



Security Council

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Letter dated 3 August 2023 from the Permanent Representatives of Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Switzerland and the United Arab Emirates, as Co-Chairs of the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council and in close cooperation with the United Kingdom, would like to share the summary note of the meeting of the Informal Expert Group on the situation in Syria (see annex).

We would be grateful if the present letter and its annex could be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Pascale **Baeriswyl**
Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations

(Signed) Lana Zaki **Nusseibeh**
Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates
to the United Nations

(Signed) Barbara **Woodward**
Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom
to the United Nations



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Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council: summary of the meeting on the situation in Syria, held on 2 May 2023

On 2 May 2023, the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security convened a meeting on the situation in Syria. The members received a briefing from the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, Geir Pedersen, and the Deputy Director of the Operations and Advocacy Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in New York, Heli Uusikyla. Members exchanged questions and answers with the briefers, after which the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) presented key recommendations developed in coordination with the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, which also shared additional observations at the end of the meeting.

Questions from Security Council members

Security Council members asked several questions about the humanitarian situation in the wake of the devastating earthquakes of February 2023. They asked about gaps in humanitarian aid for women and girls, such as obstetric or antenatal care for pregnant women in displacement camps, or access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for women impacted by the earthquake, as well as gender-based violence and mental health and psychosocial support in a context of increased prevalence of violence against women and girls and rising suicide rates. Council members wanted to know the specific impact of the lack of resources in humanitarian aid and services targeting women and girls, and whether the increased access after the earthquake had resulted in improvements in the gender-responsiveness of aid delivery, as well as any preliminary findings on the socioeconomic impact of the earthquake on women and girls. Several Council members asked for opportunities to recognize the agency of women peacebuilders and support women-led organizations and women human rights defenders, as well as ways to address protection concerns, emphasizing the importance of combating impunity, especially for sexual and gender-based violence. They also enquired whether the United Nations had gender-specific findings from the more than 70 missions conducted into north-west Syria since mid-February. Some questions focused on other issues affecting women and girls, such as the rate of girls dropping out of school, any available data on trafficking of women and girls, or humanitarian access to Al-Hol and other camps populated primarily by women and children. There were also questions about the barriers to women's participation in humanitarian planning and conflict resolution, and whether the women advising the Special Envoy or the Humanitarian Liaison Group are able to establish wide contacts with women throughout Syria, including at the grass-roots level.

Main points raised at the meeting

- Since the last time the Informal Expert Group met to discuss Syria, in February 2020, the Security Council has adopted four resolutions, all of them extensions of the authorization for the Syria cross-border aid mechanisms, and none of them mentioned women or gender-related 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, including ceasing the widespread use of sexual and gender-based violence, and had called for the release of all arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children. Since February 2020, 13 women from civil society have briefed the Council on Syria, two of them twice in that period.

- The Special Envoy and his deputy, Najat Rochdi, rely very heavily on the advice of Syrian women in their mediation efforts to reach a comprehensive political solution in Syria in line with Security Council resolution 2254 (2015), which specifically calls for effective women's participation in the political process. The outreach of the Office of the Special Envoy to Syrian women includes members of formal parties in the political process, participants in the Constitutional Committee, and cooperation with consultative bodies such as the Syrian Women's Advisory Board and the Civil Society Support Room. The advice of Syrian women has been valuable with regard not only to gender equality issues but also to issues related to sovereignty, equality and equal citizenship, pluralism and diversity, civic space, protection, local administration and decentralization, transparency and accountability, regional re-engagement with Syria, and protection concerns for the safe and voluntary return of refugees. In recent months, the Office of the Special Envoy has conducted outreach missions to Syria, Lebanon, Türkiye and northern Iraq, where they have prioritized consultations with women.
- In the Constitutional Committee, which has regrettably not met for nearly a year for reasons unrelated to Syria, women make up 29 per cent of its members and have frequently raised issues related to women's political participation, quotas for women, gender-based violence, women's rights and non-discrimination, as well as provided a gender-sensitive perspective related to other political debates that have taken place during the eight sessions convened to date.
- Throughout these engagements, Syrian women have insisted that the future of Syria must take into account their own needs and priorities. Their visions build upon the roles that many have been thrust into as a result of sustained conflict and social upheaval. Women have headed households and assumed new responsibilities, both public and private, in their families and communities. They have broadened their professional lives and engaged in public debate, choosing to be visible even when it may have been safer to remain unseen.
- The dire humanitarian situation in Syria has significantly deteriorated since the last meeting of the Informal Expert Group on Syria, in 2020, when around 11 million people needed humanitarian assistance. Today, nearly 70 per cent of Syria's population, or 15.3 million people, are profoundly impacted by 12 years of crisis, economic downturns, and climate shocks and require humanitarian assistance. The earthquakes that struck Türkiye and Syria on 6 February have further worsened this crisis, causing damage to more than 390,000 housing units, 2,149 schools, and 241 health facilities in both countries.
- Syrian women face a range of legal and administrative challenges to exercising their rights, including accessing education, medical care and civil documentation, or participating in public and social life, especially those in a single-headed household. The earthquakes have made these challenges more pronounced as thousands of families lost or left behind housing, land and property documents as well as civil documents, an issue that was already a concern to millions of Syrians who were displaced by 12 years of conflict. The earthquake trauma combined with the loss of family members, homes and income sources have had a huge toll on affected people, especially women: adolescent girls and elderly women have become caregivers for younger siblings

and grandchildren; women in collective shelters and reception centres are facing safety and security concerns; women with disabilities are increasingly in need of extended family support; and women-headed households are now even more vulnerable to long-term poverty. In north-west Syria, multisectoral needs assessment data show that 56 per cent of pregnant and breastfeeding women and 36 per cent of children under 5 are anaemic. The malnutrition rates of pregnant and breastfeeding women, as well as adolescent girls, have significantly increased as food prices doubled in the past 12 months alone. UN-Women research shows that a high percentage of income generated by women inside the home through informal economic activities has become untenable owing to the destruction of homes and buildings, with a devastating economic impact on their livelihoods. Even before the earthquakes, women and girls were used as economic coping mechanisms through forced and early marriage, or subjugated by unregulated, informal labour markets offering no protection.

