

PEACEWORKS



Precarity and Power REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN AND YOUTH IN NONVIOLENT ACTION

By Jonathan Pinckney and Miranda Rivers



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

NO. 178 | SEPTEMBER 2021

PEACEWORKS

NO. 178 | SEPTEMBER 2021



**MEDIATION,
NEGOTIATION
& DIALOGUE**

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines trends in the impact of women and youth on nonviolent action campaigns, common barriers to their participation, and the long-term political outcomes of that participation. Based on research by frontline activists in Armenia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Venezuela, it was funded through an interagency agreement between the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance at the United States Agency for International Development.

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Cover photo: Students block a road in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on August 2, 2018, while protesting the death of two college students in a bus accident. Bangladeshi students have been active in demonstrations ranging from road safety to women's rights. (Photo by A. M. Ahad/AP)

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Peaceworks No. 178. First published 2021.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-874-6



UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE PRESS



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Summary



Women and youth have played crucial roles at the forefront of nonviolent action campaigns for peace, democracy, and social justice. The mobilization of both groups is frequently decisive in the success of a movement. Yet the common barriers to their participation, as well as the related impacts and long-term outcomes of their participation across contexts, remain poorly understood. How do women and youth activists themselves experience such barriers, impacts, and outcomes?

A series of case studies commissioned from seven frontline female and youth activists in Armenia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Venezuela provides a diversity of contexts and perspectives on these questions. The activists' reflections revealed several common patterns in the general experiences of women and youth across contexts. Major barriers included disproportionate state violence (particularly toward women), cultural norms against active political participation by women and youth, and economic precarity. Women and youth were nonetheless typically at the forefront of movements even when their participation came at high personal and social cost.

Women and youth participation had numerous positive impacts—in particular, increased tactical creativity and commitment to continuing activism even in the face of significant challenges, greater nonviolent discipline when threatened by violent provocation (especially for women), and a greater ability to mobilize across political or identity-based divides. This combination of factors made movements with significant female or youth participation particularly potent in mobilizing activists and achieving short-term goals. Yet long-term outcomes were mixed. In some cases, the participation led to greater social and political empowerment. In most, movements struggled to turn short-term mobilization into long-term change.



Demonstrators protesting the military coup present roses to police in Yangon, Myanmar, on February 6, 2021. Despite the danger, women have been at the forefront of the protest movement, rebuking the military coup and generals who ousted a female civilian leader. (Photo by New York Times)

Introduction

In 2019, at the height of anti-government protests against Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, audiences around the world were captivated by footage of a young Sudanese woman, Alaa Salah, leading thousands of chanting demonstrators from the top of a car.¹ The image was made all the more powerful by the knowledge of the country's repressive political environment and the particularly poor political and material conditions for women and young people. Maternal mortality rates in Sudan are more than twenty times higher than the average in the developed world and youth unemployment is over 30 percent.² That even in a society with such barriers to effective political and economic participation a young woman would risk standing up to a brutal dictator in such a public way was compelling.

Nor is Alaa Salah, who became a symbol of the successful Sudanese revolution, an isolated case. In the spring of

2021 in Myanmar, as hundreds of thousands took to the streets to condemn a military coup, young women were on the front lines, leading demonstrations, organizing strikes, and demanding the end of the illegal seizure of power.³ In Bangladesh, young women filled the streets to demand an end to a culture of impunity around rape and sexual violence.⁴ In Nigeria, a group of young women formed a "feminist coalition" that organized and collected money for protests against police brutality by the country's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS).⁵

These stories are evidence of a deeper global trend with powerful implications. Women are often on the front lines of major nonviolent action campaigns.⁶ Students and youth are often the crucial backbone of these movements.⁷ Yet across many contexts, significant social, cultural, and economic barriers can prevent both women and youth from participating in nonviolent action

effectively. These patterns prompt related questions: What barriers tend to prevent women's and youth's participation in nonviolent action?⁸ What impacts does their participation have on movement dynamics? What are the long-term outcomes of their participation?

This report attempts to answer these questions by drawing on a growing literature and a series of reflective case studies of frontline activists across seven widely different contexts. These activists are at the forefront of progressive change in their countries, advocating for gender equality, against political violence, or for education or other reforms. They have led protests in the streets, arranged legal advocacy campaigns, and run for political office.

Among the most significant barriers activists face are state violence, economic and social precarity, and prejudice against women and youth. Despite these barriers, however, across the case study contexts both women and youth have played a central role in mobilizing almost all recent social movements and are frequently on the front lines of nonviolent action.

As to impacts, activists in almost all the case studies reported that when women and youth did participate, events tended to have less violence, to endure longer, and to mobilize across ideological or partisan divides, overcoming political or identity-based polarization that stymied other movements. These factors helped movements with a widespread participation of women and youth achieve their goals more frequently.

In regard to long-term outcomes, participation in nonviolent action on occasion proved an avenue for women and youth—who had been previously excluded from institutional power—to gain the respect and influence necessary for longer-term sustainable advocacy. These cases were an exception, however. In general, women and youth struggled to turn concessions gained on the streets into long-term meaningful political transformation. The most common long-term attitudes were either disillusionment or, at best, cautious optimism.

Popular discussions of activism by women and youth often downplay the complexity of both groups, treating their experiences and impact as interchangeable. Yet women and youth contribute to nonviolent action in distinct ways. Neither are these groups homogeneous. Women make up roughly half the world's population. Youth, depending on a country's demographic structure and the contextual definition of youth, are often the largest demographic category. Identifying meaningful trends across such diversity and complexity is a difficult task, and one constantly in danger of oversimplification.

