

Report about the symposium on “Refugees and Peace: Situated Knowledge, Lived Experience, and Gender Dynamics”

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On 9th and 10th October 2023, the team of the Junior Professorship for Forced Migration and Refugee Studies at Osnabrück University hosted a symposium titled “*Refugees and Peace: Situated Knowledge, Lived Experience, and Gender Dynamics*”. It was organized by Ulrike Krause, Nadine Segadlo and Hannah Edler and supported by Anna Werning to mark the end of the research project “*Women, Forced Migration – and Peace? Peacebuilding Practices of Women in Refugee Camps*” funded by the German Foundation for Peace Research (DSF). The symposium was held in a hybrid format so that a total of 18 participants from universities and institutions across Europe, Africa, Australia, and North America were able to attend.

Approach and overview

Whereas scholars in Forced Migration Studies have extensively examined the relation between conflict and displacement, peace has widely been neglected thus far. The symposium and its associated research project sought to address this gap by exploring the various meanings that displaced people ascribe to peace and ways in which they contribute to peaceful conditions. With this focus, peace is not reduced to the absence of violence or war, but broadly captured as a multifaceted, relational, and dynamic social phenomenon. The symposium drew on this understanding and placed the focus on situated knowledge, lived experiences, and gender dynamics of peace-related practices.

To facilitate a fruitful discussion, the symposium brought together an interdisciplinary group of researchers with and without lived experiences of displacement to engage in a total of four sessions:

- *What do we (not) know? Displacement, Peace, and Gender* with contributions by Elisabeth Olivius (Umeå University), James Milner (Carleton University), and Ulrike Krause (Osnabrück University)
- *Peaceful Women, Violent Men? Coloniality, Peace, and Gender in Displacement* with contributions by Philipp Schulz (University of Bremen), Zeynep Pinar Erdem (MOSAIC Mena) and David Onen Ongwech (Makerere University), Rose Jaji (German Institute of Development and Sustainability), and Samuel Binja Cimanuka (Kalobeyi Initiative for Better Life, Kakuma-Kalobeyi)
- *Making Refugees Peaceful? Humanitarian Governance, Gender Experiences, and Contesting Practices* with contributions by Franzisca Zanker (Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg), Nadine Segadlo (Osnabrück University), Sudi Omar (Girl Power Initiative, Kakuma), and Yvette Ruzibiza (Business School of Copenhagen)

- *“We are Creating Peace!” Displaced People’s Perceptions of and Practices for Peace* with contributions by Abubakar Rugamba Kabura (Fitgang, Kakuma, Xavier University), Hannah Edler (Osnabrück University), and Lydia Gitau (University of New South Wales)

This report summarizes the main topics discussed during the symposium presentations. Hence, it does not reproduce the concrete remarks by participants but instead outlines the core areas addressed.

Session I: What do we (not) know? Displacement, Peace, and Gender

In the first presentation, Elisabeth Olivius provided a brief overview of various theoretical approaches to peace from peace as everyday practices, over negative and positive peace interpretations to idealized perceptions of utopian peace meanings, concluding that there is a lack of clarity about what exactly is spoken of when discussing the term ‘peace’. She drew on her research on women’s activities in humanitarian aid and diaspora politics in refugee camps and its consequences for gender equality. Here, she differentiated between peacebuilding in exile and in the diaspora. The former involves everyday actions for social change through insurgent citizenship and prefigurative politics, while the latter seeks to influence national peacebuilding processes in the countries of origin. Thus, refugees can perceive refugee camps as sites of peacebuilding by becoming actively involved in peacebuilding processes even before armed conflicts in the countries of origin have ceased.

James Milner challenged the missing bridge between evidence of peace(building) in Forced Migration Studies and the conversations in Peace and Conflict Studies. Tackling the important questions about where and when peacebuilding takes place, how it is constituted, and by whom its processes are influenced, needs such a bridge between the two fields of studies. He argued that refugees can be considered ‘peacebuilders’ when they are taking lead in participating and demonstrating agency and leadership. He also agreed that in line with a positive definition of peace, the refugees’ engagement in the establishment of social systems working towards a resolution of the conflict often begins before armed conflict has even subsided. What is more, he points to the fact that refugees engaging in peacebuilding processes often reside in neighboring countries which consequently extends the scope of peacebuilding processes beyond the country of conflict. Taking these findings to a meta-level,

Ulrike Krause elaborated on how knowledge about peace has been produced in academic discourses so far. She focused on three key arguments of Western, top-down and androcentric knowledge production. She revealed that peace concepts have largely been developed in Western research institutions whereas postcolonial approaches along with the effects of colonial structures on shaping peace and power have long been neglected. Moreover, peace has been primarily explored by scholars focusing on political levels such as state and international organizations; the recent ‘local turn’ in critical peace research contributed to change toward studies on how people contribute to peace. Yet, displaced people have not yet been considered. Finally, she criticized that peace has been embedded in androcentric perspectives

due to the public/private divide; only the male-dominated public and thus political sphere was deemed relevant, while the private, apolitical realm traditionally associated with women and LGBTQ+ people was excluded. She stressed the need for a shift in perspective to broaden and deepen understandings of the varieties of peace that consider intersectional relations in displaced people's perceptions of and practices for peace beyond such binaries and heteronormativity.

