

# “Until Lasting Peace”

## Diaspora Women Building Peace Where They Are

### CASE STUDY: THE NETHERLANDS

*Leading Change: Peacebuilding Initiatives of Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch Women in the Netherlands*

This case study is part of the *“Until Lasting Peace”: Diaspora Women Building Peace Where They Are* report created by the Women PeaceMakers program.

## “Until Lasting Peace”

In an era defined by human mobility and multiple, mutually reinforcing crises, diaspora communities have emerged as vital actors in shaping peace and social cohesion—far beyond the traditional boundaries of conflict zones or homeland politics. Yet, the contributions of women within these transnational networks remain obscured by disciplinary silos and policy frameworks that too often address peacebuilding, migration and gender in isolation. The *“Until Lasting Peace”: Diaspora Women Building Peace Where They Are* report begins from the conviction that understanding diaspora women’s peace work demands an integrated lens—one that traces the trajectories of diverse migration waves, centers gendered experiences, and bridges the worlds of international law, community activism and feminist care.

At the heart of this inquiry lies the question of how existing international frameworks—embodied, among others, in the Women, Peace and Security agenda, global migration agreements and human rights treaties—create (or fail to create) an enabling environment for diaspora women to be recognized and well supported agents of peace. This research interrogates how international instruments recognize (or omit) the capacity, participation, leadership, resources and belonging of diaspora women.

This report was co-created by the three 2024-2025 Women PeaceMaker Fellows — Bochra Laghssais from Morocco and living in the Netherlands, Mariia Levchenko from Ukraine and living in Germany and Temi Mwale from the United Kingdom — and was supported by leaders in the peacebuilding field, who provided their own expertise and perspectives to shape this work. By bringing together insights from generational legacies, long-standing communities and emergent diaspora networks, this report offers a multidimensional analysis that transcends geography and history. This report seeks to chart a path toward policies and practices that not only acknowledge diaspora women’s agency but actively support their leadership in forging just and lasting peace across borders.

Since 2002, the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (Kroc IPJ) at the University of San Diego’s Kroc School has hosted the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship program. The Fellowship offers a unique opportunity for peacebuilders who focus on issues of gender, peace and conflict to engage in a cycle of learning, practice, research and participation that strengthens peacebuilding partnerships. The Women PeaceMakers Fellowship facilitates impactful collaborations between peacebuilders from conflict-affected communities and international partner organizations. The Fellows also co-create research intended to shape the peacebuilding field and highlight good practices for peacebuilding design and implementation.



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# Case study

## The Netherlands

### Leading Change: Peacebuilding Initiatives of Amazigh Moroccan- Dutch Women in the Netherlands

CASE STUDY

By Bochra Laghssais



#### Context<sup>a</sup>

The Amazigh people are the Indigenous people of North Africa, who have been colonized by various civilizations from the Arab Muslim conquests in the 7th century to the French and Spanish states in the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, these communities reject the stigmatizing, pejorative term Berbers, preferring to call themselves Amazigh, which in the Tamazight language means “free noble people.”<sup>1</sup>

This case study explores how Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women in the diaspora navigate questions of identity and culture while integrating into European society and naturalizing in the Netherlands. It focuses particularly on their self-organized peacebuilding efforts within their local communities.

Following World War II, the Dutch economy recovered faster than expected, creating a shortage of low-skilled labor. While the Netherlands initially recruited workers from Southern Europe (Italy, Spain and Greece), in 1969, the Netherlands and Morocco signed a bilateral recruitment agreement that formalized the hiring of Moroccan guest laborers (gastarbeiders).<sup>2</sup> This agreement accounted for only about 4,000 workers.<sup>3</sup> The majority of Moroccan workers had already arrived outside formal channels through spontaneous migration before 1969 or continued to migrate independently afterward.<sup>4</sup>

Komitee van Marokkaanse Arbeiders in Nederland (KMAN) — Committee of Moroccan Workers in the Netherlands was established in 1975 to protect and advocate for Moroccan worker rights in the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup> Once it became clear that most of these guest workers would stay in the Netherlands permanently, the workers’ wives and children followed them in the second wave of migration.<sup>6</sup> The Minorities Act of 1983 was introduced as part of a broader policy shift that formally recognized several immigrant groups (including Moroccans) as ethnic minorities, entitled to targeted policies for integration, equal opportunities and participation.<sup>7</sup>

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a Literature review support from Sara Kuhn