The diversity and heterogeneity of youth and women's movements and their participation in nonviolent action campaigns underscore the importance of analyzing them with a complex and intersectional lens. The youth and women who participate may have shared interests and draw on shared identities even as they face different forms of oppression and injustice based on the particular dimensions of their identities.⁹ This report acknowledges the varying experiences of youth and women, even among those who may be participating in the same movements. It recognizes that the youth category often lacks detail on gender and that the women category often lacks detail on age.

When appropriate, this analysis highlights the differences and distinctions across contexts and between the experiences of women and youth. Yet the activists whose experiences and reflections underlie this report repeatedly emphasized several threads of commonality, the roots of which were most frequent in the shared experience of exclusion from the main avenues of access to power and influence in society, despite their being a majority or near-majority of the population. Denied such access, both women and youth have frequently turned to nonviolent action to challenge existing power structures and change the status quo. Although many other identity groups are excluded from power and influence across the societies considered here and also engage in nonviolent struggle, they typically make up much smaller proportions of the population.

Table 1. Case Study Countries

	Women's Empowerment ^a	Youth Population Percentage ^b	GDP per Capita ^c
Armenia	High ▲	26.3%	\$4,622.70
Bangladesh	Very low ▼	36.7%	\$1,855.70
Ethiopia	Low ▼	42.0%	\$855.80
Kenya	Low ▼	41.5%	\$1,816.50
Myanmar	Low ▼	35.1%	\$1,407.80
Nigeria	Low ▼	39.2%	\$2,229.90
Venezuela	Average ◆	32.7%	\$16,054.50

- a. Level of women's empowerment is drawn from the Variety of Democracy project's Women's Empowerment Index, which is a continuous variable from 0 to 1. Countries with a score of more than 1 standard deviation above average in the most recent year available (2019) coded as high, of less than 1 coded as average, of less than 1 below average coded as low, and of more than 1 below average coded as very low.
- b. Youth population is the percentage of residents between ten and twenty-nine years old, according to the 2019 UN World Population Prospects report (<https://population.un.org/wpp>) and the 2012 USAID report "Youth in Development: Realizing the Demographic Opportunity" (www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/Youth_in_Development_Policy_0.pdf).
- c. Numbers are drawn from 2019 World Bank data and expressed in current dollars.

Several important lessons are to be learned in looking at the shared experiences of women and youth as majority or near-majority social groups excluded from power who have turned to nonviolent action to address the imbalance and achieve their goals.

CASE STUDY COUNTRIES

The seven case study countries for this research were Armenia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Venezuela. Countries were selected in a competitive application process in late 2020 and early 2021 in which activists completed a short questionnaire describing their past and current activism, particularly as participants or leaders of women or youth movements. The selection process was designed to identify activists with significant frontline experience in nonviolent action, or with deep personal and professional networks among activists in their countries. Selections were based on the quality of applications, supplemented by outreach to a

few additional potential case study authors. The goal was to have a complex and diverse set of country contexts with significant participation of women and youth in nonviolent action to identify trends that were greater than a specific country or region.¹⁰ (See table 1 for select data on the seven countries.)

Each activist selected to write the case study was then given three guiding questions to direct their writing: How much do women and youth participate in nonviolent action in your country? What are the main barriers to their participation? What are the short-term impacts and long-term outcomes of their participation? The activists were also given a wide degree of latitude to interpret the questions as most appropriate to their country context and personal history. All case studies focused on the authors' reflections based on their experience and, in some cases, discussion with a few additional activists in their networks.

The one limitation in scope of this report is that developed, liberal democracies such as Japan or Sweden were deliberately excluded.¹¹ The goal was to focus on nonviolent action by women and youth in contexts of greater political fragility and governance challenges. The report, rather than describing each case study in-depth, weaves lessons learned from all seven together thematically.

Yet to ensure that these lessons can be understood in the appropriate context, brief descriptions of the recent major movements in each of the case study countries follow.

In Armenia, a government crackdown on peaceful pro-democracy protests in 2008 sparked a decade-long, youth-led mobilization on a wide variety of issues. Peaks came in 2012, with the movement to save Mashtots Park in downtown Yerevan, and 2015, with the Electric Yerevan protests against electricity price hikes. In 2018, an attempt to seize greater power by long-time authoritarian ruler Serzh Sargsyan resulted in the mass protests of the so-called Velvet Revolution, which overthrew Sargsyan and brought activist opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan to power.¹² In the years since, Pashinyan's government has made democratic reforms and anti-corruption work a priority and brought many of the youth activists who participated in the revolution into government. Yet a 2020 armed conflict with Azerbaijan over the long-contested Nagorno Karabakh region and a peace settlement that many asserted was antithetical to Armenia's interests have threatened Pashinyan's government and put many of the gains of the 2018 revolution at risk.

In Bangladesh, the two major political parties that led the way to the country's initial democratic breakthrough in 1990—the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party—dominate the highly polarized political landscape and direct much of the mobilization on the streets through their partisan organizations.¹³ Yet, in recent years, new mobilization by leftist and nonpartisan youth groups has led to a revitalized youth activism

space and major recent campaigns against taxation of higher education demanding greater government accountability and calling for an end to sexual violence against young women.

In Ethiopia, protests sparked by Oromo students in 2015 against government land seizures led to a years-long movement demanding political reform, the so-called Qeerroo movement. The movement achieved a breakthrough in 2018 with the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and the election of nominally reformist Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. However, the government's delay of the 2020 parliamentary elections and the outbreak of armed conflict between the government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front in early 2021 led to a humanitarian crisis, raised questions about the depth of the reforms, and put the country in danger of a return to authoritarianism.