The subsequent discussion further explored the roles of refugees in peace-related processes. Participants highlighted that humanitarian systems often perceive refugees as passive and in need of education on peace and democratic values. Peace education programs, however, are embedded in a system of power and knowledge production that favor Western understandings of peace and fail to acknowledge refugees' perspectives on peace. This results in peace-related practices of refugees being silenced and marginalized which lead to discussions on peace that neglect its complexity, fluidity, and heterogeneity. Participants emphasized how refugees not only actively envision their ideas of peace but should have every right to act on these ideas of peace and build on them. In this context, also the linkage between economic development and peace was pointed out to underline how collective contributions to peace need a state of well-being and economic securities for everyone. As peace perceptions are filled with ambiguities, peace(building) processes and peace research need to refrain from a checklist-like understanding of peace risking reductionism and instead push forward discursive approaches to peace.

Session II: Peaceful Women, Violent Men? Coloniality, Peace, and Gender in Displacement

The first contribution by Rose Jaji addressed masculinity in the context of displacement and conflict. She pointed out how, in conflict situations, masculinity is oftentimes associated with being strong enough to endure and stay behind. Consequently, the masculinity of male refugees is challenged as they flee. What is overlooked, however, is that while there are many armed men in violent conflicts, a majority are unarmed because of an unequal division of labor and, therefore, more likely to flee. In this context, she also highlighted that men are not born to be violent but are taught to be. Further, is it inherent that women are naturally peaceful? It is necessary bearing in mind the question of who people were before their displacement. How do we perceive them as (not) peaceful and why?

Following this, Philipp Schulz, Zeynep Pinar Erdem, and David Onen Ongwech challenged the binary and heteronormative thinking of agent versus victim suggested by the title of the session. Taking the example of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), they argued that both agency and victimhood can be present at the same time regardless of gender or sexual orientation: Men, for instance, can be subject to SGBV and still be actively involved in conflict and peace. Therefore, the speakers called for a more intersectional understanding of (gender-based) violence that also includes diverse LGBTQIA+ experiences and overcomes gendered assumptions.

While introducing the work of the refugee-led community-based organization Kalobeyi Initiative for Better Life in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya and reporting on his practical experiences, Samuel Binja Cimanuka then added to the deconstruction of the agent-victim dichotomy. He stated that many initiatives in refugee camps are, in fact, led by women, and, therefore, could act as agents while still being vulnerable. However, he criticized that attention has been insufficient by academics and humanitarian agencies, and thus called for change.

In the following discussion, the importance of emphasizing interconnected dimensions, such as gender, race, and class, when reviewing peace concepts as well as the incorporation of pre-colonial concepts of gender, violence, and peace in analytical research frameworks were stressed. There is limited knowledge and also research on the perceptions of gender, violence, and peace before colonization. Discussants pointed out how understandings of these social phenomenon can differ from Western theoretical concepts when considering local spaces of knowledge production. These differences and contradicting points of view are needed to unravel colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative, and binary perceptions of the relationships between gender, race, violence, and peace. The discussion also revolved around questions of how to approach translating theory into actual policies and overcoming gender binarities in practice. An additional point discussed in this context concerns the aspect of translating peace, but also other concepts, into different languages and taking into consideration local meanings attached to terms.

Session III: Making Refugees Peaceful? Humanitarian Governance, Gender Experiences, and Contesting Practices

The presentation by Franzisca Zanker shed light on a contradiction between theory and practice: While refugees are often expected to take responsibility for their own lives, find a job and adapt to so-called democratic values, they are not given the space to act out their agency freely. Oftentimes, refugees find themselves in a highly politicized environment with a variety of actors trying to enforce their interests and categorizing people as migrants or refugees due to external and internal pressures that result in a restriction of (political) rights and agency.

In addition, Yvette Ruzibiza critically remarked on approaches to vulnerability. She warned not to completely neglect the diverse individual vulnerabilities of refugees when analyzing their agency. Their lived experiences in situations of confined refugee camps, for instance, often includes limited health care, education, political rights, and economic opportunities. These wide-ranging challenges cause experiences of uncertainty and hopelessness but this does not mean that refugees do not practices agency. Instead, they cope with the issues they are confronted with. This is why she suggests to carefully consider which category to put emphasis on before starting research.

