

# U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security



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POLICYbrief

## Women's Role in Achieving Sustainable Peace in Syria

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by Ashley Bandura and Mercedes Blackwood.*

Women continue to be sidelined in ongoing efforts to end the Syrian civil war, which so far has cost more than 400,000 lives and displaced as many as 13 million people.<sup>1</sup> Yet they share fully in the suffering: Syrian women have been targeted for kidnapping, arbitrary arrests, and sexual violence, and they are often used as collateral for negotiations and extortion. The group Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently has documented hundreds of cases of women being forced into marriage with ISIS fighters, with about a third of them under age 18.<sup>2</sup> The issues Syrian women face cannot be separated from the considerable challenge of resolving the Syrian conflict.

Since 2012, attempts at peace talks have failed to achieve meaningful ceasefires or deescalate the conflict. Ensuring women's meaningful participation in stabilization and peace efforts in Syria is thus a strategic security imperative. Such participation will promote a more inclusive, enduring, and stable democratic society. Women's participation in peace agreements has been shown to critically affect their sustainability, with 64 percent of agreements being less likely to fail if women are at the negotiating table. Additionally, agreements such as ceasefires are 35 percent more likely to last at least 15 years if women participate in their negotiation.<sup>3</sup>

Female leaders have been consistently underrepresented in Syrian delegations to high-level international meetings and ceasefire negotiations.<sup>4</sup> Peace talks in Geneva and the initial round in Astana lacked women's participation entirely (box 1). The failure of these talks resulted from many factors: competing global interests, geopolitical maneuvering, regional instability, and obstruction by parties to the negotiations. But the absence of women is surely an important factor as well.

In early 2017, Syrian civil society organizations called upon the Syrian opposition and the international community to ensure that the delegation to any future talks include at least 30 percent women.<sup>5</sup> In the last round of Astana talks in October 2017, women made up 16 percent of the negotiators. They raised critical issues in areas where women have been at the forefront of action on the ground. Syrian women have negotiated local ceasefires, deescalated fighting so aid could pass through, organized nonviolent protests, monitored and documented war crimes, led humanitarian efforts for displaced Syrians, and worked in schools and hospitals while the conflict raged.<sup>6</sup> By finding consensus on controversial issues related to aid delivery and the release of detainees, for example, the Women's Advisory Board has demonstrated what women can do.<sup>7</sup>

This policy brief outlines barriers to women's participation in Syrian peace and stabilization, major challenges they face regarding protection in the war, the lack of aid and resources for recovery, and steps the United States can take to ensure they are included in future efforts.

### Barriers to Women's Participation

Despite the efforts of the Syrian Women's Network and the Women's Advisory Board, Syrian women remain largely absent from the negotiating table. Even when women have been part of high-level peace talks, they are silenced or pushed into supporting roles.

### Timeline of Negotiations

**Geneva I Conference, June 2012** – US and Russian officials, and other major powers met to agree on a road map for peace. No women present at the peace table or on the margins of talks.

**Geneva II Conference, January 2014** – The UN fails to break deadlock between opposition and the government and blames the Syrian government's refusal to entertain the opposition's demands. Few women, with limited roles at the negotiating table.

**Vienna Process, 2015** – All 20 members of the International Syria Support Group met to outline a transitional plan and timetable for formal talks. No women were involved.

**Geneva III, January 2016** – The Syrian government and opposition refused to sit in the same room, talks were suspended. No women were involved.

### Timeline of Women's Participation

**Syrian Women's Network, May 2013** – 200 individuals and 29 NGO's formed the Network to develop a new Syrian constitution and a set of laws with full equality of women.

**Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace, 2013** – 50 women representing civil society, including 8 members of the Syrian Women's Network established the Initiative to promote the peace process, and bring women directly into the negotiations. They demanded a 30% quota of female participants in the Geneva II Sessions.

**Syrian Women's Advisory Board, February 2016** – Politically unaffiliated group of 12 women. The Board does not participate directly in talks, but advises mediators on proceedings. SWN withdrew based on critiques of transparency.