In the 1980s, the economic landscape in the Netherlands changed dramatically, with a significant decline in manual labor opportunities. Unemployment among Moroccan men rose sharply, particularly in labor-intensive sectors. In response, many Moroccan women entered the labor force for the first time, often becoming the primary breadwinners. This shift in economic roles gave women more decision-making power within the household and enhanced their autonomy in managing transnational relationships with family in Morocco.<sup>8</sup> Having their own income enabled women to make independent choices about remittances, travel and financial obligations, helping to reshape gender dynamics within the diaspora.<sup>9</sup> Gender also shaped the nature of transnational engagement. While some men, facing status loss due to unemployment, maintained stronger ties with Morocco to regain a sense of respect, many women, empowered by work and education, became more locally oriented and less focused on return migration.<sup>10</sup>

It was within this period that the Marokkaanse Vrouwen Vereniging Nederland (MVVN)- Moroccan Women's Association Netherlands was founded in 1982 as one of the most influential organizations focused on the empowerment of Moroccan women in the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup> Over time, it evolved into a strong advocacy platform addressing domestic violence, women's rights and independent residency rights for migrant women. It also played a significant role in transnational activism, campaigning for reforms to Morocco's family law (Moudawana).<sup>12</sup>

Despite over sixty years of Moroccan presence in the Netherlands, discussions around integration still persist today. According to historian Nadia Bouras, a key reason lies in the Dutch government's early approach to labor migration.<sup>13</sup> Moroccan guest workers were seen as temporary laborers who would eventually return to Morocco. As a result, policies in the 1960s and 1970s encouraged strong ties with the country of origin. One example of this approach was Onderwijs in Eigen Taal en Cultuur (OETC)- Education in Own Language and Culture, which offered Arabic classes to prepare children for eventual return.<sup>14</sup> While these policies initially supported cultural retention, they laid a fragmented foundation that would later complicate integration efforts.<sup>15</sup>

By the 1990s, Dutch integration policy and political discourse shifted in response to concerns about integration outcomes. This shift was not limited to rhetorical framing but reflected concrete policy changes and public narratives promoted by key actors. Political leaders, such as Minister Eberhard van der Laan, voiced concerns about migrants maintaining strong ties to Morocco, portraying such attachments as signs of divided loyalty and barriers to integration.<sup>16</sup> Parliamentary debates and integration policy documents increasingly echoed the idea that successful integration required diminishing transnational ties. The state moved from supporting transnational cultural ties to actively discouraging them. Connections to Morocco came to be viewed not as bridges but as barriers to national cohesion.<sup>17</sup> This marked what Bouras describes as the "problematization of transnationalism."<sup>18</sup> Politically, dual citizenship raised questions about migrant loyalty. Economically, investments in Morocco were portrayed as harmful to the Dutch economy because remittances and investments abroad were believed to divert resources that could otherwise strengthen the Netherlands.<sup>19</sup> Culturally, continued attachment to Morocco was seen as the root of failed integration.<sup>20</sup> As a result, responsibility for integration failures was increasingly placed on the behaviors and cultural practices of migrants themselves rather than on structural or policy shortcomings.<sup>21</sup> This ideological shift from enabling return to penalizing connection redefined how the state viewed migrant communities and reshaped both policy and public discourse.<sup>22</sup>

The Amazigh Moroccan community in the Netherlands is diverse,<sup>23</sup> with the majority originating from the Rif region,<sup>24</sup> which has a distinct identity rooted in its unique history, including the Rif Republic (1921–1926) and recent movements like Hirak El-Rif (2016). This regional identity shaped migration patterns and influences how diasporic identities have evolved.

Throughout this case study, the terms first, second and third generation are used. Formally they are defined as:

- **First generation:** people born in Morocco who have migrated to the Netherlands
- **Second generation:** people born in the Netherlands with migrant parents
- **Third generation:** children of the second generation; they and their parents were born in the Netherlands



This case study focuses on two distinct aspects of peacebuilding. On the one hand it looks at different types of violences as a continuum,<sup>25</sup> how they are interconnected and how to address these directly. This perspective aligns with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, particularly its focus on the need to address violence in both conflict and peacetime contexts.<sup>26</sup> Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women in the Netherlands have traditionally suffered structural violence manifested through discrimination in housing, employment and healthcare; symbolic and cultural violence such as negative media representation and denial of language and identity; and gendered social control within their communities, including stigmatization, early marriage and the under-recognition of their peacebuilding and caregiving work. On the other hand, the case study looks at peace beyond the absence of violence and tries to highlight activities of Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women to actively build peace as an alternative and preventative measure to violence. It focuses on Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women's self-organized peacebuilding through neighborhood initiatives, community projects, informal mediation of conflict, cultural event curation and digital peacebuilding efforts. In doing so, this research challenges one-dimensional portrayals and instead centers the strength, resistance and leadership of Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women in the face of enduring adversity.

