) promoting peace, as well as (2) protecting and empowering women. However, when we look at the common WPS discourse, we can detect a strong focus on meaningful participation in conflict resolution and negotiations, as well as on the protection of women since they are disproportionately affected by conflict and war. While the WPS agenda builds on the argument that including women is necessary for sustainable and lasting peace, the focus of the agenda tends to be around political and economic empowerment while neglecting the aspect of conflict prevention and the addressing of root causes and structural problems that underlie the conflict and/or violence.

This paper aims to reconnect with the two essential goals of the WPS agenda by putting forward recommendations that empower local women as well as contribute to peacebuilding, in particular conflict prevention, and to creating sustainable peace. Arguing that peace begins at home, this paper highlights the importance of peace education, both for children and their parents. Acknowledging the significant impact of a child’s immediate environment during early childhood development, as well as the unique position that mothers have long after that, this paper proposes to empower local women, and in particular mothers or other female caretakers, through educational programmes. Tailored to the context and nature of the conflict or security threats in particular countries, these programmes can empower women in contributing to sustainable peace through a role they have taken on long before: caregiver.

However, this paper also highlights that these educational programmes should not be limited to the empowerment of local women or mothers, but should aim to include men as much as possible in order to prevent further stereotyping of women and men and refrain from inadvertently putting an additional burden on women. Moreover, prior to the implementation of these programmes a risk assessment and protection schemes would be necessary in order to protect women and caretakers during this process.

### UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) marked a milestone in the fight for tackling gender blindness in peace and security as well as empowering women in their role as peacebuilders by creating the foundation for what we now know as the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Prior to this landmark resolution, women were merely portrayed as victims of war, but after UNSCR 1325 and the eight resolutions that followed, women are increasingly seen

as agents of change and peace. Today the WPS agenda focuses on: (1) women's meaningful participation in peace processes and negotiation, (2) protection of women, acknowledging they are disproportionately affected by conflict and war, and; (3) the need for a gender mainstreaming in peace and security. Following UNSCR 1325, individual countries were encouraged to develop their own National Action Plans (NAPs) with a view to implementing the resolution in their national policies and foreign policies. As of April 2019, 79 countries have developed a NAP and 7 organisations have adopted a Regional Action Plan (RAP)<sup>1</sup>. The Netherlands introduced their first NAP in 2007, and is currently nearing the end of their third NAP covering the period of 2016 - 2019. This policy paper will focus mainly on the third specific goal as set out in the latest NAP for, namely "Ensure that women have equal leverage in conflict prevention and resolution, peacebuilding, relief and recovery at all levels, and that their efforts are acknowledged and supported" and will to a smaller extent touch upon goal two, to "subvert harmful underlying gender norms, which are obstacles to sustainable peace."<sup>2</sup>

### Peace begins at home

The WPS agenda characterises women as key to sustainable peace, yet its resolutions and associated NAPs maintain an unbalanced focus on increasing meaningful participation in decision-making and negotiations as well as protecting women from violence, while neglecting other potential forms of empowerment as well as other threats and root causes of violence. Aspiring to empower local women to the fullest as well as keeping in mind the important end goal of sustainable peace, this paper aims to put forward proposals that perpetuate both. The following part will therefore focus on these two matters: building towards sustainable peace and the role of women in achieving this.

Studies across disciplines, including psychology, neuroscience, and IR, have highlighted the importance and impact of early childhood development. In the context of peace and security, scholars have researched the effects of early childhood development on people's characteristics and values concerning peace and conflict in later life. Studies have explored the attitude of children towards "others" perceived as "different" from them, as well as their coping mechanisms and conflict resolution strategies when disputes arise with others.<sup>3</sup> More research has focused on the way children perceive "peace" and "war", uncovering that while the teachings and understanding of war amongst children is developed, there is a lack of understanding of the concept of peace among children.<sup>4</sup> While there is still a lack of empirical evidence on the role of caregivers in teaching about peace, research has shown ample evidence of that a child's environment as well as his/her caregivers have a large impact on their perception and understanding of conflict and war. Consequently, in communities where conflict and violence are rampant, peace education could have a large impact on the next generation and in turn the future of these communities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Peace Women Member States. Retrieved From: <https://www.peacewomen.org/member-states>

<sup>2</sup> Peace Women The Netherlands. Retrieved from: [http://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Dutch\\_NAP\\_2016-2019.pdf](http://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Dutch_NAP_2016-2019.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Schwebel, M. (2001). Promoting the culture of peace in children. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 7(1), 1-3.; Leckman, J. F., Panter-Brick, C., & Salah, R. (Eds.). (2014). *Pathways to peace: The transformative power of children and families* (Vol. 15). MIT Press.

