

## ***Syria: The Role of Women in the Elaboration of Durable Solutions to the Syrian crisis***

Ten years after the start of the war, the Syrian conflict continues to challenge the security, stability and well-being of an entire population. What began as a civil uprising in 2011 has turned into one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time. Half the population has been displaced within and outside the country, nearly half a million people have been killed, homes, infrastructure and the local economy have been destroyed, and most of the population lives below the poverty line.

In this extremely difficult context, women have become pillars of Syrian society. By providing for the needs of their families, defending their communities, opposing extremist tendencies, Syrian women have contributed to dialogue and to the elaboration of solutions that can ensure lasting peace in the country. However, in the various dialogues and peace processes that have sought to end the conflict, the presence of women has been reduced to a minimum and women have once again been marginalised. Indeed, beyond the creation in January 2016 of the Women's Advisory Board (WAB), a consultative mechanism sought by the office of the UN Special Envoy, which saw the inclusion of 17 women from different backgrounds and with different affiliations in the Geneva dialogues, women have often been sidelined and denied the opportunity to participate consistently and meaningfully in the various negotiations and peace processes that have taken place over the years.

In order to better understand the internal dynamics that have led to the marginalisation of Syrian women in the conflict resolution, the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN) launched the initiative "The role of women in the elaboration of durable solutions to the Syrian crisis" in collaboration with the NGO **Search for Common Ground** and with the support of the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation** (MAECI).

During the initiative, which took place between February and October 2021, the MWMN and Search for Common Ground organised four webinars involving experts, 25 Syrian women activists and various network members with the aim of:

- *Promoting and supporting dialogue among Syrian women, as well as with other women in the MWMN and experts in the field, to better understand their needs and pave the way for lasting solutions to the Syrian crisis, including in the context of the official peace process;*

- *Amplifying the voices of Syrian women through transparent and inclusive engagement with all stakeholders, other women mediators, organisations and institutions that share the network's vision;*
- *Identifying key areas of future focus on which to build new initiatives inside and outside Syria, and gathering recommendations from Syrian women to take forward through networking and advocacy.*

During the webinars, the following topics were addressed, identified by the participants themselves as the areas of most interest: the role of women in the peace process; the challenges that Syrian women in the diaspora face in the host countries and when they decide to return to Syria; the legal and traditional barriers that hinder Syrian women from playing a key role in society and political space.

After the webinars, participants of the webinars formulated a series of recommendations addressed to the international community and non-governmental organisations working on Syria.

### **KEY Recommendations**

In the past couple of years, the Syrian conflict has lost its international attention, although a peace-drive and just solution struggles to be found. When supporting the resolution of the Syrian conflict, **the international community should prioritize the Syrian women<sup>1</sup>.**

- Recognizing the value of the **multiplicity of perspectives** that Syrian women bring to the negotiation table. These perspectives can help shape solutions for the multiplicity of identities and circumstances that affect Syrian women and ensure that interventions take into account this diversity. Hence, **a political solution based on UNSCR 2254** is the first step towards reaching the following key recommendations. It is important for peace talks to represent the Syrian community as a whole, including women and youth, and to save what is left of the Syrian people and their history.
- The Syrian Government is a party in the negotiation process and is represented at the United Nations. **The Government must therefore commit to sign and implement all relevant international treaties<sup>2</sup>.**

<sup>1</sup> Syrian women include very diverse groups: women in rural areas; women with disabilities; women without documents; single, widowed, divorced women leading households; women formerly connected to ISIS; incarcerated women. They should all be somehow recognized in the context of any project.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., While Syria ratified the 'Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhumane and Degrading Treatment' with Legislative Decree 39/2004, it placed a reservation on Article 20 of the Convention, which allows the Committee Against Torture to investigate allegations of systematic torture being practiced in a state party of concern. This illustrates an unwillingness of the Syrian authorities to tackle the issue of torture by taking more effective actions to fight these practices. [Alternative Report \(ohchr.org\)](#) ; JS14\_UPR26\_SYR\_E\_Main.pdf

- The international community should restart **projects that support services, development, and infrastructure**. With the help of relevant international organizations, it is important to focus on projects on education, with special focus on children who were forced to leave school and forcibly displaced.
- The international community should pressure the Syrian government to **cancel Property Law n.10<sup>3</sup>** that threatens refugees' right to own and return to their properties, as it links property rights to security approval. This violates the principles of the Syrian constitution and must be stopped.
- The international community should ensure that the **new Syrian constitution is gender-sensitive** and guarantees a minimum 30% quota of women participation, while aiming at equal participation of women in institutions<sup>4</sup>. The Constitution must apply equally to all citizens, men and women, and take into consideration the losses suffered by women.
- The international community should coordinate with International Human Rights investigators and create an **international human rights' monitoring committee** that will record **human rights violations against Syrian women (including detainees and the forcibly disappeared) on all sides of the conflict** and help collect evidence, combat impunity, and bring violators to justice. Special attention should be given to former ISIS wives/children and their rights. Resettlement is a key issue to the Gender Sensitive transitional justice approach.
- This Committee should also include the rights of **Syrian refugees in Europe and neighboring countries, and support IDPs to return to their original areas and homes. This could be done by** implementing existing international conventions for refugees and ensuring that their rights be respected, even in the demographic changes taking place. A key effort should be made to recover or reissue key identification documents.