## Methodology

This case study explores the challenges and adversity faced by Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women and sheds light on their peacebuilding effort in the Netherlands. Specifically, the case study answers the research question:

- How do diaspora Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women in the Netherlands build peace and empower each other through grassroots initiatives within their local communities?

This case study draws on primary data collected through semi-structured interviews, as well as secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, national statistics from the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) in the Netherlands and reports by public institutions.

This case study used qualitative research methods with data collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women in the Netherlands from both the second generation and third generations of Moroccans in the country. In addition, an interview was conducted with Esther Aminata Kamara, an expert on Neighborhood Associations. The interviews were conducted both in person and virtually, using a mixture of English, Dutch, Darija and Tamazight. The researcher translated and transcribed the interviews verbatim into English when needed.

The sample of diasporic participants is comprised of Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women in the Netherlands who identify as Amazigh or Moroccan or Dutch with Moroccan backgrounds and are active in society. They are involved with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or work as entrepreneurs or content creators promoting Amazigh Moroccan culture digitally.

During the initial phase, the researcher encountered challenges in identifying participants who matched the research sample criteria. At first, the search was conducted in English, but most of the information found on Moroccan-led initiatives was focused on philanthropic efforts in Morocco, often carried out by the Moroccan-Dutch diaspora to support their ancestral homeland. English was primarily used to promote these transnational activities. In contrast, the researcher switched to searching in Dutch, which made it more effective to identify peacebuilding initiatives led by Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women at the micro or neighborhood level in the Netherlands, often described using broader terms such as "Dutch women with a migration background." This terminology made it more difficult to locate and engage relevant participants, as their work was less visible and did not appear under conventional search terms. In response, the researcher adjusted the terminology used in the call for participants to ensure that women could recognize themselves in the language and feel a sense of belonging in the invitation.

## Mapping the Landscape: Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch Women and Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding activism and advocacy within the Moroccan community in the Netherlands have traditionally been politically-oriented and male-led, shaped by the initial waves of migration in which men arrived as guest workers. With MCVN's establishment in 1982 as the first formal NGO to support women's empowerment and subsequent efforts in this direction, Moroccan women in the Netherlands became increasingly engaged in society, taking active roles in politics, community building and grassroots leadership. However, they are still expected to fulfill traditional domestic roles as mothers and wives. This creates an intersectional constraint as they navigate the challenge of balancing public responsibilities with private expectations.

Given the migration history of the Moroccan community, interviews with second- and third-generation participants reveal that "diaspora" identity is often associated with a sense of longing. These individuals navigate a fluid identity: born in the Netherlands yet not seen as fully Dutch by broader society. In response, they engage in self-organization to collectively address the challenges of existing as an in-between community.

Still, across both generations, there is a shared sense of pride in their Amazigh Moroccan identity, and it is seen as enrichment. Participants expressed appreciation for the sacrifices made by their parents and grandparents, acknowledging that diaspora identity includes both gratitude and a sense of responsibility to carry their heritage forward. Many of them engage in community projects, artistic expression or cultural initiatives as a way of reconnecting with their roots and honoring their heritage.

When asked about the meaning of diaspora, participants, particularly from the second generation,<sup>27</sup> spoke about growing up in homes where Tamazight, Tarifit or Darija were spoken, in addition to taking Arabic classes. These language skills and home environments reinforced a deep connection to their parents' homeland, even as they navigated life in Dutch society. For the third generation, who are born to parents already born and raised in the Netherlands, this connection often looks different. Their primary language is Dutch, and their cultural ties to Morocco may be more symbolic. However, for some interviewees,<sup>28</sup> "diaspora" means maintaining strong links to the country of origin or their parents' homeland. This sense of connectedness often manifests itself as a feeling of responsibility or commitment to giving back. Many Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women are involved in NGOs and community foundations that collect resources and mobilize aid for Morocco in times of need. One interviewee, Yasmine Bellachi,<sup>29</sup> shared that her NGO right2care organized earthquake relief efforts in 2023 following the earthquake that struck the Marrakech region in Morocco. This highlights how diasporic identity can include transnational solidarity and rapid mobilization during moments of crisis and beyond.

