

Update on women, peace and security in Syria

2 May 2023

The Informal Expert Group (IEG) of the Security Council on Women and Peace and Security discussed the situation in Syria in February 2020 ([S/2020/283](#)). This update summarizes more recent developments.

Developments in the Security Council

The Security Council has adopted four resolutions since the last time the IEG convened to discuss Syria (February 2020). These resolutions were all extensions of the authorization for the Syria cross-border aid mechanisms and none of them mentioned women or gender-related issues. Between 2011 and February 2020, the Security Council adopted 24 resolutions on the situation in Syria, and half of them did reference women or gender issues. Before 2020, all previous resolutions on cross-border aid had recognized the high number of displaced women, recalled the legal obligations of all parties under international humanitarian law and international human rights law to cease the widespread use of sexual and gender-based violence, and had demanded the release of all arbitrarily detained persons, starting with women and children. Among the other resolutions, resolution 2254 (2015) encouraged “the meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated process for Syria,” and resolution 2118 (2013) indicated that “women must be fully represented in all aspects of the transition.” In June 2022, the Security Council also held an Arria Formula meeting on “Syrian Women’s Voices on Detainees and the Disappeared in Syria.”

Since February 2020, 13 women from civil society have briefed the Security Council on Syria, two of them twice in that period.¹ These briefers include directors of international non-governmental organizations like Save the Children or CARE International, medical professionals, human rights lawyers, and women’s rights activists. Many of them argued for the extension and expansion of cross-border access points for aid, as crossline aid delivery is insufficient, asked for more funding for the humanitarian needs of women and girls, echoed the findings from the International Commission of Inquiry, focused on the fate of the thousands of missing persons and detainees and women’s marginalization from political talks and decision-making, and called for justice and accountability and ending impunity for perpetrators. These issues were often raised by Council Members too, in addition to the plight of women and girls in Al-Hol and Al-Roj camps. In 2022, 72 statements by either Member States or Special Envoy at the Security Council mentioned the importance of women’s rights and women’s participation in the political process.

Women’s participation in conflict-resolution efforts

Progress under the UN-led political process remains limited. Women’s representation in the Constitutional Committee established in 2019 stands at 28 percent, but the Constitutional Committee has not met in almost a year and has yet to reach any preliminary agreement on a constitutional text. Given the lack of progress on this front, international and national actors have sought out other paths, from proposing discussions on confidence-building measures among the parties, to investing more in local dialogue initiatives, to trying to leverage the recent measures and negotiations in the context of the response to the earthquake into efforts to break the impasse in the broader peace process.

The UN Special Envoy continues to engage regularly with the 17-member Women’s Advisory Board (WAB), who bring together women from across Syria, advise the UN and national and international actors, including in parallel to or between the sessions held by the Constitutional Committee or major donor

¹ From February 2020 to March 2023, these were Rasha Muhrez, Farida Almouslem, Mariana Karkoutly, Nirvana Shawky, Thuraya Hijazi, Amani Ballour, Mounerfah Albarouki, Amany Qaddour, Rouba Mhaissen, Abeer Hussain, Sonia Khush, Wafa Mustafa, and Noura Ghazi.

conferences, and serve as a bridge between the political process and segments of Syrian society, such as women peacebuilders in Track 2 and Track 3 initiatives. More recently, a Women's Advisory Group (WAG) has also been established to advise the Humanitarian Liaison Group in Gaziantep for the cross-border aid operation.

It is very difficult for Syrian women's civil society to operate, amid legal, security, and financial constraints. Many grassroots women's organizations face significant challenges in registering their organizations and activities with de facto and de jure authorities, and the risk of reprisals remains very high. Still, at the local level, Syrian women have led efforts to negotiate ceasefires, organize non-violent protests, work in field hospitals and schools, distribute food and medicine, and document human rights violations.

Humanitarian issues affecting women and girls

Nearly half of Syria's population has been affected by the devastating earthquakes that hit Syria and Türkiye in February 2023. A majority of the worst-affected in Syria are in northwest Syria, where already 90 percent of the population depended on humanitarian aid. The impact on basic services has been disastrous for women and girls. Apart from the loss of homes, education, economic security, and food security, women and girls experience higher risks of sexual and gender-based violence and lack of access to sexual and reproductive healthcare. The UN estimated that the immediate impact put at least 350,000 pregnant women in Syria and Türkiye at risk, owing to the destruction or evacuation of maternity facilities and diminished capacity to provide emergency obstetric and new-born and postpartum care. Women living in public spaces and collective shelters lack privacy, dignity, or security, and there have been reports of women being raped, beaten, harassed, and women and girls gone missing after the earthquake due to child marriage and trafficking. Limited access to clean water also affects menstrual hygiene practices. The UN is trying to address gender-based violence in overcrowded collective shelters and host communities in Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia, provide sexual and reproductive healthcare and gender-sensitive WASH facilities, and support family reunification efforts, but Syrian civil society have been very critical about the inadequacy of these efforts and the overall response.