These **recommendations are thorough and comprehensive** and therefore can lead, if well implemented, to a solution to the Syrian Crisis. They consist of all the elements that can lead the country to stability. Hence, it is important to put in place mechanisms for their implementation.

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Furthermore, Syria has signed the CEDAW, but has kept a reservation on Article 2 which calls for states parties to "condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women..."

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/309/97/PDF/N0630997.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>3</sup> The law stipulates that if a property owner does not have official documents or has those documents, but does not appear on them (women), he or she has one year to provide proof of ownership after receiving notification that their property is in an area slated for 'reconstruction.' If the owner fails to provide proof, he or she will not be compensated for the loss and the ownership will be transferred to the province, town, or city in which the property is located. For many refugees, the requirement of establishing proof of ownership while they are outside the country is almost impossible. While this law affects both males and females, it, however, affects women (especially widows and single women) more because women are traditionally deprived of official documents.

<sup>4</sup> In Kosovo, the women organizations networked and lobbied for a quota system. They were able to enforce the quota in parliament.

In addition:

- A **Syrian Women Mediation Network** should be created to achieve greater **standing and legitimacy** vis-à-vis the international community and the Syrian government in consideration of the role of Syrian women have played in peacebuilding at all levels of society.
- **The Network could ensure that women's roles are guaranteed in mediation, negotiation and peacebuilding, in line with the WPS Agenda and UNSCR 1325 and following resolutions.** Women in different areas of Syria are involved in peacebuilding, also through networks<sup>5</sup>, and therefore should be involved in the negotiations. It is key to **coordinate with the existing structures so that** the interests of ALL Syrian women, inside and outside Syria, may be considered. Among women, greater **alignment** on the priorities to pursue at different levels of the peace architecture should be reached.
- The network could increase **capacity-building for greater participation in decision-making**. Since 2011, there have been many initiatives focusing on Syrian women's capacity building. Therefore, there are many groups of qualified and effective women who have advanced in public sectors, including direct political participation. The skills of these women should be leveraged to advance the status of all women in Syria, and to ensure that this knowledge is transferred to the next generation.
- The network could generate new **capacity to measure presence and impact** of Syrian women in the peace process and at different levels.
- The network could generate increased **funding for projects** that the members of the network could initiate. Projects should address the WPS Agenda based on UNSCR 1325 & following resolutions, and support women in reaching decision making positions. There could also be projects in cooperation with relevant organizations<sup>6</sup>.

**INGOs** could support the Syrian women by:

- **Mainstreaming a women-centered approach and gender sensitivity** in all Syria-related projects;
- **Providing women with capacity-building opportunities** to ensure that their presence at the negotiation table and in decision-making contexts is meaningful and effective. At the same time, women should be

<sup>5</sup> E.g., The Syrian Women Network; The Syrian Women Lobby; The Syrian Women Political Movement... Also, there are a large number of Women Led Organizations in the Group controlled areas that is working on the ground under the control of the Syrian Armed Forces

<sup>6</sup> E.g., in Collaboration with the Search for Common Grounds and the projects that it is implementing in Syria

supported with dedicated trainings identified by them<sup>7</sup>; **Working with young women on the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda**, alongside the WPS Agenda, and strengthening intergenerational relations. It is key that young women and men are also guaranteed a quota in decision-making positions, and are integrated in the peace process. It is important to ensure that young Syrians are well informed of what is going on in the peace process and in their country<sup>8</sup>.

- Supporting **political will and decision-making on** the right to property ownership, in addition to the access to justice. Pressure must be put on the Syrian Government<sup>9</sup> to ensure that the rights of Syrian refugees and IDPs are preserved, and that their property will not be confiscated by the authorities. This will also help contain the demographic changes that are already occurring. The collaboration with relevant 'block chain'<sup>10</sup> projects, and the provision of legal and administrative support to Syrian women will allow them to claim back their property even in the case that their spouse has disappeared.
- **Supporting refugees and IDPs** by upholding their rights and creating platforms of dialogue to reconnect those who stayed in Syria and those who left, to strengthen social cohesion, regardless of political stance and status. Social cohesion among the Syrians must be enhanced to ensure that all Syrians, outside and inside Syria, feel a sense of belonging to their homeland, regardless of political affiliation. Syrian Women have been striving for the last ten years to keep their communities together and it would be important to support them in this endeavor.
- **Elevating the topic of ISIS women** and their children internationally and initiating a project to engage these women at multiple levels, to offer them both psychological support and capacity-building.

<sup>7</sup> Take into consideration that the Syrian women have had a lot of trainings on 'negotiations' and 'the constitution' during the last 10 years. A lot of funds have been allocated for this matter, and therefore the Syrian women find it important to relate to the topics they identify as priority.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to understand the status of Syrian youth as they form a large part of the refugee and IDPs communities. Even the young Syrians who stayed behind in Syria, most of them are searching for ways to migrate. A number of projects were initiated for Young Syrians including the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) <https://rawabet.org/syrian-young-leaders-programme>

<sup>9</sup> There are a number of mechanisms that the Syrian Government has initiated to prove ownership and document all the citizen's information. Most of the information is digitalized

<sup>10</sup> Between 2013 – 2014 a number of block chain initiatives were conducted in Syria however, most of them failed due to the gaps and challenges that were not properly addressed. Hence, very few Syrians responded to the initiatives <https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2479&context=gjicl>