The concept of peace, as understood by the women interviewed in this research, differs from the traditional notion of peace in relation to war and conflict, and is instead focused on ending structural violence. Since the Netherlands is not a conflict zone, peacebuilding for these women is connected to community well-being, solidarity and cultural survival within the Amazigh Moroccan diaspora.

Participants described peacebuilding as a response to the structural challenges of immigration, discrimination and cultural disconnection that span multiple generations. As a result, Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women began organizing among themselves at the community level, developing local neighborhood NGOs that support women's development, foster inclusion and offer culturally safe spaces. Their initiatives include mentorship programs, mediation and dialogue sessions and age-specific activities that address the needs of both youth and elders. In this way, peace is enacted as everyday community care and empowerment.

Since the Netherlands is not a conflict zone, peacebuilding is connected to community well-being, solidarity and cultural survival.



## Manifestations of Challenges and Adversity Among Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch Women in the Diaspora

Challenges vary according to each generation, although they still have points of intersection. These challenges shape the societal isolation felt by Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women, how they interact with public services, relationships within their local micro-Moroccan communities in the Netherlands, and how they carry out peacebuilding work.

### Longing for Belonging

#### *The in-between community*

A common pattern that is reiterated through all interviews is the lack of a sense of belonging to either Morocco or the Netherlands. This pattern is common among the second and third generations. They are the generation in-between: despite being born in the Netherlands and speaking Dutch, they are not seen as Dutch by many of their native peers. When they go to Morocco on vacation, many Moroccans do not view them as Moroccan but see them as Europeans or Dutch. This leaves them alienated in an in-between space. This sense of a lack of belonging led some interviewees to feel frustrated and lost or isolated. Some reported trying to more fully assimilate with their Dutch peers by partaking in various activities that increased their exposure to local Dutch culture, which was not always in line with the cultural preferences of their parents. Some examples given were going to Dutch parties, coloring their hair blonde or wearing blue contact lenses. Other examples counter this completely by embracing their Moroccan identity and rejecting aspects of the Dutch culture that do not resonate with that identity. Some young women alternate between these two options, searching for ways to navigate the in-between.

Given the migration history of the Moroccan community, interviews with second- and third-generation participants reveal that “diaspora” identity is often associated with a sense of longing. These individuals navigate a fluid identity: born in the Netherlands yet not seen as fully Dutch by broader society. In response, they engage in self-organization to collectively address the challenges of existing as an in-between community. This sense of connectedness often manifests itself as a feeling of responsibility or commitment to giving back.

## Societal Challenges

### *Structural challenges*

Although article 1 of the Dutch Constitution states that “[a]ll persons in the Netherlands shall be treated equally in equal circumstances. Discrimination on the grounds of religion, belief, political opinion, race or sex or on any other grounds whatsoever shall not be permitted,”<sup>30</sup> interviewees expressed facing structural violence and systemic racism growing up and living in the Netherlands. This was particularly evident in daily integration into society. Interviewees reiterated that many have not been selected for a job or housing opportunities because of their Moroccan names and backgrounds. In the words of Nisrine Mbarki: “I was just brought up by Dutch people and considered myself Dutch, but of course, we never got the same opportunity as Dutch people.”<sup>31</sup>

Navigating the health system for first-generation women comes with its own set of challenges. Many of these women did not receive formal education, resulting in limited knowledge about reproductive health, nutrition and preventive care. Illiteracy and linguistic exclusion also mean they struggle to read medical texts or understand prescriptions, often leading to untreated or mismanaged conditions.

Interviewees<sup>32</sup> from the second and third generations shared instances where they faced biased assumptions when dealing with health and care systems. One example<sup>33</sup> given was of a participant’s child who had a neurological sleep disorder and before being diagnosed was repeatedly told that he was lazy; a comment, according to the interviewee, less likely given to a person belonging to a higher social class.

Psychological stress caused by migration, social isolation and gendered expectations often manifest physically. This can be understood through the lens of Ulysses Syndrome,<sup>34</sup> a condition describing the chronic and multiple stress symptoms migrants experience due to extreme levels of stress during migration and adaptation.<sup>35</sup> This is reflected in research showing that “relatively more Moroccan women compared to Dutch women in the Netherlands suffer from gynecological complaints (33 percent versus 15 percent); digestive and respiratory problems; and physical problems in general.”<sup>36</sup> Cultural taboos around menstruation, fertility and sexual health often prevent women from seeking timely medical care. Language barriers, distrust or fear of the Dutch medical system and shame, particularly regarding gynecological issues, further compound the delay in accessing appropriate healthcare.