As the humanitarian emergency has only become larger after 12 years of conflict and overlapping crises, Syria is now the largest humanitarian appeal in the world, though only 6 percent has been funded in 2023 so far. In 2022, only 47 percent of the Humanitarian Response Plan was funded, the lowest ever. These are some of the issues affecting women and girls most directly:

- 8.5 million people need assistance for gender-based violence (1.2 million more than in 2022).
- In 2020, the UN estimated that the number of women-headed households across Syria had increased by around 80 percent since the start of the conflict in 2011. Women-headed households are especially vulnerable to food insecurity and the sharp increase in the cost of the basic food basket. These households consistently report higher levels of hunger and malnutrition, higher likelihood to buy food on credit, and higher rates of negative coping mechanisms.
- Boys and girls in women-headed households also report the highest levels of psychological distress, due to the higher existing vulnerabilities of this group and their unequal access to resources.
- Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the water crisis across the north and north-east due to their prominent role in the agriculture sector. Because women comprise 70 percent of the agriculture workforce, their incomes are particularly affected if insufficient water to irrigate lands leads to crop losses. Women held two out of three of the 55,000 jobs lost in agriculture.
- Only 35 percent of women surveyed by CARE in North-East Syria have access to safe toilets, collecting water can take more than an hour, and most women rely on a male family member to fetch water because it is unsafe to do otherwise. It can be safely assumed that these numbers would be much worse in the North-West and even worse after the earthquake.

- The UN reaches hundreds of thousands of Syrians with life-saving reproductive health services and gender-based violence services (e.g. women and girls' safe spaces, emergency obstetric care facilities, mobile clinics, reproductive health kits, dignity kits, monthly e-vouchers for hygiene items, cash vouchers), but this is still insufficient to meet the needs. As an example of the gaps in obstetric or antenatal care, assessments in displacement camps in Dayr al-Zawr and Hasakah showed that only half of the pregnant women and new mothers in these camps had access to these services.
- There are 5.7 million Syrian refugees in Syria's neighbouring countries, while 6.7 million people remain internally displaced within Syria. The income of families with women as the primary breadwinner is on average 30 per cent less than other displaced families. In neighbouring countries, child marriage among Syrian refugees is especially pronounced. A survey of displaced Syrian women in Lebanon found that 41 per cent were married before the age of 18 – compared to UN estimated from 2006 that suggested that only 13 per cent of Syrian girls were married before their 18th birthday.
- Nine in ten people in Syria now live below the poverty line with 60 per cent of the population at risk of hunger, while shortages of bread, fuel and medicine impact the lives of an increasing number of Syrians. 81 per cent of women aged 18 to 64 are unemployed or out of work, with women's participation in the workforce being relatively higher in government-controlled areas.

Human rights violations, including conflict-related sexual violence

One of the human rights issues most frequently raised by women advocates is the fate of thousands of detained, disappeared, and missing persons, both because of the thousands of women whose whereabouts remain unknown and the larger number of men, whose absence has a profound impact on the lives of their female relatives. High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk noted the real number of disappeared persons in Syria could well be over 100,000. As the Secretary-General reported, pre-existing gender inequalities, discriminatory laws and social injustices are exacerbating factors. As women are reportedly less likely to be detained, they are sometimes considered the “safer” person to undertake the search, thus exposing them to further vulnerability, risk and exploitation by government officials and other de facto authorities. When male family members go missing, women in the family are forced, despite the stigma, social isolation, and grief, to take on the responsibility for providing for themselves and their families, while also bearing the financial burden of searching for the missing person. Mothers may also be forced to sacrifice their children's education in order to help to support the families. Those female heads of household are often searching for multiple relatives gone missing.²

Parties to the conflict continued to detain social media activists, journalists, and women in areas under their control, with little or no information provided about reasons for their arrest or their whereabouts. The International Commission of Inquiry has been documenting many reprisals and attacks against women's rights activists and public leaders across all of Syria, as well as violations of the rights of women in the community. For example, gender-focused programmes and interventions are subjected to backlash and resistance from local authorities in northwest Syria, where the Security Council-designated terrorist group Haya'at Tahrir-al-Sham (HTS) has reportedly arrested women for non-compliance with dress codes or entertainment-related bans. In Afrin, armed groups have targeted “almost every aspect of Kurdish women's lives,” threatening and harassing women in positions of political, military, medical and educational roles, as well as civil society activists. Several recent killings of women with significant media attention have increased discussions on violence against women, as advocates keep pushing for a broader definition of violence against women in Syria's criminal code.

² See A/76/890.

