

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.

I. Women's participation in peace and mediation processes

Although it has often been difficult for the Syrian women to align around common objectives, it is also clear that there are many examples of successful collaboration. If they can align, they can represent their community and their society.

- a. For the international community and donors:
 - i. Recognize the variety of perspectives of women as an asset and not as an issue, since more and not less ideas are needed to restore livelihoods in Syria. A variety of perspectives for women's economic empowerment can be an opportunity and can support Syrian women in gaining leadership roles in their communities and in the political sphere.
 - ii. The funding priority should be on international aid, opening of borders, and on vulnerable women groups including: women in rural areas, women with disabilities, women without documents, and women heading households.
- b. For Syrian Women:
 - i. A Syrian women mediation network should be created. This network could strengthen the alignment around common goals, but also direct more resources and attention on the field issues in Syria. Women in the network could attend capacity-building activities to ensure that their capacity to attend peacebuilding activities at all levels is increased.
 - ii. A multi-track conversation on meaningful participation to the peace process should be held to understand what different groups of women need and want from the process. INGOs could help women draft a strategy on how to advance these priorities at the international, national, and local levels inclusively, as committees dedicated to topics like transitional justice, women as peacebuilders, access to equal rights,

gender sensitive law, perspective for return. Diverse ideas and strategies should be considered as potential pathways forward, including the representation of those who cannot be physically present.

- iii. This conversation should not include just the women who have been involved to this day, but also women who are typically excluded. The ideas developed by the committees should be circulated to other women typically excluded from these conversations for their feedback. Feedback should be integrated, and recommendations adjusted on an ongoing basis to also reflect the changing landscape. This would allow broader sharing and increased legitimacy in the eyes of the EU. This would also be very relevant in the context of constitutional conversations, in which the input of women working inside and outside of Syria and at different levels would be key.
- iv. The women should also come up with a M&E assessment system to monitor the advancement of women participation, beyond specific projects.
- v. Support the Syrian Women Advisory Board (SWAB) effort in their attempt to develop strategies to increase women's participation, and the inclusion of gender perspectives in all the peace processes.

c. For Syrian ISIS Women and Children

- i. Elevate the topic of ISIS women and their children internationally so that a commonly agreed solution may be found. A charter of principles, ideas, and concrete needs shared among the women that wish to go back to their communities should be drafted and brought to the international community. This charter should become public, with the help of international NGOs, to elevate the plight of this group.
- ii. A project could be initiated to engage these women at multiple levels, to offer them both psychological support and capacity-building (finances, art, education, psychological support, gender issues and sensitivity, etc.)
- iii. A full record of all the women in the camps should be created and the women that wish to go back to organized society should be noted and supported. Work should also be done with the communities they wish to go back to, to ensure acceptance and inclusion.

II. **Transitional Justice**

In the current circumstances, without constitutional guarantees and an ever-volatile security context, there are heavy hurdles for the return of refugees that left Syria and IDPs. Both the Syrian government and the many Syrians who have stayed in the country throughout the war do not look at refugees and IDPs favorably, even more so if they are women, and there are no security guarantees for these groups. Returnees ask that their right to go back home be upheld together with protection for themselves and their families, especially for single women or widows with children.

- a. An international monitoring committee should be created to monitor the return of refugees to Syria and a clear timeline should be established. For effective transitional justice, there needs to be: 1) understanding the roots of the conflict (economic, political), 2) recording of human rights violations, 3) understanding the laws that protect offenders and laws of immunity, 4) bringing violators to justice, and 5) supporting individuals and their communities in resettling. Women need help in understanding how to tackle patriarchy, and dealing with rumors and disinformation cast on those who have left.
- b. The Syrian Human Rights Centers should become better known so that so that public and decision-makers better understand the plight of Syrians.
- c. The international community should pressure the Syrian government to cancel Property Law no 10, that threatens refugees right to own and return to their properties. The law stipulates that if a property owner does not have official documents or has those documents, but does not appear on them (especially in the case of 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 effects both males and females, it, however, effects women (especially widows and single women) more because women are traditionally deprived of official documents.
- d. The inheritance laws that are depriving women of their rights to ownership, especially those who have lost male members in the family, should be changed. Widows, divorced or young women should be able to claim property of their deceased husbands and families.
- e. A project that centers around block chain and the identification of property through crowd sourcing should be initiated. Data should be collected from refugees, but also from IDPs and Syrians in the country to collectively understand who lived and owned what and collectively understand property configuration of entire areas.
- f. In the context of a new constitution, arbitrary detention of women and children should be abolished, and they should be released from jails around the country and enter dedicated programs.
- g. A gender-sensitivity project to mitigate discrimination, gender-based violence, and the overall isolation of women IDPs and refugees should be initiated.

III. Paving the Way to 'return Home'

- a. The EU should issue a legal statement that Syria is not a conducive environment for returnees. Europe must implement the international conventions for refugees, and to work towards protecting them.

- b. Syrian refugees in Europe should mobilize to guarantee the protection of their rights as refugees. Human rights lawyers could be mobilized in their support. Special support should be given to those who attempt to return and seek to reclaim their property, particularly women.
- c. Platforms of dialogue should be created to reconnect those who stayed in Syria and those who left, to strengthen social cohesion, regardless of return. Groups/committees could be created to ensure alignment and advance advocacy on key issues, both within and outside of the country.

IV. Customary and statutory law

- a. As the Syrian government regains recognition, it should be asked to sign and effectively implement: The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the CEDAW Optional protocol, and the UNSCR 1325 NAP. It should be internationally recognized that the files against 'terrorists', that the regime has issued, are often political files aiming at revenge against Syrian men and women activists, both inside and outside Syria.
- b. International and national media should be mobilized to support women in their plight for equality and a change in social norms.
- c. Campaigns targeting government officials and the opposition should support a gender-sensitive constitution and laws, in line with international standards. The constitution should guarantee a minimum 30% quota and gradually work towards equal participation of women in institutions¹.
- d. The Constitution should apply equally to all citizens, men and women, and it should ensure that the courts are independent. Widows or women who provide for their families should be given support and recognition.
- e. Capacity-building training to support women in the negotiation of their land and property rights should be offered through a dedicated project.

National councils throughout Syria should be supported with human and financial resources to issue the necessary documents to Syrians. Some standards on the issuing of documents should be established - what is needed for an ID to be reissued? Or a marriage license? Etc. IDs should include all necessary information, including the residency, so that people can go back to their homes. The issuing of passports and main documents should be systematized for everyone without discrimination.

¹ In Kosovo, the women organizations networked and lobbied for a quota system. They were able to enforce the quota in parliament.