Nadine Segadlo then shared insights into how humanitarian agencies seek to ensure a peaceful life in refugee camps. On the one hand, agencies strengthen police and security forces in the camps as to secure

the physical peace of refugees. On the other hand, they engage in peace education to “civilize reluctant refugees”. This reveals the underlying assumption that peace values are not present in displaced communities and the time refugees spend in camps, is seen as a transformative period.

Sudi Omar supported these findings drawing on her experiences in working with refugee girls in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. She argued that humanitarian agencies engage in peace education but then do not include refugees in peace processes. She, therefore, suggests using the community as a starting point for sustainable conflict resolution and going beyond sole peace education and capacity building. Instead, displaced communities need to be actively included and take lead in peace.

The discussion that followed first revolved around the question of how political a refugee’s agency is in itself. Referring to refugees finding themselves in a highly politicized context, agency is acted out in relation to other actors depending on a refugee’s positionality and power constellations in the respective contexts. Taking up the discussion from session one and circling back to the nature of peace education programs, one participant proposed the differentiation between the hardware of peace, i.e. police and security forces that ensure that no fighting takes place, and the software of peace that includes the mental and psychological dimension of it. In this context, participants also emphasized how police forces as well as ideas of security can have various meanings depending on the community. Furthermore, questions on the effects of peace education on the host communities were raised: Do they actually not also need to be educated on peace in the same way as displaced people are?

Session IV: “We are Creating Peace!” Displaced People’s Perceptions of and Practices for Peace

Lydia Gitau opened the fourth discussion with a video showing young people engaging in their own or their family’s refugee journey through poetry and sharing challenges related to their mental health and questions of identity and belonging. Based on the video, she drew the conclusion that peace cannot be established with a top-down approach but, as a concept, varies from community to community. Therefore, it is important to stay open and engage with the refugees through what she calls political listening, meaning listening with intent and broader societal change in mind.

Abubakar Rugamba Kabura then explained how sport activities, his initiative offers in Kakuma refugee camp, enable refugees to experience what he calls inner peace. Engaging in physical activity in a safe space helps refugees to enhance emotional connections with people from diverse backgrounds and become aware of cultural diversity. He essentially stressed the importance of locally-led initiatives of refugees which contribute to their wellbeing and peaceful surrounding far beyond the humanitarian structure that govern camps.

In a similar vein, Hannah Edler described how interlocutors from the research project, who have settled down in Germany, perceive peace. For them, a peaceful life includes physical and economic securities

and mental well-being that allows refugees to plan ahead with regard to education or family. Furthermore, peace is associated with mutual recognition, respect, tolerance, and the freedom to speak or better yet express oneself freely. While interlocutors shared many experiences of structural violence in their lives, they nevertheless strove to impact peace on a structural, collective, and individual level in reaction to or despite of violent surroundings.

Subsequently, participants discussed challenges in defining peace while incorporating experiences from displaced communities. For one, refugees are still expected to somehow prove that they are peaceful and willing to adapt. What is more, inner peace is often considered a taboo topic as it is associated with vulnerability and weakness. On a broader level, participants also questioned the use of the term refugee in general. Should it be abandoned due to its dehumanizing character? What to make of the privileges the refugee status carries? And how can scholars translate their insights from academia to a broader public without reproducing a stereotypical image of a refugee? Accepting the label as a refugee has been pointed out to be a way of coping with its effects; yet it should not mean that one is limited to being a refugee alone. Peace here was emphasized by participants with or without lived experiences of displacement in relation to humanity: Peace means being human and being treated as such. Participants thus questioned ascribed roles of not only ‘peacebuilders’ or ‘peace-creators’, but also of ‘peace-spoilers’ or ‘peace-bystanders’. Who are they and how do they need to be considered in conversations and research on peace meanings as well as in the constitution of peace processes?

Conclusions

The discussion at the symposium first and foremost revealed the urgent need for further research about the relation of peace and displacement beyond the Western approaches that have characterized research debates thus far. It is necessary to let go of top-down understandings and instead place a focus on local understandings of peace. Time and again, participants criticized that the relation between peace and displacement has widely been neglected in research. It is therefore all the more important to take local perspectives on peace as well as those of displaced people into account when exploring the complex variety of peace in the future. This includes practicing political listening when speaking with refugees about their perspectives on peace. Political and humanitarian actors should further support refugees’ engagements in peace processes instead of solely educating them on Western ideas of peace. On top of that, it is necessary to consider pre-colonial ideas of peace, violence, and gender. This helps to diversify understandings of peace, to counter unequal power structures, and to contribute to overcoming gendered assumptions as well as gender binarities in the context of peace and displacement.

The symposium was organized as part of the project [“Forced Migration, Women – and Peace? Peacebuilding practices of women in refugee camps”](#) funded by DSF, led by Ulrike Krause, carried out with Nadine Segadlo and Hannah Edler, and supported by Anna Werning at Osnabrück University.