

# **“DIGITAL PEACEBUILDING”: EXAMINING YOUNG WOMEN LEADERS’ USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO BUILD PEACE IN THE PHILIPPINES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper conceptualises digital peacebuilding by demonstrating how Muslim, Lumad<sup>1</sup> and Christian young women leaders, who are marginalised in peacebuilding processes, are using Facebook and TikTok in building everyday peace in the Philippines’ Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Through an intersectional feminist lens and employing social media analysis, the article demonstrates how these women navigate their diverse identities online, shaping discussions on peace and security within BARMM and extending their influence beyond the region’s peace process. Preliminary findings reveal that (1) social media is a vital platform for young women to voice their peace agenda, often neglected in traditional and institutional peacebuilding platforms; (2) within the diverse context of BARMM, different groups of young women have distinct perceptions of peacebuilding; (3) practising care both to the self and community is central to their peacebuilding work; and (4) digital peacebuilding of young women leaders extends beyond the mere use of technology to promote peace and encompasses unique ‘platform vernaculars’ (Gibbs et al., 2015). This paper broadens the narrow ‘tool’ view of digital peacebuilding, emphasising the crucial interplay between technology and social practices in understanding its effectiveness in achieving and sustaining peace. Additionally, by documenting the active involvement of young women in digital peacebuilding, it ensures their perspectives are integrated into peace processes, promoting more inclusive and equitable paths to conflict resolution.

*Keywords: digital peacebuilding, youth inclusion, digital public sphere, social media, Bangsamoro Mindanao, intersectional, feminism*

## **“Digital Peacebuilding”**

The field of peacebuilding has witnessed significant growth in the utilisation of digital technologies, especially among youth-led organisations in recent years. This emerging practice is referred to as “digital peacebuilding” (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2023), which is defined as “the use of digital technologies toward a peacebuilding objective, and the use of peacebuilding approaches in response to digital conflict drivers” (Build Up, 2023, p. 5). Digital peacebuilding encompasses the following: (1) utilising off-the-shelf digital technologies like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok for peacebuilding efforts; (2) employing technologies explicitly designed to serve peacebuilding goals; and (3)

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<sup>1</sup> Lumad is a Visayan term meaning “native” or “indigenous”, and is the ascribed collective name of the non-moro indigenous peoples of Mindanao.

implementing peacebuilding responses to address digital conflict drivers (Schirch, 2020).

However, existing literature on digital peacebuilding lacks a comprehensive analysis of how it plays out in people's everyday lives. To address this gap, a shift from a narrow tool-focused approach to understand the interplay between technology, social practices, and peacebuilding is necessary. This new understanding recognises that technologies are deeply woven into complex social systems, with their impact intricately shaped by power dynamics and existing social practices (Hirblinger et al., 2022; Welch et al., 2015).

### **Young People's Role in Digital Peacebuilding**

Youth have been recognised globally for their significant role in peacebuilding, which is broadly understood as the process of building positive peace via building trust, repairing relationships, and reforming institutions (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015; Grizelj & Saleem, 2022; Lederach, 1997). This recognition was formalised by the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) and reinforced by subsequent YPS resolutions - Resolutions 2419 (2018) and 2535 (2020) (Altiok & Grizelj, 2019; Simpson et al., 2018). These resolutions call for the meaningful participation, representation, and inclusion of young people in all phases of peace processes and political decision-making (UNSCR, 2015). This UN Security Council resolution delineates five crucial pillars for effective action: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration. However, despite this acknowledgement, youth, particularly young women, continue to be excluded and marginalised in peacebuilding efforts (Grizelj & Saleem, 2022; Pruitt, 2021). Current peacebuilding frameworks fail to adequately address gendered exclusions, with interventions primarily targeting young men as potential threats and not addressing the specific vulnerabilities and contributions of young women (UN Women, 2018). The lack of intersectional perspective compounds this exclusion, overlooking the nuanced experiences of youth based on gender, age, and other social identities (Pruitt, 2021; UN Women, 2018).