Education and language challenges emerged as a recurring pattern across the interviews. Many participants highlighted the challenges faced by children of the second and third generations who grow up speaking Darija or Tamazight at home. When they enter the Dutch school system, they often experience a Dutch language deficiency (taalachterstand) compared to their peers. This in turn creates an early barrier to educational achievement and can shape how children perceive themselves and how they are treated by teachers and institutions. Data from the Central Statistics Bureau (CBS)<sup>37</sup> confirms that students with a migration background, especially those of Moroccan or Turkish descent, are more likely to receive lower school advice than their native Dutch peers.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it often takes four or five more years of study to reach higher education because they are often placed at the lowest level and must work their way up.

### *Political turmoil and the Moroccan-Muslim experience*

Another recurring concern expressed in the interviews was the growing sense of fear and uncertainty surrounding the rise of far-right politics in the Netherlands, particularly in relation to anti-Moroccan and anti-Muslim rhetoric. The normalization of xenophobic and Islamophobic discourses, especially through political figures like Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders, has had a direct psychological impact on Moroccan communities.<sup>39</sup> Participants shared deep anxiety about raising children in a society where their identity is regularly politicized and targeted.<sup>40</sup> Interviewees’ reflections capture a broader intergenerational fear about worsening conditions and a further diminished sense of belonging for future generations of Moroccan-Dutch youth.



## ***Representation of Moroccans in the Dutch media***

All interviewees expressed that Moroccans are portrayed negatively in the Dutch media on a regular basis. Participants emphasized that media narratives often reinforce harmful stereotypes, particularly portraying Moroccan men as criminals or troublemakers<sup>41</sup> and reducing Moroccan women to one-dimensional stereotypical figures as jobless, illiterate women who care for lots of children and live on social benefits. This provides a very narrow and incomplete perspective on the complex identities, backgrounds and variety amongst these women.

One interviewee expressed more nuanced views, acknowledging both the structural conditions and the media's role in exaggeration.<sup>42</sup> She explained that poverty, lack of opportunity and systemic marginalization are the root causes behind the overrepresentation of Moroccan youth in criminal statistics.<sup>43</sup> However, she stressed that the media sensationalizes this reality. Her reflections underline the danger of media generalizations, which amplify fear and reinforce stigma while ignoring structural causes such as class, exclusion and inequality.

In the context of misrepresentation of Moroccans and their identities in the media, interviewees<sup>44</sup> expressed that their fluid identity as Moroccan, Amazigh, Arab, Dutch, Muslim, North African and female is rarely acknowledged, or, worse, stigmatized. They raised the sentiment that the media focuses on talking about them rather than speaking with them. These harmful portrayals reflect a form of symbolic and cultural violence, reinforcing structures of exclusion and otherness that contribute to the broader continuum of violence experienced by Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch communities.

## **Challenges within the Local Micro-Moroccan Communities**

### ***Pursuit of peace and freedom: Women's experiences in the community***

Many interviewees expressed difficulty in attaining the rights and freedoms ingrained in the Dutch constitution or the basic personal freedoms available to Dutch women in the broader society around them. When asked about hope, many participants expressed a desire for peace and freedom, particularly as they reflected on the stark differences between the Moroccan community in the Netherlands and the one in Morocco. Several described the Moroccan community in the Netherlands as old-fashioned or extremely conservative. This was often explained through the context of migration history. Coming from conservative and economically marginalized backgrounds, many settled in tight-knit enclaves that acted as cultural time capsules, where norms from their rural hometowns were preserved and passed down to their children. Often, families lived close together, in neighborhoods where everybody knew everybody.

While this strong sense of community can offer care, respect and support, it is conditional on one's conformity to unspoken rules of honor, shame and social expectations. Interviewees from the second generation mentioned that in 1980s, it was controversial for women even to light a cigarette, and the community was heavily involved in enforcing this norm. If seen in public, then the parents would be involved. For girls and women, this created a climate of surveillance in which they felt suffocated. One interviewee recalled how her Riffian friends would travel to different cities just to go on a date in secret, fearing gossip or backlash within their own neighborhoods.<sup>45</sup> Early and arranged marriages were common practice.<sup>46</sup> The interviewee recalled three examples of femicide within the community in which women were victimized because of their desire to live lives that did not strictly adhere to the community's expectations and were more in line with lifestyles common to the Dutch society around them.<sup>47</sup> This clash between traditional expectations of virginity and honor and the more liberal norms of Dutch society created intense internal conflict, particularly for young women.