<sup>4</sup> Schwebel, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Leckman et al., 2014

According to UNICEF, peace education can be defined as “the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behaviour changes that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level.”<sup>6</sup> Peace education thus has the potential to transform not only the understanding of peace and conflict of one individual child, but also impact the larger community and future disputes since the new generation will be engaged in the promotion of peace and tolerance, rather than engaging in discrimination and hardship.

The impact of peace education is also underpinned by various interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, and scholars of peacebuilding have put forward the key pillars that need to be taught in peace education in order for it to contribute to sustainable peace. While every programme should be tailored to the context and nature of the local conflict or violence, these principles should serve as the framework for each peace program. These principles include: “Conflict is an integral part of human life; Conflicts can be resolved in nonviolent ways; cooperation is more effective and less costly than avoidance, competition, or accommodation in resolving conflicts; addressing the root causes of a conflict is a necessary step in resolving it; conflict resolution processes should address the asymmetric power relations among parties; conflict resolution can bring about structural social and political changes; safe spaces for dialogical learning must be generated when conflict resolution models are implemented.”<sup>7</sup>

Mothers and other caregivers are the first teachers of life, before any formal education (if this is even applicable). Once formal education has begun, mothers remain in a unique position in relation to their children and are part of the immediate environment that influences their human development. Women have been encouraged and supported in their political and economic empowerment, aiming to get them not only a seat at the table but also a voice. However, this approach runs the risk of forcefully empowering women into a position that may be contrary to their vision of empowerment. Therefore, this paper puts forward the peace education scheme to empower women in a role that is natural to many women, namely motherhood, in order to include groups of women that may have been left behind in previous strategies. However, this paper also acknowledges that not all women are mothers, and that not all caregivers are women. Therefore, the peace education strategy is not restricted to women or mothers, but seeks to include men and other caregivers in the change towards sustainable peace.

Finally, this part will give some examples to show that while resting on key pillars, the peace education programmes can be tailored to the context and the nature of the conflict or security threats of the country. Taking the example of one of the focus countries as named in the Dutch NAP, a peace education programme in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) could take the following form. The Universal Periodic Review of the DRC in early May this year has pointed inter alia to these continuing issues: children are being accused of witchcraft and subsequently cast out from society and left alone on the streets; children are recruited and sold as child soldiers; and violent conflict between different groups within DRC remain. A potential

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<sup>6</sup> Peace Education in UNICEF, retrieved from:  
<https://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/files/PeaceEducationUNICEF.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Leckman et al., 2014

educational programme for women (and men) could address all these issues by putting a strong focus on tolerance, harmony, and countering discrimination. While the main principles of peacebuilding will be crucial in order to promote a culture of peace, it will also be important to teach the community about the consequences of accusations of witchcraft and the impact of child soldiers in their later life. On the other hand, peace education programmes could also be beneficial within the Netherlands itself. Here, programmes could for example focus on teaching parents on how to spot early signs of radicalisation, and how to handle extremist views in children. Initiatives like these have been utilised in other countries, for example the Mother Schools of Women Without Borders.<sup>8</sup>

#### Conclusion and recommendations

Aiming for a more holistic approach towards peacebuilding, and in particular conflict prevention, this paper puts a strong emphasis on the sustainability and durability of peace and the role that local women can play in this. Empowering local women (and men) in their own home could have transformative impacts on the understanding of peace and conflict of individuals as well as the community as a whole, directing the next generation towards a culture of peace. Therefore, this paper proposes the following recommendations:

1. Launch a “Peace begins at home” campaign, raising awareness of the impact that the immediate environment of children has, especially during early childhood.
2. Conduct more research on the context and nature of the conflict and/or security threats in the countries (the Netherlands and its focus countries)
3. Launch peace education programmes appropriate and tailored to the needs of the particular country, focusing on the role of women, and caretakers in general.
4. These programmes can include:
  - a. Early childhood development programmes teaching values of peace and harmony as well as conflict resolution and peacebuilding skills, in order to counter the environment of conflict and violence outside the home;
  - b. Education on how to spot early signs of radicalisation and how to tackle them, in order to prevent violent extremism;
  - c. Other programmes that work towards a culture of peace.
5. Engage men, and in particular fathers, or other male caregivers in these same programmes in order to refrain from further stereotyping women and men and not place extra enforced burden on women.
6. Research the dangers, and subsequently ensure the safety, of women and men partaking in these educational programmes, acknowledging the risks that come with the role of being promoters of peace.

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<sup>8</sup> Women Without Borders. Retrieved from: <https://www.women-without-borders.org>