The situation of tens of thousands of women and girls in camp settings in the northeast of the country, particularly Al-Hol and Al-Roj remains of concern. 42 murders were reported in 2020 in Al-Hol camp, including 22 women and 4 children. These included two Egyptian sisters, both younger than 15 years old, whose bodies were found in the sewage area in the camp after being raped by unknown perpetrators and harassed by a group of radical women because of the stigma associated with sexual violence. There are also reports of so-called widow camps in northwest Syria, largely neglected and under the radar.

The Commission of Inquiry continues to document patterns of conflict-related sexual violence: as a tactic to stifle political dissent, as a form of torture in detention settings, in situations of protracted displacement, and at security checkpoints. For example, the Commission of Inquiry reported 30 rapes in February 2020 in northern Syria by members of the Free Syrian Army, a loose coalition of armed opposition groups, as well as sexual assault of women in detention site Branch 227, and of men in Saydnaya prison. Conflict-related sexual violence remains severely under-reported due to the lack of access by human rights monitoring groups to all parts of Syria, and the stigma and victim-blaming experienced by survivors. These survivors are often rejected by their families or targeted for “honour killings,” so many remain in displacement camps rather than facing the risks of returning to their communities of origin. The rise of child marriage has also been extensively documented, as well as the related sharp increase in suicides, which more than tripled last year. Girls were 40 per cent of all suicides between early 2021 and mid-2022, for example. The percentage of adolescent girls who attend school has also dropped markedly and is now just one in three.

Impunity persists, and only last year, under the principle of universal jurisdiction, a former official of the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate, Anwar R., was convicted by the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany, for crimes against humanity, including sexual violence, committed in 2011 and 2012.

Civil society organizations like the Syrian Network for Human Rights estimate that, since March 2011 until now, 16,298 women have been killed by the parties to the conflict in Syria, that 10,169 women have been detained, and that there have been no fewer than 11,532 incidents of sexual violence against women and girls, and attribute a majority of these violations to government forces.

Recommendations:³

In any upcoming resolutions or presidential statements, the Security Council should consider:

- Welcoming all efforts to facilitate and expand humanitarian access, including the renewal of the UN’s cross-border authorization to deliver humanitarian aid, to ensure continuity in access to lifesaving aid and basic services and keep pace with the unprecedented scale of needs.
- Encouraging and/or welcoming regional organization’s and/or member states’ adoption of further humanitarian exemptions to their own sanction regimes.
- Urging the international community to fully fund the Humanitarian Response Plan, with special attention to addressing all forms of gender-based violence and stronger investments on sexual and reproductive healthcare, mental health and psycho-social support, mainstreaming gender equality throughout the humanitarian response, and ensuring women’s participation in in and leadership of decision-making at all levels of the humanitarian response and throughout the humanitarian planning cycle.
- Urging greater investment in women’s organizations to support local grassroots peacebuilding efforts and the delivery of humanitarian aid. In line with the Secretary-General’s five WPS Goals

³ These recommendations are prepared by UN Women as the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group, in consultation with other UN entities.

for the Decade, this could include recommending that donors and international partners multiply by five the humanitarian funding allocated to women-led organizations.

- Demanding all parties to develop policy measures aimed at eliminating discrimination against women and girls in all spheres of life and to achieve substantive gender equality.
- Urging the full, equal, and meaningful participation of diverse Syrian women, using the 30 percent threshold as a minimum, in any peace negotiations, broader political dialogues, discussions on confidence-building measures, and national consultations about the future of Syria, and adopt measures to ensure that these targets are reached.
- Stressing the need to invest much more in women's participation in Track 2 and Track 3 diplomatic efforts and supporting local women peacebuilders and community mediators, inter alia by expanding multi-stakeholder involvement including through dialogues.
- Demanding the parties refrain from imposing constraints on women's political advocacy or the activities of women's organizations.
- Demanding all parties to clarify the fate and whereabouts of all missing persons and facilitate access and investigations by international mechanisms, and simplify and facilitate access to civil documentation, with special attention to women whose spouses are missing, disappeared, or have been killed, and supporting the creation of a victim-centered mechanism for missing persons, as outlined by the recommendations of the UN Secretary-General, emphasizing the central role of families and particularly the women relatives of the disappeared.
- Demanding all parties to end all forms of sexual violence, including in detention settings, to hold perpetrators accountable, and to facilitate humanitarian access throughout the country in order to ensure the provision of multisectoral services.
- Recommending the creation of survivor-centered justice mechanisms for all survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, including reparations and guarantees of non-repetition, and requesting that victims of sexual violence perpetrated by terrorist groups be recognized as victims of terrorism who are entitled to reparations and redress.
- Call on Member States to rapidly and safely allow for the voluntary repatriation of their nationals from camps and places of detention in northeast Syria, with particular urgency for children and their families, in line with international law and standards; and further develop tailored gender- and age- sensitive policies for risk assessment, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration, in accordance with international law.