Although Kenya has seen significant economic and political reform since the one-party rule that characterized the early decades after independence in 1963, major gaps in the rule of law continue, particularly for women. Political corruption remains endemic.¹⁴ Recent years have seen a significant increase in grassroots activism, inspired by long-time activists such as Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai, whose Green Belt Movement in the 1980s advocated for greater environmental protections, sustainable development, and democratic rights and freedoms. Movements have focused on demanding free and fair elections, ending sexual violence, improving governance, and a variety of other issues related to social and economic justice.

In Myanmar, the country's military-led dictatorship ceded power to the main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), which came to power in 2015 through landslide election wins. The years that followed saw a back-and-forth struggle between the NLD and the military as well as attempts to resolve many of the country's ethnic conflicts. An attempted

genocide against the Rohingya minority group led to accusations that the government's commitment to democratic ideals was shallow. In February 2021, the Myanmar military staged a coup d'état, arresting the civilian leaders of the government over unsubstantiated accusations of fraud in 2020 elections that had led to increased NLD majorities in parliament. The coup sparked a massive, nationwide civil disobedience movement demanding the end of the coup and return to power of the civilian government. Youth, particularly young women, have been at the forefront of this movement.¹⁵ Although the movement has been met with brutal repression by the Myanmar military, as of this writing it is ongoing.

In Nigeria, despite a transition to democracy in the late 1990s, political corruption and an Islamist insurgency by the Boko Haram group remain major challenges. Building on a long tradition of women and youth activism, recent years have seen several major campaigns, including a few that received widespread international attention. In 2014, the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok by Boko Haram led to a mass campaign using the slogan #BringBackOurGirls to demand

the government do more to bring the girls back home. In 2020, new revelations of police brutality revitalized a campaign to disband the Nigerian government's Special Anti-Robbery Squad, notorious for extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary arrests, among other abuses.¹⁶ When the movement was met with brutal repression, demands expanded for greater government accountability across a wide range of issues.

In Venezuela, an opposition-led protest movement began in 2014 soon after the rise to power of President Nicolás Maduro. The movement peaked in 2019 with the proclamation by opposition leader and National Assembly president Juan Guaidó that, in response to accusations that Maduro had been reelected on the basis of fraud, he was assuming the presidency. The move by Guaidó received the backing of dozens of foreign governments, including the United States and France. Opposition parties and a vast civil society alliance joined forces in nonviolent action, primarily mass street protests, to attempt to push Maduro from power. These failed, however. In 2020, in contested elections that the opposition condemned as unfair, the Maduro regime reclaimed control of the National Assembly.

Women and Youth: The Research

Research on both women and youth in nonviolent action is considerable. To date, however, much of that on women has focused on their mobilization and the gendered outcomes of their participation, while that on youth has focused on their motivations and the impacts they have had. Significant questions thus remain about the broader barriers, impacts, and long-term outcomes of their participation.

WOMEN

Scholars have sought to better understand women's movements, the mobilization of women in different political, social, and economic settings, and the gendered outcomes resulting from women's participation in nonviolent action. As women engage in nonviolent action, they draw on their identities not only as women but also as workers, mothers, wives, citizens, or members of racial and ethnic groups. Women have participated in movements around the world to end wars, oust dictators, challenge colonial rule, and expand women's rights.¹⁷

Women frequently participate in movements against authoritarianism while making space to express their desires for equality and respect as women. Women activists during the 2010–11 Tunisian revolution, protesting under the slogan No Democracy Without Equality, mobilized to end the dictatorship of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and make demands related to their rights and social status.¹⁸ In Egypt's 2011 revolution, female protester demands aimed to bring about "justice and freedom for all Egyptians" rather than focusing solely on women's liberation.¹⁹ In the Philippines, feminist groups brought their existing organizing skills and networks to support the broad-based democracy movement against President Ferdinand Marcos.²⁰

Many of the barriers to women's participation in nonviolent action have been identified in societies "where social or cultural codes of behavior limit or restrict mixed groups of men and women" and where restrictions are placed on women's participation in protest activity.²¹ Often, more restrictions are placed on young women than on young men. Gendered backlash to participation is also a commonly cited barrier. This effect often comes in the form of sexual violence against female movement participants.

In Egypt, where women's presence during the 2011 revolution was significant, women faced sexual assaults and harassment, by state security forces, among others, when participating in public demonstrations.²² This violence inspired independent mobilizations by women across social backgrounds. In Iran, women were often at the forefront of protests during the Green Movement following the fraudulent 2009 presidential elections. They faced various forms of violence, including targeted killings meant to heighten fear among families that may have been hesitant about their presence as women in public at the time.²³ These examples underscore the grave risks women face when they struggle against oppression and injustice and how they can function as significant barriers to participation.

The most commonly identified impact of women's participation is what is called a moral shield effect, in which women's frontline participation helps prevent violent repression.²⁴ A strong women's presence during public demonstrations may pose a moral dilemma for security forces, which could well think twice about cracking down violently on such protests.²⁵ This was the case in Argentina, where women drawing on their identities as mothers formed Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) to protest the disappearances of



Students protest the São Paulo Forum, a gathering of leftist politicians and activists from across Latin America and the Caribbean, in Caracas, Venezuela, on July 26, 2019. Critics said that Venezuela, whose economy was collapsing, could not afford to host the event. (Photo by Leonardo Fernandez/AP)

their children during what became known as the country's Dirty War. The women carried pictures of their missing children and demanded their return during regular public marches. Transforming "motherhood into a source of power," this action made it harder for the women to be persecuted by a government that claimed to respect maternal roles.²⁶ Motherhood has often been used as a political tool across a variety of movements, allowing women to garner broad-based support as they engage in political action on the basis of an injustice committed against their children.²⁷

In regard to long-term outcomes, recent cross-national data indicate that nonviolent movements with the frontline participation of women are more likely to achieve their goals and less likely to turn to violence.²⁸ A prominent example is the Liberian women's movement that formed in 2003 to end the country's second

civil war. Using a combination of nonviolent action and peacebuilding tactics, including a sex strike, the women pressured the warring parties to enter into negotiations, which ultimately resulted in a ceasefire agreement and an end to the war.²⁹ Women's contributions during times of political transition have been given significant attention as many scholars have examined the nexus between women's mobilization, processes of democratization, and gendered outcomes.³⁰ These periods often act as moments of realignment that may offer women "uniquely gendered opportunities." Women mobilizing based on their identities to increase women's rights and greater women's political inclusion may bring new opportunities during a political transition to get their issues onto the political agenda.