Although the Netherlands is widely regarded as progressive when it comes to women's rights, several interviewees emphasized that legal freedom does not always translate into lived freedom within their communities. Therefore, Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women still face strong expectations around virginity before marriage, motherhood and career choices. Although they are able to attain financial independence as a result of living within a capitalistic system, this does not guarantee real autonomy within their community for many women.

## Challenges Carrying out Peacebuilding Work

### *Challenges of peacebuilders in doing peacebuilding work in the diaspora*

According to the interviewees, challenges around Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women's peacebuilding work is often not recognized, which makes receiving funding difficult. Some stakeholders and institutions that provide funding for this work frame the peacebuilders' contributions as civic engagement rather than peacebuilding, which affects which types of funding are available. This is particularly challenging for work focused on care, emotional support or informal mediation, which is often not counted as peacebuilding in institutional or policy frameworks. However, women leading this work carry a heavy weight; several participants described the relentless demands of community peace work, often characterized by long hours, emotional intensity and a constant state of reactivity. This kind of nonstop caregiving and problem-solving leaves little space for rest, reflection or long-term strategy, which leads to emotional exhaustion, blurred personal boundaries and burnout.

While many Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women's NGOs operate on an open-door approach, which is intentionally inclusive and trauma-informed, it often limits organizations' ability to document, evaluate or advocate for the value of their work.<sup>48</sup> They foster an environment of mutual trust for their participants by creating an environment that offers anonymity and safety.<sup>49</sup> This trusted environment is created through the social proximity of the peacebuilders to the participants of the programs, but this also exacerbates complexities around documentation and advocacy regarding their efforts. Women's peacebuilding leadership within these programs stems from a sense of caring, kindness, empathy, trust, relational depth and family-centered service of their communities. A lot of work done by these women is not recognized as work but as raising the children and keeping the neighborhood clean.<sup>50</sup> Women's soft power is undervalued, untracked and underfunded because of this. A lot of activities within these programs lean on the women's soft power and the impact their "mothering" nature can have on its participants. Activities include breakfast gatherings, informal conversations, cooking classes, Dutch language lessons, sewing workshops, Pilates sessions and mother-daughter events. Some activities, such as "informal conversations" are intentionally vague, as it allows for the peacebuilders to interact with participants on a deeper personal level.

As a result, women leading these efforts are often overlooked for funding, recognition or collaboration in funding opportunities driven by local municipalities and various private funds. This challenge reflects a broader disconnect between how peacebuilding is defined and how it is actually practiced in migrant communities.

Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women peacebuilders in the Netherlands navigate an intersectional set of challenges based in structural bias towards "otherness", gendered expectations and cultural in-betweenness. Their peacebuilding efforts are often hindered by exclusion from public services, national and social media, and challenges present for women within their own communities. These difficulties are not only deeply gendered but also intergenerational, emotional and political. Despite these barriers, many continue to resist, adapt and advocate — often at great personal cost — to try and provide a better future for those within their own local communities.

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## Building Peace from the Margins: Initiatives and Successes of Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch Women

Although they face challenges, Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women lead a range of peacebuilding and community building initiatives. Initiatives investigated through this research generally fall within the themes of grassroots local neighborhood initiatives, cultural curation as peacebuilding and the digital space as a form of peacebuilding.

### **Buurtmoeders Initiatives (Neighborhood Mothers Initiatives)**

Grassroots local neighborhood NGOs such as Stichting Home Empowerment, Stichting Nisa for Nisa, Stichting Buurtmoeders Krachtmoeders, Stichting Dappere Dames and Stichting Prachtvrouw play a vital role in supporting Dutch women with a migration background, particularly those from Amazigh Moroccan communities. These organizations focus on the development and emancipation of women by providing safe, trusted and culturally sensitive environments.

Activities include breakfast gatherings, informal conversations, cooking classes, Dutch language lessons, sewing workshops, Pilates sessions and mother-daughter events. These types of activities are mainly targeted at first-generation diaspora women who feel alienated and depressed, often linked to factors like poverty, unemployment, and linguistic and external cultural stigma. These conditions often lead to a lack of self-esteem and difficulties interacting with society around them.