- Generous donor contributions through the Central Emergency Response Fund, the Syria earthquake flash appeal, the Syria Humanitarian Fund and the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund have allowed the United Nations and non-governmental organization partners to reach thousands of women and girls affected by the earthquake in Syria with food aid, shelters, dignity and maternity kits, hygiene kits, emergency nutrition packages and cash assistance. Humanitarian actors have also established and run safe spaces for women and girls and provided gender-based violence and reproductive health-care services, legal counselling, mental health services, and protection training to staff running collective shelters. The expanded cross-border access following a decision by the Syrian Government after the earthquake has allowed for more crucial United Nations support to reach women and girls in north-west Syria. Over 1,800 trucks have crossed through three border crossings, and United Nations agencies have conducted 76 inter-agency missions.
- At the same time, the Humanitarian Response Plan for Syria is less than 8 per cent funded, severely limiting the ability of the United Nations and partners to meet the needs of women and girls across Syria. Limited and insufficient funding for gender-based violence programming has affected the functioning of referral pathways and safe spaces across the country as well as caused gaps in the availability of trained health workers, post-rape treatment kits, and sexual and reproductive health care in displacement camps.
- The United Nations aims to increase the representation of women on assessment teams to reach the 30 per cent minimum benchmark established by the Whole of Syria Strategic Steering Group, even as women aid workers were forced to move to new communities or to prioritize family and childbearing responsibilities in the aftermath of the earthquake.
- Since 2021, the Syrian women's advisory group in Gaziantep provides a platform for Syrian women to engage in high-level humanitarian decision-making and ensures that Syrian women can directly inform senior leadership and are part of strategic planning in the United Nations-led humanitarian response. However, this is still a nascent mechanism that needs support and resources for their recommendations to be applied widely. Similarly, there is still room for improvement in the collection and use of sex- and age-disaggregated data and in strengthening the engagement of women-led civil society organizations providing humanitarian assistance on the ground, including in their ability to be registered in the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund.

- Syrian women and girls also report that the violence against them has become normalized because of years of conflict. This includes rape in detention, physical and sexual abuse in shelters, harassment at checkpoints, arbitrary arrests, kidnapping, psychological and emotional violence, sexual violence and exploitation, economic abuse, including deprivation of inheritance rights in cases of divorce and for widows, as well as forced and child marriage. Displaced women and children, who are disconnected often multiple times from the security of family and community, are especially at risk. The situation is particularly alarming in camps that predominantly host women and children where various forms of gender-based violence and murder are prevalent, such as Al-Hol camp in north-east Syria. In north-west Syria, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic documented a systematic practice of detention to stifle political dissent by the Security Council-listed terrorist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, with former detainees reporting torture and sexual violence.
- Conflict-related sexual violence is still chronically underreported in Syria owing to a lack of multisectoral response services in certain areas of the country, stigma, fear of reprisals, and pervasive impunity. It is also included in the annual report of the Secretary-General on conflict-related sexual violence. To date, with the exception of a conviction in Germany of a former official of the Syrian General Security Directorate through universal jurisdiction, no other convictions for sexual violence offences committed during the decade-long Syrian conflict have been delivered. The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General reminded the Group of the importance of ensuring access for the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and strengthening of information and analysis of patterns and trends of sexual violence as a basis for preventive action and programming through the United Nations monitoring, analysis and reporting arrangements on conflict-related sexual violence, as well as the use of sanctions regimes within the purview of counter-terrorism efforts to prevent and address conflict-related sexual violence committed by parties to the conflict.
- The issue of detainees, abductees, disappeared and missing persons remains one of the top priorities for Syrian women. The Office of the Special Envoy continues to advocate for large-scale releases of detainees, granting access to international specialized organizations to places of detention, communication between detainees and families, and the creation of a stand-alone entity for missing persons in Syria, following the Secretary-General's recommendation to Member States.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were presented by UN-Women, as the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group, developed in coordination with the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict.¹

¹ These recommendations are suggestions from United Nations participants in this meeting or the background note prepared by the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group ahead of the meeting, including by the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. They are not recommendations from the Informal Expert Group as a whole or Council members.

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 United Nations cross-border authorization to deliver humanitarian aid, to ensure continuity in access to life-saving aid and basic services and keep pace with the unprecedented scale of needs.
- Urging the international community to fully fund the Humanitarian Response Plan, with special attention to: (a) addressing all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination against women and girls; (b) stronger investments on sexual and reproductive health care, mental health and psychosocial support; (c) enhancing resilience and early recovery programming and access to basic services; (d) mainstreaming gender equality throughout the humanitarian response; and (e) ensuring women's equal and meaningful participation and leadership in decision-making at all levels of the humanitarian response and throughout the humanitarian programme cycle.
- Urging greater investment in local women's organizations to support local grass-roots peacebuilding efforts and the delivery of humanitarian aid. In line with the Secretary-General's five women and peace and security goals 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 per cent 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 to 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 remove barriers to and facilitate access to civil documentation, with special attention to women whose spouses are missing or disappeared or have been killed, and supporting the creation of a victim-centred mechanism for missing persons, as outlined in the recommendations of the 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-centred 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 north-east 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.

The Co-Chairs thanked the participants and encouraged all Security Council members to follow up on the important issues raised in the discussion.