However, many scholars find that democratization does not often bring about significant political gains

for women despite their important contributions to pro-democracy movements. These efforts do not tend to translate into equal roles in transitional governments or new, democratically elected ones. Women's participation, in sum, does not always lead to women's "subsequent emancipation or prevent their exclusion in post-revolution societies."³¹ After helping "change the repressive terrain by claiming important political space," women's groups may then be "eclipsed by the dominant political forces," defined by deeply entrenched patriarchal structures and practices.³² Such conventions may be suspended during phases of peak mobilization, when women's contributions are needed or sheer numbers matter, but then resurface in the aftermath of a political transition after crucial goals have been achieved.³³

Women's movements may be able to secure more women-friendly outcomes from democratizing states after transitions are complete, however, when women develop cohesive coalitions and when transitional ideologies align with women's legitimate goals, among other factors.³⁴ A successful case is South Africa's democratic transition, during which a Women's National Coalition formed and framed the struggle for women's equality within the broader frame of liberation and equality for all. Their efforts helped increase women's political representation and lay the foundation for legislation in the aftermath of the transition that promoted reforms like affirmative action for women in hiring, criminalized domestic violence, and improved health-care access and services for women.³⁵

YOUTH

Youth have long played prominent roles in social movements for major political, social, and economic change, from the global student and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s to the Arab Spring uprisings starting in 2011 to recent pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong and Myanmar. Research on youth participation, as noted, has focused on their motivations for joining social movements and the

impacts they have had. Less attention has been paid to the specific barriers to their participation and the longer-term outcomes of the campaigns.

A key focus on youth protest in particular has been its economic drivers: studies show that frustration at a lack of opportunities for upward mobility can increase the likelihood of young people's taking to the streets.³⁶ Youth have increasingly engaged in political and social mobilization, especially in countries hard hit by the 2008 global financial crisis.³⁷ Since the influx of neoliberal and free trade policies beginning in the 1970s, many of today's youth are seeing high levels of both unemployment and underemployment.³⁸ Clear evidence of the link between growing youth unemployment and the rise in social unrest is the protests across Europe in response to the sovereign debt crises, the mass demonstrations over economic inequality in Chile, and the global wave of Occupy movements. As a result of unmet expectations, youth have made the streets new spaces of struggle against dominant and oppressive political and economic forces.³⁹

Youth have also had a significant impact in using nonviolent action to protect the integrity of existing political institutions and encourage the authorities to adhere to constitutional law. Such activities counter characterizations of youth as politically disengaged or apathetic. Senegal's Y'en a Marre (We're Fed Up) movement, led by young rappers and other artists, was consequential in ensuring the country's democratic transition. Sending a clear message with the protest chant "Touche pas à ma constitution!" (Don't Touch My Constitution), the movement was successful in mobilizing the populace to protest and demand improved governance, quelling President Abdoulaye Wade's attempts to change the constitution in his favor. In 2004, Ukraine's Orange Revolution succeeded in bringing opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko to power after Ukrainian youth took to the streets in mass numbers to protest claims of corruption and fraud in the country's presidential elections. Teenage girls in Kyiv handed out flowers to

Young people . . . tend to be more technologically savvy than older generations and more likely to take to new media to express their political demands. . . . Youth assert that social media gives them agency, allowing them “to write history as they see it” and influence national and international audiences.

policemen stationed outside the presidential administration building, helping build trust between protesters and security forces; other young people launched civic initiatives such as get out the vote campaigns and election monitoring, and engaged in a variety of nonviolent action tactics to promote electoral integrity and mobilize citizens against election fraud.⁴⁰

Another key focus in the literature on the impacts of youth participation has been on their adept use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to achieve their goals. Young people, having grown up with the internet, tend to be more technologically savvy than older generations and more likely to take to new media to express their political demands. Scholars analyzing the role of ICTs in protests and social movements more generally have found them to help amplify messaging, facilitate participation, increase interaction and collaboration across groups, and foster new forms of activism. Youth assert that social media gives them agency, allowing them “to write history as they see it” and influence national and international audiences.⁴¹ Despite considerable agreement as to the positive impact that the availability and use of ICTs can have on movements, scholars and others interested in movements acknowledge that these technologies by themselves do not inevitably lead to political mobilization and collective action.⁴² Questions

remain about the enduring impacts that the use of ICTs has on youth political participation and the extent to which they yield genuine political change.⁴³ However, the prevalence of social media and the internet in many youth-led movements and the prominent role they have played in helping these movements recruit, mobilize, and organize in pursuit of their goals are not in doubt.

Although much research has focused on the impacts of youth participation in nonviolent action and whether campaign goals were achieved, less attention has been paid to what happens to young people at the end of a protest campaign and how they are affected over the long term by campaign outcomes. A few case studies shed light on these dynamics. For example, in the aftermath of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s resignation in February 2011, youth there were able to get some decisions and rules they opposed reversed during the transition period but were unable to “morph into political actors in their own right.”⁴⁴ In Afghanistan, some of the movements in which large numbers of youth participated were eventually used by established political elites to advance their own political interests and agenda.⁴⁵ More research is needed to better understand how youth have pushed back against co-optation and transformed street action into political power that lasts over the long term.

