

**United Nations General Assembly Side Event on the Gender Dimensions of Youth and Armed
Conflict
Ten-Year Review of the World Program of Action for Youth
UN, New York, 5 October 2005
Hilary Jeune**

Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen. Today I wish to present to you three examples of how young people affected by violence have been able to change the situations that affect their lives. They have been able to understand the problems that either they face or that of their peers and through this become effective agents of change. Here, I would like to emphasize the great untapped potential and power of youth. I will focus on three initiatives, from Colombia, West Africa and the Middle East. I would also like to introduce to you the organisation United Network of Young Peacebuilders which trains and promotes youth as peace-builders and has been building a network across the globe since 1989.

My first example is of a youth working in a violent conflict zone, Colombia. **Jesualdo** works for an association called 'Concultura Ciudadana' visiting secondary schools to do conflict resolution workshops and peace education through camps and other non-formal education activities. They also do technical trainings such as carpentry and brick-laying for school leavers. The aim of this project is to delay the youth, mainly young boys, becoming involved in the conflict. This is because in Colombia, young boys are offered jobs in either the guerillas or the paramilitars and when they are 18 can join the army. These forces pay much better than many 'legal' jobs. The trainings provide young boys with choices of other employment opportunities. Jesualdo is also part of a pool of lawyers that voluntarily offer their services for mediation in difficult situations involving youth and either the guerilla movement or the government army. For example he mediated to get food and medicine to villages that were controlled by the guerillas. This example shows youth are working in very violent areas; they cannot stop the violence but are helping to postpone youth's involvement, especially young boys in the conflict. At the same time the project starts to deal with the structural causes of violence; extreme inequality and poverty.

Mohamed from Guinea, Salamatu from Sierra Leone and Arthur from Liberia all front **The Mano River Youth Parliament**. They are part of a group of youth from the Mano River Basin who have come together to promote peace in spite of many years of civil strife. They are trying to mend the broken relationships and create an atmosphere of co-existence in the basin. The initiative was a direct reaction to the marginalized position of youth; they felt that they have hardly been involved in the peace building process in their countries and are not considered as positive actors nor are they included in decision making institutions. The aim of the parliament is to empower youth's capacities; network to overcome their isolation and; to improve their effectiveness of their projects. As part of this parliament they organized the Mano River Union Peace Caravan. Young women and men, three different cultures, two different national languages, many different social and religious backgrounds came together on a single journey. For a week, 40 youth traveled on a bus throughout the region. The youth spread flyers with peace messages, talked to people who gathered around the bus, attracted the youth to the workshops on conflict transformation using drums and planted peace trees in the villages they passed. This example shows the positive actions of young people in a post-conflict region. That youth, themselves have taken the initiative to bridge the gap of culture, religion and gender to work together to build peace.

When more and more women are being obliged to join the Israeli army, **Gal** became a peacebuilder. She was director and now on the board member of an Israeli-Palestinian Youth organisation called Reut-Sadaka, which means friendship in Hebrew and Arabic. Their activities include inter-cultural learning, workshops and camps with each side together and always co-facilitated and bilingual. Their most successful activity was the 'sleep over' project. Parents gave permission for their children to sleep over in the house of a friend from the 'other side'. Gal explained to us that the gender dynamics have been very challenging within this organisation, and along with cultural differences, has caused a lot of difficulties. This is because most of the volunteers have been young Israeli women, as most men were doing their military service or simply not as interested, and young Palestinian men. She explained that the volunteers tend to act in blocks with different types of political awareness and differences in motivation for working in the organisation. For the Israelis, most have refused to join the army, so their motivation is to work for peace and also there are little alternative jobs, as Gal explained 'it is very hard, as few hire you in Israel if

you don't go into the army'. For Palestinians, they too are unemployed, so it is a job opportunity, and a political statement. The one very strong thing they have in common is that they want peace. The process is not only to facilitate dialogue among the groups that they represent but build consensus within the team. Their biggest challenge has been not to fall into the traps of what they are criticising in terms of cultural and gender barriers.

The United Network of Young Peacebuilders was established in 1989 by a group of concerned young people from around the world as an International Youth NGO with an aim of 'empowering youth to become agents of positive change'. Our goal is to empower young people's local capacities for peace and increase their effectiveness through

- Organising peace conferences and training seminars in the fields of peace-building, conflict transformation and reconciliation;
- Developing global and regional networks of young peace-builders to share experiences, skills and create friendships;
- Advocate for stronger and more meaningful partnership of young individuals and youth organisations with the United Nations system;
- Campaigning for the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence.

To prevent violence, it is essential to involve and to educate youth in non-violent, multi-cultural dialogue and understanding. Involving youth in these ways will encourage respect, and is also a necessary step in facilitating the transformation of conflicts. I have given you a few examples of youth from our network to show that they are a positive force in building peace. They have turned their experiences of conflict, violence, hate and anger into positive actions. They show us that they can create hope out of their experiences and that in spite of being victims of violent conflicts, they can help themselves and others not to become victims in future conflicts.

There are many challenges to develop this youth activism. Youth need support. There are still a lot of questions; how can and do youth want to be included and empowered? How can they develop their potential? How can they coordinate and sustain their ideas and activities for positive change?

Youth are not just the future; they are the here and now. Recognizing their positive role in creating a better world will give youth inspiration to involve themselves in peace building activities. As Johan Galtung, one of the developers of the Transcend Conflict Transformation Approach, mentioned in one of his recent lectures 'Young people are searching for new ideas and open to new challenges while adults have already formed their dogmatic discourses. In peace-building processes, young people should meet, and even better, young women should meet'

Thank You!