The continual failures of international interventions to take into account local perspectives, promote local agency, and establish local ownership of peace processes leads to the local turn to peace (Ljungkvist & Jarstad, 2021). In this 'turn', engagement with local communities is seen as a way of embedding the intervention locally, thereby tailoring it to local needs and cultural expectations (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). The local turn steers away from the assumption that statehood is the foundation of peace and suggests that building social cohesion should begin at the individual level, at home, in school, in the community, and at the national level. This local turn is conceptualised as everyday peacebuilding. "Everyday peace" is defined as "the capacity of ordinary people to disrupt violent conflict and forge prosocial relationships in conflict-affected societies" (Mac Ginty, 2014, p. 2). It refers to 'small' and informal peace practices involving pragmatism, common sense, emotional intelligence, and acts of sheer or fundamental humanity, empathy, and compassion at the grassroots level, even below

the level of organised forms within civil society. It could happen in the most mundane areas such as the workplace, school, or grocery store (Kacowicz, 2022). These informal peace practices use contemporary tools, for example, youth using social media and popular art to communicate information and build solidarity (Bangura, 2022). The everyday space is conceived as a political space in which individuals who are most marginalised and excluded from formal political discourses, such as youth, find collective meaning and organise in reaction to conflict, violence, and exclusion (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015).

Despite its promise for greater inclusion, the limitation of the current conceptualisation of everyday peace is it presupposes a depoliticised and gender-neutral image of the 'local' and 'everyday', failing to highlight the importance of context in determining whether or not everyday life is composed of spaces that are particularly open and inclusive to youth (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015; Jabri, 2013). For example, there are still cases where male youth representatives speak on behalf of young women during policy consultations, and elite youth represent the greater youth population in the formal peace tables (Jabri, 2013; Ragandang & Podder, 2022).

Furthermore, current literature on everyday peace does not include peacebuilding work on digital platforms. Though several researchers discuss how information and communication technologies (ICTs) are used in peace and conflict in local contexts (see for example Stauffacher et al., 2005; Tellidis & Kappler, 2016), their focus has not included the role of digital media, particularly social media, in the conflict transformation and prevention. Discussions on digital media tend to focus primarily on misinformation and disinformation as the problems of the internet's democratising force (United States Institute of Peace, 2023). This paper aims to address these gaps and asks: ***How do young Muslim, Lumad, and Christian women in the Philippines use social media for peacebuilding?***

## **Intersectional Feminist Peacebuilding**

Anchored in feminist peace principles, feminist peacebuilding aims to uncover and transform complex power dynamics within peacebuilding programs, striving for inclusive peace that embraces diversity (Fal-Dutra Santos, 2022). Recognising that peace is produced and reproduced in everyday spaces and actions, feminist researchers and activists highlight the importance of mundane caring practices in fostering peaceful communities (Vaittinen et al., 2019). Attention to grassroots peace processes is crucial in acknowledging diverse experiences of conflict beyond governmental strategies (Prügl et al., 2021). Feminist peacebuilding underscores the diverse impact of conflict across genders, ages, and social backgrounds, emphasising the vital roles of women and marginalised groups in peace efforts (Fal-Dutra Santos, 2022). Intersectionality deepens this understanding by revealing how systems of inequality, such as those rooted in gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and class, intersect to shape unique dynamics, and impacts of conflict on vulnerable individuals.

Through an intersectional feminist lens (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991), the paper specifically looks at how women with diverse and intersecting social identities (including race, religion, and age) participate in everyday digital peacebuilding in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). BARMM was formally established as part of a peace agreement to end nearly five decades of armed conflict and several years of peace talks between the Philippine government, and several autonomist groups. By investigating young women's digital media practices in building everyday peace, the paper offers valuable insights into various ways technology is used for peacebuilding, young women's understanding of peace, and the representation and negotiation of gender across different conflict settings. A better understanding of young women's contributions to digital peacebuilding also contributes new evidence for policymakers and practitioners to make more informed decisions on how to advance more inclusive and equitable use of digital media to conflict resolution and peace.

### **The Current Bangsamoro Peace Process in Mindanao**

Home to approximately 4 million Filipinos, BARMM is an autonomous region located in the southern Philippines and is the only region in the Philippines that has its own government (Ordering, 2023). Its population includes thirteen distinct Islamised communities alongside ethno-religious minorities, such as non-Moro Indigenous peoples, also known as Lumad, and Christians (Ferrer, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2022). Currently, the region is under the regional interim government, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, headed by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The transition involves two parallel tracks: the political and the normalisation tracks. On the political front, the focus is on constructing essential institutions through the development of priority legislation and the improvement of governance structures. At the same time, the normalisation track facilitates the gradual disarmament of guerrilla forces, supported by financial assistance, and the transformation of rebel camps into productive communities in preparation for the exit agreement and the inaugural Bangsamoro Parliament Election scheduled for May 12, 2025 (International Crisis Group, 2022; Marcelo, 2018)