Barriers, Impacts, and Outcomes



Women and youth, who have been excluded from mainstream channels of political power and influence throughout history and today, have played crucial roles in working to bring about social, economic, and political change to make societies everywhere more just and peaceful. Additional insights into the various barriers they face to be able to do so, the different impacts they have, and the long-term outcomes of their participation in nonviolent action to support these causes are essential.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

The first question in the case studies was what the major barriers to women's and youth participation in nonviolent action were. In nearly all cases, violent repression and discouragement from family members were seen as the primary obstacles. Youth and women described how carrying the identity of an activist seemed to put them in a precarious situation, both within their households and in society more broadly.

Women activists in several cases, as noted earlier, were reported to have faced violence at the hands of state security forces, including threats, intimidation, and bullying as they spoke out and participated in demonstrations against a variety of injustices. In Ethiopia, an activist reported that the military sexually harassed female protesters to discourage them from participating. In Venezuela, an activist noted how feminist groups operating in a “machista context”—a culture in which men dominate women—often face state repression, including arbitrary detention.

Activists, especially women, are also often derided and stigmatized for engaging in protests against gender-based violence and other gender-related

issues. Bangladesh has seen a massive anti-rape movement in recent years. Activists there have raised their voices on several issues, including domestic violence and sexual health—topics “considered to be highly risky or taboo” in many parts of the country. When working with alleged rape victims, women are often threatened by the victim's family and local politicians and even branded by local citizens as being a “culprit” or “bad girl” themselves. Women in Nigeria faced similar disparagement in 2018 when a group staged a march at a Lagos market, chanting “Stop Touching Us” in response to harassment and sexual assault by male traders they faced there. Some of the traders blamed the women for dressing “inappropriately” and told them to stay home if they wanted to avoid being harassed.

Much of the discrimination women face for participating in nonviolent action relates to social and cultural expectations of what is deemed appropriate behavior for women. This appeared to be especially true in Armenia, where young and married women living in the country's more conservative areas were said to be restricted by male relatives from engaging in activities outside the home. Women activists reported having to “go against the family” to participate in protests. At the same time, they also described experiences when participating openly in the capital city during the country's 2018 nonviolent revolution led to an increase in activism and civic engagement among women after they returned to their hometowns, showing how families eventually became more accepting of such activities.

Among youth activists, some reported that fear of government repression was often what motivated their



Protesters demonstrate at the gates of Parliament, one holding a placard referring to President Uhuru Kenyatta and his family, during an anti-corruption demonstration in downtown Nairobi, Kenya, on May 31, 2018. (Photo by Ben Curtis/AP)

relatives to dissuade them from participating. This discouragement ranged from being pressured to “delete Facebook posts relating to government corruption” to being asked to avoid protests altogether to align with cultural norms that require young people to show respect to people in authority.

State repression aimed at silencing, intimidating, and suppressing various forms of dissent was also identified as a major barrier in nearly all cases. In Nigeria, dozens of youth were killed by state security forces during recent #EndSARS protests, for example. In Kenya, young people were especially at risk because of their lower economic and social status. “As grassroots youth activists, we are vulnerable to police brutality and have no source of support if we are arrested,” one young person from Kisumu said.

Many of today’s youth are pushed into precarity by the high levels of unemployment and underemployment that result from ineffective state policy and inequality. When youth challenge such injustices, government officials often feel threatened and try to undermine their activities. This has been the case in Ethiopia, where several youth movements have emerged in recent years calling for greater access to economic resources. The government has taken to labeling the protesters as jobless and unruly and dismissing them as simply “kids on the streets” who do not even know why they are protesting, further marginalizing young people.

In all these cases, women and youth have turned perceived barriers into mobilizing opportunities, enabling them to mobilize for and demand justice, human rights, and equality.

IMPACT OF WOMEN AND YOUTH

The second question case study authors reflected on was the unique impacts of women and youth on nonviolent action in their countries—particularly the differences between what nonviolent action campaigns looked and felt like when large numbers of women and youth participated in or led campaigns versus when they did not or did so only minimally. Activists emphasized the critical roles of members of both groups as leaders, organizers, and participants. Many argued that without the participation of women and youth, major nonviolent movements of recent years would not have taken place at all or, had they occurred, would have failed to achieve their goals. Reasons for these advantages were numerous, from a greater willingness to take risks or initiate movements even when the potential for success was limited, to more creative and strategic tactical choices.

Three major themes emerged consistently: both women and youth typically showed greater commitment to their causes; women were better at maintaining nonviolent discipline, youth having a mixed record; and youth were better able to overcome existing patterns of political polarization.

Demonstrating Greater Commitment

Despite the vulnerability that women and youth face in regard to violence and social pressure, they were typically the first to join movements and more likely to stick with the movement the longest, “relentlessly” maintaining their commitment even in the face of significant barriers, as the Venezuelan activist reported. For youth, having no previous negative experience influenced their greater willingness to start action. An Armenian activist reported that youth were typically the first movers in nonviolent action because older adults who shared their desire for change had traumatic memories of Armenia’s protest movement in 2008, when nonviolent action after a fraudulent election ended with a massive government crackdown. The failure of that movement made many older Armenians cynical about the possibility of change.