An interview participant emphasized the importance of creating safe spaces for teenage girls, especially regarding issues of online safety and sexual exploitation.<sup>51</sup> One interviewee expressed that “one of the big problems facing this community is online safety. Girls are lured into sending nude pictures and then get exposed. Sometimes even normal pictures are altered with AI or Photoshop and shared in Telegram groups. These organizations help girls understand these risks and protect themselves.”<sup>52</sup>

Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women’s local NGOs often act as informal mediators between residents and external institutions, helping to bridge a gap marked by mutual distrust and prejudice, especially in areas like Amsterdam Nieuw-West.<sup>53</sup> Communities may view some official institutions with suspicion, while these institutions often see such neighborhoods as “vulnerable” or “problematic.” NGOs counter this by creating trusted spaces for dialogue, where community-led gatherings invite institutions to engage in ways that prioritize local needs.<sup>54</sup> This grassroots mediation enables social services to operate more effectively by fostering trust, care and mutual understanding.

Interviewees shared that another key method through which women contribute to peacebuilding in their communities is by participating in Prevention Rounds focused on de-escalating street violence and offering care-based engagement. These women, often referred to as neighborhood mothers, walk through their local streets to offer presence, support and informal guidance, especially to young people. They describe their role as not to police, but to act as visible and trusted figures, often regarded as “aunties” in the community who create a sense of safety through familiarity, relational trust and care.<sup>55</sup> Their presence became especially visible during an incident in November 2024, when unrest broke out at Plein 40-45 in Amsterdam Nieuw West following a Maccabi Tel Aviv vs Ajax soccer match, during which a tram was set on fire.<sup>56</sup> The neighborhood mothers, wearing their yellow vests, stepped in and helped calm tensions and de-escalate the situation through their trusted relationships with local youth.

Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women’s local NGOs often act as informal mediators between residents and external institutions, helping to bridge a gap marked by mutual distrust and prejudice.

## Cultural Curation as Peacebuilding: Reclaiming the Narrative

A growing number of Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women are reclaiming cultural spaces as sites of peacebuilding by using art, storytelling and heritage work to promote dialogue, visibility and community healing. While their mediums vary, what unites them is their commitment to challenging dominant narratives, preserving cultural identity and fostering intercultural connection.

Together, Myriam Sahraoui,<sup>57</sup> Nisrine Mbarki<sup>58</sup> and Warda El-Kaddouri<sup>59</sup> contribute to peacebuilding through curating cultural production spaces that promote dialogue, visibility and recognition for marginalized voices, particularly Amazigh and Moroccan women. Their work demonstrates that peacebuilding is not limited to conflict mediation or grassroots social work, but can also take place in theatres, museums, books, exhibitions, literary festivals and other creative gatherings.

Fatima Oulad Thami — Hand of Fatima is a henna artist who engages in peacebuilding through what she calls the intentional reclamation of cultural heritage.<sup>60</sup> She hosts gatherings, workshops and conversations centered around sisterhood, decolonial storytelling and cultural empowerment. Her work includes the Restore the Narrative project, in which she overlays colonial-era postcards with henna patterns to reclaim representation and rewrite visual histories. Fatima said, “[i]t was never about us; now it’s time that we tell our own stories.”<sup>61</sup>

Through these events the artists create spaces for alternative narratives and intercultural dialogue and connect people beyond politics and conflict. During these events, visitors from all kinds of backgrounds can learn about multi-layered North African cultural identity and connect with each other on these topics to break down stereotypes and promote cultural understanding and peaceful coexistence.

## The Digital Space as a form of Peacebuilding

Digital platforms are increasingly becoming vital peacebuilding spaces for third-generation Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women, who use social media visibility and storytelling to challenge dominant narratives and foster connection, pride and representation.

Through curating content that combines everyday culture, critical reflection and public discourse, online spaces become tools of decolonial knowledge-sharing and grassroots peacebuilding, reaching young audiences often excluded from traditional activism.

These initiatives attempt to transform the perspectives of the general population’s often polarized and complete view of the Moroccan-Dutch community to a more holistic and complete perspective that fosters respect, understanding and appreciation for their fluid identities.