BARMM is currently in the normalisation phase of peacebuilding, but challenges persist, including the effective transition of former MILF combatants into governance roles. Additionally, the presence of violent extremist groups (Loesch, 2017), slow rehabilitation of Marawi City post-2017 conflict (Hart, 2020), and high levels of crime and poverty in BARMM continue to hinder progress (Herbert, 2019). These challenges, combined with the region's diverse population, underscore the need for an inclusive approach to the peace process, especially for marginalised groups like women and youth. This approach involves respecting the rights of non-Moro Indigenous people, ensuring meaningful participation of youth and women in political life, and protection from violence (Ferrer, 2012; Herbert, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2022). Inclusive peacebuilding for marginalised groups entails direct participation in negotiations, broadening participation in peace talks, engagement in consultations, inclusion in commissions implementing peace agreements, participation in problem-solving workshops, leadership in public decision-making, and involvement in mass action (O'Reilly et al., 2015; Paffenholz, 2014).

The Bangsamoro Youth Commission (BYC), acting as the youth arm of BARMM, is pivotal in policy making and coordination regarding youth matters. BYC spearheaded the crafting of the Bangsamoro Youth Transition Priority Agenda for 2020 to 2022. The peacebuilding and security aspect within the youth agenda seeks to promote human security, implement inclusive disengagement and reintegration programs, prevent association with armed groups, and actively engage in peacebuilding and conflict prevention initiatives (Bangsamoro Youth Commission-BARMM, 2021).

## **Examining Digital Peacebuilding Practices on Facebook and TikTok**

I am a young woman and a Christian settler in Mindanao. I am actively engaged in peacebuilding in the region through youth leadership programs, youth peacebuilding dialogues, and peace education for more than a decade through my academic work at Mindanao State University and my leadership role in the Young Women+Leaders for Peace Philippines, an organisation advocating for young women's leadership for peace. It is through this positioning that I examine the digital peacebuilding practices of young women on social media. The empirical data analysed in this article stems from thirty (30) young women leaders, ages 18-30, who identify as, or are descendants of, Muslim, Lumad, and Christian settlers in Mindanao, Southern Philippines, collectively referred to as the *tri-people youth*. These young women are leading peacebuilding initiatives within BARMM or hold leadership roles in youth-led organisations in the region. The data gathered includes 300 social media posts, including audience engagement, of these young women leaders on TikTok and Facebook gathered in the span of three months. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023), the study critically examines key issues and themes in women's digital peacebuilding strategies in the Philippines. This paper presents preliminary findings from Phase 1, focusing on social media analysis, while Phase 2, involving interviews and co-participatory workshops with young women, is not included in these initial results.

## **Mobilising non-violent actions, solidarity and care for peacebuilding**

Muslim, Lumad, and Christian young women build solidarity through social media to advocate for their representation in formal and informal peace and security decision-making forums, access to peace education and training opportunities, and platforms to network and learn. They seek protection from various forms of violence, including armed conflict and gender-based violence. They strongly oppose those resorting to violence in resolving conflicts and stand in solidarity with victims of war, including those affected by the war in Gaza. Interestingly, each group of women also has specific agendas: Lumad young women focus on mobilising solidarity around land rights and addressing their marginalisation within BARMM, Muslim young women work towards combating anti-Islamic rhetoric, emphasising the peaceful aspects of Islam, and Christian young women prioritise peace education and interfaith dialogue as pathways to peace across sectors. This showcases the heterogenous conception of peace among

these young women and unique experiences and perceptions of violence and insecurity rooted in their diverse and intersecting ethnic and religious identity.

Care is pivotal in their digital peacebuilding, both self and community care. Self-care includes exercising, travelling, socialising with friends, and engaging in mutual aid. Young women also align much of their self-care to spirituality, particularly Muslim young women embracing Islamic teachings to care for themselves and their community. This also includes taking care of each other and their community. For example, on December 3, 2023, after the bombing attack at the Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi City, which is a predominantly Islamic area within BARMM, during a campus Catholic mass that claimed four lives and injured several others, Muslim female leaders took to social media. They offer their homes to Christian individuals who feared for their safety after the bombing. Some provided shawls to women who were concerned about being targeted as Christians and facilitated transportation for those who wished to return home following the incident. This aligns with existing literature on the role of care, challenging the rigidities of conflict, strengthening social relations, transformative and peaceful outcomes (Vaittinen et al., 2019). Digital technologies, adept at forging connections and infiltrating intimate daily spaces, are well-suited for nurturing caring relationships (Papacharissi, 2010).