Youth-led movements were typically more likely both to start in response to a short-term shock rather than develop from existing organizational infrastructures and to turn that short-term response into a long-term mobilization. In Venezuela, despite the opposition’s failure to unseat Maduro, the case study author reported that both women and youth “achieve[d] a huge impact due to their creativity and ability to direct, organize, and execute plans.” In Bangladesh, youth activists, particularly the young women leading the Stop Rape protests, stayed on the streets until their demands were met, as opposed to more organized groups, who tended to opt for more symbolic hour or day-long protests before going home. The Occupy Nigeria protests of 2012 had an identical pattern of youth trekking far from home to join the demonstrations and remaining at the protests long after others had gone home. In Ethiopia, the Qeerroo sustained themselves for more than three years despite severe government repression that led to hundreds of casualties.

Where does this greater commitment come from? The tireless activity of women working, often behind the scenes, to sustain movements in difficult circumstances was a key factor. In Ethiopia, women historically played a crucial supportive role in shuttling information and maintaining movement networks.⁴⁶ In several cases, it seemed to be directly linked to the very precarity that also made participation in activism challenging. In the Stop Rape protests in Bangladesh, for example, young women’s lived experience with sexual violence and the challenges of living in a patriarchal society played a key role in pushing the protests forward. As the Bangladesh case study author explained,

The struggle of growing up as a woman in a socially conservative society, and their consistent fight in the social media contributed largely to the level of critical understanding and boldness of this particular movement. These women were dedicated to their feminist cause and consistently chose to discuss “controversial” issues. Also, seeing these women in the leadership role gave courage and confidence to a large number of young women (otherwise unvocal) to come to the front, participate, or even lead.

In Bangladesh, the assumption of women’s “peacefulness” is so deeply baked into how protest is organized that putting women in the front lines has become standard operating procedure for political parties, civil society groups, and grassroots movements alike.

In other words, because both women and youth had more to lose from the potential failure of their activism, they were more willing to suffer significant costs and harms to keep the movement going. Activists described both youth and women as taking their activism more seriously, as a matter of life and death that demanded their full commitment, rather than as a matter of political or social positioning.

Maintaining Nonviolent Discipline and Managing Repression

Activists consistently reported that women were better able to remain nonviolent, even in the face of violent government repression. Indeed, in Bangladesh, the assumption of women’s “peacefulness” is so deeply baked into how protest is organized that putting women in the front lines has become standard operating procedure for political parties, civil society groups, and grassroots movements alike because “police forces become extra cautious if participation of women is significantly larger,” a powerful example of the moral shield effect of women’s participation identified in the literature.⁴⁷

The mechanisms of this greater commitment were unclear, however. Some suggested mechanisms rely on problematically essentialist views of gender, reflecting how gender is performed in their context. Others relate to differences in how women behave in the heat of a given moment, and still others to the symbolic nature of the effect of women’s participation on men’s behavior. Some are more indirect processes, through which women’s leadership leads to different kinds of tactics or tends to reduce levels of repression, which in turn reduces provocation for violence. In Ethiopia, a young woman activist reported that “women are . . . not easily tempted to use violence. Men are sometimes emotionally driven and cross the boundary of nonviolent movements into violence.” Women’s presence may also be, as reported from Armenia, “a restraining factor for men, who would otherwise engage in violent actions.”

The picture is somewhat more complicated when it comes to the impacts youth have. Many youth-led movements placed a similar value on nonviolent discipline and were careful to express their peaceful posture in their public communications. For instance, the Qeerroo movement in Ethiopia was, according to one activist, “organized with the highest possible discipline and respect for human rights, focusing on principles of nonviolence . . . no damage to property and human life, not being armed, no usage of alcohol and drugs, and remain[ing] polite and submissive to law enforcement officials.” However, protests and other public nonviolent action tactics often provided an opportunity for other youth, whom activists claimed were not directly associated with their movements, to engage in violence toward the state. In Nigeria, several movements, including Occupy Nigeria and #EndSARS, have struggled with this dynamic. The case study author there reported several instances in which the heightened tension of public protests led to attacks on government buildings, infrastructure, and security forces.

At the same time, governments or other opponents of nonviolent action movements have used particular youth groups to act as agents provocateurs, or even a more directly repressive arm of the state, sowing chaos and violently attacking nonviolent activists. This was especially true in Nigeria, where groups of young men were paid to attack protesters, and in Bangladesh, where the youth wings of the major political parties often served as violent enforcers to crack down on nonpartisan nonviolent action. The core takeaway from these reflections on youth and nonviolent discipline is thus one of complexity and contingency. The same willingness to take on significant risk that may lead some youth to participation in nonviolent action may lead others to violence that undermines the goals of a movement.



Protesters demonstrate against police brutality by Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad, or SARS, in Lagos on October 19, 2020. Nationwide protests began more than two weeks earlier after a young man was allegedly killed by SARS members. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)

Overcoming Polarization

Youth-led movements across many contexts appear better able than movements led by older people to overcome existing political, religious, and ethnic divides. This is a crucial potential value-add for nonviolent action movements. Identity-based divides are one of the most potent barriers to the success of nonviolent action. Coalitions that cross those divides are much more likely to achieve the broad participation necessary for success.⁴⁸

In Ethiopia, youth-led movements were characterized by “connectedness, a sense of common identity, and common goal.” In Nigeria, “youths usually tolerate one another irrespective of the difference in their background, religion, ethnic group, status, and so on. Therefore, whenever a movement is led by Nigerian youths, it is easy for a diverse group of people with a common goal to participate in the movement.” This

manifested itself in participation across several movements of people from the LGBTQ community as well as from conservative religious communities.