For example, Yasmine Bellachi’s online Instagram channel provides a new space for intergenerational dialogue.<sup>62</sup> She coins this the middle ground or “gray space” that reflects experiences of the hybrid identities of Moroccan diaspora in the Netherlands; before she created this space, women were generally categorized as one of two opposites: either as conservative women, who were illiterate and unintegrated, or as women who were fully assimilated. There was no space in between for people to navigate and foster understanding of the full spectrum of identity that lies between these opposites.

In an interview conducted for this research, Warda El-Kaddouri<sup>63</sup> spoke about an initiative called Grote Spelers, a community academy for youth aged 16 to 35. The academy supports young students and professionals from marginalized areas by helping them build networks, confidence and practical skills. “They don’t have the tools or network to get the jobs they’re qualified for, so this program teaches them how to connect, how to build a CV and how to access their own potential,” Warda explained.<sup>64</sup> Strengthening the ability of these young people to better tap into their own potential reduces the chances of them engaging in unlawful activities.



Grote Spelers also hosts a digital podcast, which serves as a powerful platform for representation and hope. The podcast features guests who grew up in Amsterdam Nieuw-West and went on to build successful careers, offering listeners real-life examples of achievement rooted in shared experience. By showcasing these stories, the podcast aims to inspire youth from the area and challenge the dominant narrative that associates Amsterdam Nieuw-West with failure or marginalization. It flips the script, highlighting pride, resilience and possibility.

Due to the predominantly self-organizing nature of the peacebuilding efforts analyzed in this study and the close social proximity of the peacebuilders to the participants in their programs, these grassroots efforts can operate effectively and achieve truly life-changing successes for the participants. The deep level of trust between the peacebuilders and participants is a valuable asset in the fieldwork of peacebuilding that instigates high-impact and meaningful change within their local communities. Due to the nature of these deep interpersonal relationships, full transparency on all activities and their results is not always feasible, causing challenges in showcasing the the nature and impact of their work to stakeholders like funders. These challenges aside, the newer generations of Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women peacebuilders within these communities leverage digital spaces to reach a wider and often younger audience to educate and foster better understanding of Moroccans and their culturally diverse backgrounds within the Netherlands.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The challenges faced by Amazigh Moroccan women in the Netherlands are amplified by structural inequalities, cultural exclusion and the invisibility of their contributions to peace and community resilience. Addressing these challenges requires recognition of their lived realities and the value of their grassroots, cultural and digital peacebuilding work.

By fostering intersectional inclusion, rethinking dominant narratives and creating space for these women's voices, institutions and society can begin to support safer and more equitable communities. The women at the center of this research demonstrate remarkable strength, creativity and leadership. Their everyday efforts, acts of care, mediation and cultural preservation represent the invisible part of the iceberg in peacebuilding: essential, enduring, yet too often overlooked. Recognizing this labor is not only a matter of justice but a step toward a more peaceful, just and inclusive Dutch society.

The following recommendations are grounded in the findings of this case study and seek to enhance peacebuilding efforts within diaspora context in the Netherlands.

### Recommendations for Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch Women's NGOs

- Translate informal outcomes into recognizable impact language to improve visibility and funding opportunities for grassroots initiatives by:
  - » framing community activities as tools for wellbeing and empowerment, emphasizing their impact on social isolation, mental health and community resilience among migrant women.
  - » establishing partnerships with universities to support communications, evaluation and digital outreach through student internship programs.
  - » documenting and communicating the value of care-based, trauma-informed and culturally rooted programs as core components of peacebuilding.
- Advocate for the recognition of informal mediation, emotional support and neighborhood care work as legitimate forms of community peacebuilding.
- Foster strategic collaborations among NGOs supporting Amazigh Moroccan-Dutch women to amplify challenges, highlight grassroots successes and reduce fragmentation through joint campaigns, co-hosted events, partnerships or cross-referrals.

## Recommendations for Local Governments, Policy Institutions, and Funders

- Recognize neighborhood mothers as strategic actors in youth and safety policy by creating formal mechanisms for their participation in policy consultations.
- Fund and sustain accessible community spaces that serve youth from marginalized areas and promote inclusion, mentorship and belonging.
- Support grassroots women-led organizations with long-term, flexible funding structures that reflect the holistic nature of their work.
- Support intergenerational initiatives that create safe spaces for girls and women to address online safety, gender-based risks and empowerment through mentorship.
- Provide funding for grassroots initiatives that address youth vulnerability, especially those that operate in stigmatized neighborhoods like Amsterdam Nieuw-West.



# Endnotes

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