**Syrian Women Peacemakers Conference, May 2016** – 130 Syrian women met in Beirut, Lebanon and forged a statement of unity to further the work of Syrian women.

Their absence from high-level talks belies the realities on the ground, where many women have taken on informal leadership roles in the wake Syrian Arab Spring in 2011 and subsequently because of the absence of men.<sup>8</sup> Eighty-five percent of those killed inside Syria have been men.<sup>9</sup> According to reports by CARE International, females head 12 to 17 percent of households in Syria and up to one-third of households in refugee-hosting countries.<sup>10</sup> With high rates of male casualties, women must be breadwinners and caregivers in a broken system that is ill equipped to provide basic services they need for survival.

Although women have additional responsibilities, cultural, physical, and structural barriers often prevent them from assuming formal leadership roles. These include social stigma, lack of education or specialized training, economic deficiencies, safety hazards, and limited mobility. Culturally, most Syrian women are raised with stereotypical gender roles and expectations. They thus may be apprehensive of leadership roles that have traditionally belonged to men. According to a 2017 study by Bareeq Education and Development, 81 percent of women surveyed said that “the social norms in Syria truly impede women's success.”<sup>11</sup>

They may also find it difficult to obtain work that does not jeopardize their safety or their sense of what is honorable for a woman.<sup>12</sup> Syrian women living outside the country—particularly Turkey, Lebanon, or Jordan—may not have the right to work in their host country.<sup>13</sup> With the added

economic pressure for both men and women, many women face increased stress.<sup>14</sup> In cases where female heads of households find jobs, their income is less than that of male heads of households. Dedicated resources for services, protection, security, and training for women inside and outside Syria are critical, given the new roles, dearth of job opportunities, and safety hazards they face.

Their lack of physical security and restricted mobility also keep women from engaging meaningfully in political roles. The destruction of infrastructure and the economy have constrained women's ability to move freely, and heightened security concerns make travel dangerous for them. Cultural limitations for women's travel alone outside the home exacerbate the mobility and security barriers. Limited movement makes it more difficult for women to participate in local initiatives and heightens economic barriers.

Structural barriers include economic, legal, and educational limitations. Discriminatory laws and lack of education or skills discourage women from standing for elected office or other leadership positions.<sup>15</sup> The selection process for local councilors highlights these structural challenges. Local councils are often not elected but rather selected based on familial ties or community standing, which women have not had the opportunity to develop.

Shifting governance structures in a fragile environment also make it difficult for women to grasp or maintain a foothold for meaningful change and to realize their full potential. Where councils are elected, they are often limited in capacity and plagued by turnover. Active women would therefore rather get involved in civil society than government, which they may see as lacking legitimacy and effectiveness. When women are elected to government positions, it is often for superficial roles. In government-controlled areas women are included to showcase modernization; in opposition-controlled areas they are included to attract attention from international donors.<sup>16</sup> Despite public support for quotas for women in public administration, women thus remain underutilized, as real power stays in the hands of a few male elites.

According to the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, the next priority should be a political process for Syria that includes drafting a new constitution as well as developing an election process.<sup>17</sup> Thus women's role in peacebuilding must go beyond peace negotiations. Women should be involved in all political decision making. The international community should continue to provide tools and training for women so that they can meaningfully engage in elections and constitution building when the time comes. Conflicts can sometimes provide an opportunity to fast track progress for women in political spheres. Opening formal and informal channels for women's participation that were previously restricted to Syrian men would be one way for such progress to emerge out of the Syrian conflict.

UN and international organizations' efforts to boost women's collective voice have created demands and opportunities for women's inclusion that could contribute meaningfully to Syria's transition to peace. Their local successes demonstrate the value and credibility they can bring to the negotiating table and in reconstruction.

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## Protection from Harm and Abuse

Women are particularly vulnerable to harm and abuse. An understanding of preconflict gender dynamics in Syria is essential for assessing how the conflict has increased the vulnerability of Syrian women. Including women in negotiations to end the conflict will enable them to advocate for women and to prioritize solutions to harms and abuses that disproportionately affect women. Many of these are related to forced migration and decreased security: gender-based violence, abuse by security forces, and economic marginalization.