In Bangladesh, decades of intense political polarization have had a devastating effect. The two main political parties fight for control of the state and marginalize all other potential political actors.⁴⁹ Youth who are not embedded in the party structure tended to describe themselves as part of an “I hate politics” generation, eschewing any focus on traditional avenues for achieving political power and focusing on joining forces to advocate for change. This depoliticized attitude in turn not only enabled them to mobilize across a wide swathe of Bangladeshi society but also improved the public perception of movements for greater road safety, education reform, and the elimination of sexual violence. When students blocked the streets to demand greater

road safety, a case study writer reported, “People were enormously welcoming and supportive . . . the general perception was that [people] were ‘proud of our children’ . . . the movement instilled much hope in the minds of the general people in Bangladesh.” This in turn reduced violent confrontations between the movement and members of the public at sit-ins and other potential flash-point events.

This ability to overcome traditional political and identity-based divides is perhaps most powerfully shown in Myanmar, where the so-called Spring Revolution against the February 1, 2021, military coup, spearheaded by young women, has not only transcended political partisan divisions but also brought together members of the majority Bamar ethnic group with the country’s many minority groups.⁵⁰ Older traditional leaders of the opposition initially limited their stated goals to restoring the ousted National League of Democracy government. Younger activists quickly moved to demanding the more comprehensive goal of a federal democracy.⁵¹ As one activist said, “It doesn’t matter if we are Burmese, Kachin, Chin, or any ethnic group. As long as we are living in Myanmar, we have the same rights and we need the same freedom.”⁵²

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

Finally, activists reflected on the impacts of women and youth on the dynamics of nonviolent action not only during a campaign but also over the long term after a campaign had ended. How long do the impacts of women’s and youth’s participation endure after mobilization ends?

Many activists offered optimistic reflections on the potential for participation by women and youth during nonviolent action campaigns to result in positive long-term change. Nonviolent action may be a potent avenue for women and youth to overcome well-established inequities in representation and government policy, particularly when it rises to a societally transformative level. The social and economic changes associated with major political shifts can open space

for women and youth previously excluded from power to have better access to it, or restructure power relations to be more women or youth centered, similar to how the disruptions of war can sometimes promote women’s mobilization and long-term political empowerment.⁵³ In Kenya, a young female activist reported that her participation had led to her becoming a powerful member of her local community, able to speak out on important issues from a position of influence. In Ethiopia, the participation of women from the onset in many recent movements has had an agenda-setting effect, leading public discourse to have a greater focus on gender equity.

Perhaps the most significant long-term gains for women and youth after a mass nonviolent action campaign were in Armenia. A decade of activism leading up to the country’s 2018 Velvet Revolution, in many cases led by youth and women, and their key role in the revolution itself has resulted both in their symbolic recognition by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and in the practical restructuring of political power.⁵⁴ Armenia now has the third-highest percentage of parliamentarians under thirty of any country in the world.⁵⁵ Record numbers of women and youth were also appointed to the postrevolutionary government, including in key decision-making positions such as deputy prime minister.⁵⁶

However, although these changes were real and meaningful, more commonly women and youth in nonviolent action struggled to turn their crucial roles into long-term change. Activists reported that concessions in response to mobilization were short term. Women and youth rarely turned positions of frontline activism into stable institutional influence. In some cases, such as Venezuela, the contributions of women and youth were reported to be simply downplayed or not recognized. When they were unavoidable, the traditional power structures tried to co-opt the momentum and energy of such campaigns for their own ends without changing any underlying structures of power and influence.⁵⁷ For instance, in Ethiopia after the 2018 political opening, activists described a



Supporters of opposition lawmaker Nikol Pashinyan carry a large Armenian flag as they protest in Republic Square in the capital city of Yerevan on May 2, 2018. (Photo by Sergei Grits/AP)

divide and conquer strategy by the government to demobilize youth opposition that leveraged youth economic precarity. Youth who were willing to compromise with government concessions were given preferential access to government resources, particularly for employment. Those who refused to compromise and continued to attempt to hold the government accountable faced significant government repression.

In Bangladesh, despite their outsize presence on the front lines of many major uprisings in recent years and the Stop Rape campaign, women often struggled to make themselves heard as leaders and tended to not have a strong voice in nonviolent action movements. The barriers of strong social expectations against

women's leadership, despite Bangladesh's having had a female prime minister since 2009, appeared to be the primary culprits: even ostensibly progressive male activists resisted women's leadership of their movements.

In Armenia, despite the increased participation of women and youth in government, the postrevolutionary era has seen a significant decline in civic activism among both women and youth. Even before violence escalated with Azerbaijan in 2020, activists reported that "the government did not use the momentum to build on existing energy and potential and direct it towards national goals and aspirations." Given that the conflict ended with a peace settlement that is deeply unpopular in Armenia, youth are particularly disillusioned.

Conclusions and Recommendations



Despite the great diversity of experience among women and youth in these case studies, a few key trends stand out. Barriers of state violence, patriarchy, prejudice, and social and economic precarity make participation challenging. Yet even with these barriers, women and youth are frequently at the forefront of nonviolent action. Movements where they participate or lead tend to last longer, show greater creativity and diversity in their tactics, better maintain nonviolent discipline, and better overcome political or identity-based polarization.

These characteristics go to the core of what makes nonviolent action work. Sociologists argue that “worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment” are key factors in leading to movement success, and scholars of nonviolent action similarly point to “unity, strategy, and nonviolent discipline” as the “three engines” that drive nonviolent action to victory.⁵⁸ The participation and leadership of women and youth in nonviolent action movements appear to fuel all three of these engines, giving movements a major advantage.

Yet, though in some cases this participation did lead to long-term change, the case studies also point to some caution. Over the long term, despite the power of women’s and youth participation in nonviolent action, institutional avenues of power tended to reassert themselves, co-opting movements and undermining long-term change. Even when former youth or women activists entered positions of power it was no guarantee of significant long-term transformation for the benefit of women and youth in the population.