### **‘Platform vernaculars’ for peacebuilding**

Young women’s digital peacebuilding extends beyond the mere use of technology to promote peace and encompasses unique ‘platform vernaculars’, which Gibbs et al., (2015) define as distinctive combination of styles, grammars, and logics inherent to social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice. For example, preliminary findings suggest young women use TikTok to disseminate information, transforming it into a channel for current affairs updates of the ongoing peace process in BARMM. They also use TikTok and Facebook trends to discuss cultural practices linked to violence. For example, the "Of Course" trend is used by a young Muslim Maranao woman leader to initiate a conversation on *maratabat*’s role in clan conflicts. Maratabat, integral to Maranao culture, involves personal honour and dignity and can lead to violent retaliation when offended. Such discussions deepen understanding of cultural concepts like *maratabat* and the need for positive transformation. Another trend, “A day in my life”, offers insights into their routines, including how they organise community dialogues and capacity-building training in BARMM, providing glimpses into their workplaces and self-care practices as part of their work.

Additionally, after the MSU bombing, young women leaders updated their profiles with the MSU logo and applied a black and white filter. They posted the black and white university logo on their timelines as a gesture of solidarity, sympathy, and condolences to the victims and their families. This practice is not solely exclusive to the young women leaders included in the research, it was also adopted by numerous users I have observed who follow or are friends with them on their Facebook and TikTok accounts.

Black-and-white filters have been employed in online protests. For example, the #ChallengeAccepted trend, believed to have originated in Turkey after the tragic murder of 27-year-old Pinar Gultekin allegedly by her ex-boyfriend. Turkish people on social media began posting black-and-white pictures of women who had been killed by men as a means of condemning femicide (Lorenz, 2020). Here, young women leaders used black-and-white profile filters to express solidarity and share in the grief of the mourning Christian community. This action also aimed to counter the emergence of anti-Islamic and divisive Muslim-versus-Christian narratives following the bombing, especially considering it occurred during a mass celebration.

### **Young Women leading "Digital Peacebuilding"**

Overall, the paper underscores how young women's peacebuilding efforts are often ignored in formal processes and shows how their contribution to peace via social media is generative. Social media provides them with a vital platform to express their peace agenda, showcasing their everyday peace efforts and nuanced views on violence and insecurity. Their diverse and intersecting identities enrich broader peacebuilding discussions, contributing to national and international peace and security agendas.

The varied approaches adopted by young women on TikTok and Facebook align closely with Lederach's (1997) multidimensional framework of peace, which encompasses personal, relational, structural, and cultural aspects of conflict. Observing young women's social media posts, it's evident that they engage in practices aimed at self-care (personal dimension), fostering community well-being, promoting intra and interfaith dialogue, and extending mutual aid (interpersonal dimension). Furthermore, they advocate for youth inclusion in decision-making processes related to peace and security (structural dimension) and embrace narratives of diversity while critically examining cultural aspects that perpetuate violence (cultural dimension). This also resonates with Benjamin's (2022) concept of "viral justice," which entails cultivating the world we envision through nurturing relationships, trust, skills, community accountability, and healing. Achieving this involves developing new internal habits, promoting restorative interactions, dismantling institutional inequalities, and fostering alternative structural possibilities.

In addition to these actions, young women employ discursive strategies marked by non-violent communication when interacting with their audience, especially those holding differing viewpoints. They emphasise clear, empathetic communication and create space for respectful disagreement without hastily dismissing dissenting opinions. They also demonstrate how to demand accountability from institutions in nonviolent means.

The combination of immediacy, sustained action through multimodal approaches, and the incorporation of pop culture in social media content and strategies of young women leaders illustrates the expansive reach of digital peacebuilding, bridging both public and private spheres. This departure from an institutional-centric view of peacebuilding highlights how peace manifests in everyday life and how the use of digital technologies, particularly social media, is shaped by the online and offline subjectivities and intersecting identities of young women. Not only does this visibility amplify the efforts of young women, but it also reinforces their ownership of the peace process and solidifies their leadership in the peacebuilding space.

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