More than five million refugees have fled Syria, 48.4 percent of whom are female.<sup>18</sup> They are increasingly vulnerable to assault, kidnapping, and gender-based violence. On some routes, as many as half of women surveyed reported

experiencing sexual assault during their journey, and many take birth control to avoid getting pregnant from rape.<sup>19</sup> An initial assessment report conducted in 2015 revealed that women were sometimes forced to engage in transactional sex as to pay for travel.<sup>20</sup>

The lack of security and the breakdown of the rule of law make women targets. Terrorist groups, security forces, and border guards alike harass and assault them. These abuses increase distrust of state security providers and force women to rely on informal or extralegal familial and communal ties for protection.<sup>21</sup> Yet even these networks are failing them as their communities are shattered and they lose male allies.

Armed groups kidnap women in transit and use them as hostages in prisoner exchanges.<sup>22</sup> Reuter's news service has documented how ISIS kidnapped women refugees in transit to Europe to provide their fighters with sex slaves.<sup>23</sup> CNN reported that women in ISIS-held territory in Syria were forced into marriage with fighters.<sup>24</sup> Women refugees who manage to arrive in camps find that they are often unsecured and poorly resourced.<sup>25</sup>

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## Lack of Resources for Relief and Recovery

As the conflict endures, women have gained a measure of agency as they undertake relief and recovery efforts. Despite the overwhelming challenges, Syrian women are filling gaps in society and providing basic needs to their families and communities. As women play a larger role in relief and recovery, it is fundamental that they be included in strategies for peacebuilding and long-term stability. Otherwise, transitions to democracy and peace will not be successful.

Relief efforts in Syria continue regardless of the status of humanitarian assistance from abroad. Women in traditional roles such as health professionals, educators, and mothers are well placed to rebuild, educate, and sustain their communities postconflict. Where health and rehabilitation services are no longer available, women step in to care for the elderly, injured, and others in need of specialized care. Where schools have closed, it is often mothers who fill the void and educate children.<sup>26</sup> In refugee camps, women have started to engage in home-based entrepreneurial activities. As women take on these roles, they will need specialized training to carry them out more effectively.

Recovery efforts are not waiting for the resolution of the conflict either, and women are central. Syrian women's involvement can help close strategic gaps in the fight against ISIS. But for recovery efforts to move forward, women's substantive roles must be recognized and their needs must be addressed.

## Recommendations

The development and security sectors should continue to address barriers that hinder women's participation in peacebuilding efforts. Likewise, it is important to keep studying the conditions that facilitate women's involvement so that these conditions can be leveraged to increase women's roles and representation in peacebuilding.

As part of the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Act, which was signed into law in October 2017, the U.S. government will develop a governmentwide strategy to integrate gender perspectives across its diplomatic, development, and defense-related work in conflict-affected environments. The U.S. national strategy required by the WPS Act must emphasize the importance of understanding the barriers and facilitating conditions for women's representation in mediation, negotiation, humanitarian efforts, and political development.

Applying this strategy to Syrian women will enable the U.S. government to meet the goal, articulated in January 2017 by the secretary of state, of a stable, unified, and independent Syria, free of terrorist threats and free of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>27</sup> Implementing this plan with Syrian women is in the best economic and security interest of the entire region, as the Syrian conflict continues to overwhelm neighboring countries. As negotiations begin and recovery efforts ensue, it is imperative that the inclusion of women in decision making is a top priority for achieving and then maintaining peace.

As the U.S. government engages, the following recommendations should inform an inclusive Syrian peace process:

### *Breaking down Barriers for Leadership and Participation*

- **Promote women in negotiations and build their credibility as essential partners at the negotiating table.** Increasing awareness of the importance of women in peacebuilding and encouraging their participation are important. However, it must be clear what the women who are brought to the table are there to represent. Women cannot be brought to the negotiating table just to represent women but must be credible leaders for their causes, whether it be a political party or an organization representing a certain sector of civil society. Women's participation at the negotiating table must be mainstreamed from the grassroots level for women to be viewed as credible actors once they are appointed to participate in negotiations or peacebuilding efforts. Training for women on building coalitions and on mediation and negotiation skills can boost women's credibility.