The final picture is thus cautious optimism. Significant benefits are to be gained from encouraging women and youth to participate in nonviolent action. Yet the barriers to participation are significant as well, and if this participation is not transformed into long-term, sustainable institutional avenues of change, then its impact is likely to not endure.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVISTS AND PRACTITIONERS

Several recommendations emerge from the common patterns across these cases: to highlight the cross-cutting appeal of youth and women, to build movements with women and youth leadership, to plan for what can be called a streets-to-rooms transition, and to continue to promote education and training in nonviolent action for youth and women.

Activists in many countries pointed to the greater ability of women and youth to transcend identity or political divides. Yet this ability was not inherent. It came through intentional framing processes, as in Bangladesh, where nonpartisan youth took great care in ensuring that their movements were not co-opted by the country’s major political parties. Recognizing that movements of youth or women may have this capacity, activists can emphasize the characteristics of youth or women that cut across major social divides and use their common identity for greater mobilization to achieve their goals.

The commitment, passion, and creativity that both women and youth bring to nonviolent action campaigns were common threads across cases. At the same time,



Youth dance during a rally in the town of Woliso, Oromia Region, Ethiopia, on October 21, 2018. Earlier protests by Oromo students led to a years-long movement demanding political reform. (Photo by Tiksa Negeri/Reuters)

variation was evident in whether their voices were heard and valued. Scholars of social movements have long recognized that different movement structures, particularly those related to leadership, affect how well the voices of those at the margins are heard. To maximize the potential for women and youth to build powerful movements will require building movement structures that encourage a diversity of voices, leadership practices that incorporate many perspectives, and processes of deliberation and reflection.⁵⁹ Additionally, a gender analysis that examines the issues of masculinities and intersecting identities could also help clarify the significant barriers to building such movements.⁶⁰

The problem of ensuring that the power of women's and youth mobilization is transformed into long-term improvements for women and youth has no one-size-fits-all solution. Yet recognizing that the challenge

is approaching and strategizing for how the unique strengths and weaknesses of the movement can be leveraged over the long term is always beneficial. How should movement leaders think about either engaging directly in politics or remaining outside political structures to ensure accountability? What are the conditions that need to be met in order to negotiate an end to full-scale activism? How will youth and women be made a core part of any negotiation process? How will the movement's gains be consolidated over the next five or ten years? These are key questions that activists should consider from the outset so that they are better prepared to avoid the challenge of co-optation and turn their short-term power into long-term change.

The power of women and youth mobilization is evident across these case studies: women and youth described how they worked, despite significant

barriers, to address a wide range of issues, from sexual violence to poor and unjust governance in diverse contexts. Activists, practitioners, scholars, and others have long identified strategic nonviolent action as a powerful tool for initiating major social, political, and economic change. The lessons across these seven cases reinforce the need to continue to promote and strengthen nonviolent action training for activists and those looking to get involved in supporting campaigns and movements to bring about more just and peaceful societies. This is particularly true for individuals and groups among women and youth who find themselves excluded from accessing the dominant modes of political power and decision-making processes in their society. Such awareness raising, skills building, and peer learning to support recruitment, mobilizing, and organizing efforts are key to building the most effective campaigns and movements that can transform existing power structures. This can also help movements be better able to sustain themselves over the long term.

The experiences of women and youth in nonviolent action are diverse and even the major trends identified here have important exceptions. Yet when women and youth participate, campaigns appear better able to effect the kinds of change that result in issues of injustice and oppression being addressed without violence.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The goal of this study was to draw on the reflections of activists to better understand on-the-ground realities of women and youth participation in nonviolent action. Several questions remain open for future, rigorous research.

What drives the endurance and commitment of women and youth in nonviolent action? The intense commitment to maintaining a nonviolent action campaign and seeing it through to conclusion showed through several case studies. These reflections, however, do

not tell us whether such commitment is a general characteristic of women's and youth participation or something unique to the particular movements. Future research could look at the duration of nonviolent action campaigns and their ability to continue even in the face of violent repression and other barriers to see whether this duration is higher when women and youth participate and lead on the front lines.

What explains women's greater adherence to nonviolent discipline? Across widely divergent contexts, activists described greater nonviolent discipline as a key difference when women participated on the front lines. This commitment also shows up in cross-national statistical research.⁶¹ Yet no single satisfactory explanation for the mechanisms addresses the dynamic. As the literature on women's participation in violent rebellions shows, women are by no means incapable of violent rebellion or inherently committed to nonviolence.⁶² Yet the greater adherence to nonviolent discipline appears to hold even across contexts in which the social construction of female identity radically differs. What are the common underlying threads in the social construction of gender that explain this?

What practices or institutions help sustain gains for women and youth over the long term that can ensure more equitable and just societies? Research into the factors that help nonviolent movements sustain gains in democracy over the long term is expanding and deepening.⁶³ However, as these case studies describe, even when greater democracy has been achieved (as in Armenia) gains for women and youth may be more challenging to sustain. What are the best safeguards for turning power gained on the streets into long-term change? Is it changes in the identity of those in power? New laws or government agencies? Different patterns of civil society? Robust, rigorous cross-national study could provide crucial insights into these questions.

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PEACEWORKS

NO. 178 | SEPTEMBER 2021

Women and youth have played crucial roles at the forefront of nonviolent action campaigns for peace, democracy, and social justice. The mobilization of both groups is frequently a key factor leading to movements' success. Yet the common barriers, impacts, and long-term outcomes of their participation across contexts remain poorly understood. How do women and youth activists themselves experience such barriers, impacts, and outcomes? This report presents key lessons learned from a series of case studies commissioned from seven frontline female or youth activists in Armenia, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Venezuela. The reflections lead to several suggested avenues for future research as well as concrete recommendations for activists and practitioners to maximize the impact of women and youth's participation in nonviolent action.

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