- **Support activities that provide women with the necessary tools and training they need to increase their political participation.** As women's roles continue to evolve amid the Syrian conflict, programming supported by the international community will need to enhance women leaders' capacity for governing, as the UN and other external actors will focus on a political solution and Syrian opposition will need to be ready to work toward a solid democratic framework.
- **Connect politically active women outside the country with women who are formal or informal leaders inside Syria, and build upon existing networks.** By strengthening the work of existing networks through better coordination, the efforts of these women can be enhanced and used to highlight examples for other reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. The Women's Advisory Board should play a larger role in coordinating efforts internally with negotiations and advocacy externally. When women leaders work together, regardless of their roles or stances, they can serve as unified advocates for more inclusive institutions as Syria rebuilds.
- **Use the negotiation process to develop more inclusive governing institutions in Syria.** The trauma and destruction created by conflicts seems insurmountable at times, yet transitions can also provide unique opportunities for change. The parties to negotiations should recognize this and push for more inclusive policies that will govern the Syrian elections and the writing of a new constitution. Any outcomes of negotiations should take advantage of the opening to facilitate a new culture of citizenship.

### *Protection from Harm*

- **Examine preconflict gender dynamics, and collect disaggregated data on the standards, issues, and roles that women live with as a result of the turmoil in Syria.** A thorough understanding of Syrian women's historical and traditional roles is required to fully appreciate how women have been affected by war. Disaggregated data on within-country and refugee conditions can provide implementing organizations with key information needed to design responsive interventions. It is important to consistently track and measure gender and diversity dynamics throughout the conflict in order to draw key lessons for the diplomatic and humanitarian communities.
- **Provide resources and support to protect women from harm.** Including more women in security forces and creating a more responsive security sector can empower women and ensure that law enforcement considers female perspectives. This is important for police, military, and peacekeeping forces inside Syria and in refugee hosting countries. By training more women to contribute to security and policing, women's perspectives can be incorporated and unique challenges can be given the



attention they need. Women trained to serve in the security sector may be more receptive to claims of gender-based violence and other gender-specific problems. Women may also be more inclined to report offenses such as assault to female security agents than to male counterparts.

- **Increase awareness of the unique issues women face in conflict and their unique roles in mitigating difficulties and reconciling conflicts.** The barriers to political participation and safety that women face globally are exacerbated in conflict. By spreading awareness, the security and humanitarian sectors can provide more targeted support to address the challenges women face in conflict zones. The media can play an important role in building this awareness and in showcasing women's resilience and strength in overcoming challenges, thus increasing the recognition they deserve as powerful forces for change.

#### *Resources for Relief and Recovery*

- **Provide technical and career training for Syrian women** so that they can build skills that will allow them to obtain work and contribute to rebuilding the economy. It is imperative to equip Syrian women with skills they can use long term in conjunction with financial resources. Training on topics such as business development, financial management, and negotiation should be included to ensure that women can effectively fill the gaps in the economy that typically result from high numbers of male casualties during the war.
- **Include more women in strategic planning for rehabilitating infrastructure now** rather than waiting until the conflict is resolved. This will prepare women to move recovery efforts forward when opportunities are presented. It will also allow women to develop realistic expectations and knowledge on how to troubleshoot issues when the time comes for reconstruction efforts.
- **Increase educational opportunities for specialized skills.** As women continue to serve informally in relief roles such as medical and special care, the international donor community can build on their skills by providing them opportunities to gain formal education in these roles. Such opportunities could take the form of scholarships for technical schooling or educational exchange programs.

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The U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security (U.S. CSWG) is a nonpartisan network of 39 civil society organizations with expertise on issues involving women, war, and peace. Established in 2010, the working group acts in its capacity as an engaged, voluntary coalition to support the U.S. government's efforts to implement national strategies, plans, and policies related to Women, Peace, and Security (WPS).

