



EuroMed Feminist Initiative
المبادرة النسوية الأورومتوسطية
Initiative Féministe EuroMed

BRIEF

Syrian Women's Rights Civil Society Conference

Combating Violence Against Women and Girls
as a Main Barrier to Women's Participation
in Decision Making and Peace Building in Syria

9-10 DECEMBER 2021

BRUSSELS



This project is funded by
the European Union

BRIEF

The Syrian Civil Society Women's Rights Conference



Combating Violence Against Women and Girls as a Main Barrier to Women's Participation in Decision Making and Peace Building in Syria

9-10 DECEMBER 2021
BRUSSELS

1- INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Civil Society Women's Rights Conference to combat violence against women and girls as a main obstacle to women's participation in decision-making and peace building was held over two days on December 9-10 2021, in Brussels, in-person and online. The conference brought together more than 100 representatives of Syrian women's rights organizations, civil society organizations and local initiatives, and representatives from international organizations, the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN).

This conference comes within the framework of the program "Promoting Women's Participation in Decision-Making and Peacebuilding Processes in Syria" funded by the EU and aimed at presenting and discussing the Common Agenda to combat Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), which was developed during a consultation process over one year, with more than 250 Syrian activists, specialists and legal experts from more than 100 organizations and initiatives.

The conference provided a platform for Syrian women's rights activists to promote a sustainable dialogue between Syrian civil society and relevant parties. It also provided a unique opportunity to create more synergy between women's rights organizations and human rights organizations and initiatives, and to make recommendations to the EU, the UN and more broadly to the international community.

2- OPENING PANEL

Ms. Stella Ronner-Grubacic, Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, European External Action Service (EEAS), reassured that the EU has, and will continue to condemn all parties to the conflict, particularly the Syrian regime and its allies, for persistent, widespread, systematic, and serious violations and abuses of human rights. She discussed means by which the EU has been assisting the Syrian women and confirmed that the EU is acutely aware of the need to do more to protect girls, adolescents and young women who are at serious risks of child marriage, early pregnancy and gender-based violence, especially during the COVID19- pandemic. She stressed that there is an urgent need to combat VAWG as a main impediment to women's participation in decision-making and peacebuilding.



Stella Ronner-Grubacic - Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, European External Action Service (EEAS)

“ We need to make greater efforts to protect women, girls and adolescent girls who are at risk of early marriage, early pregnancy and various forms of gender violence in light of the urgent need to combat violence against women and girls, which constitutes an obstacle to women's participation, decision-making and peace building. ”

Building on Ms. Ronner’s speech, Ms. Birgit Van Hout, Regional Representative for Europe, UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), shed light on the fact that women are frequently silenced, and even online, simply for demanding participation, and that even when they are allowed, they lack the financial resources to participate meaningfully and at equal terms. She explained that women participation is not only a right, but it also results in better outcomes. It leads to reducing discriminatory practices that harm the fulfilment of human rights, which is critical for political and peace processes. She emphasized that the Common Agenda provides opportunities for women and opens the door for the greater representation of women in politics.

“ We will go forward hand in hand to build peace and security. ”



Brigit Van Hout - Regional Representative for Europe, United Nations Human Rights (OHCHR)

Ms. Lilian Halls-French, Co-President of the EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI), mentioned the tragic context in Syria which has hampered the development of sustainable communication channels among the diverse components of the feminist movement, despite the importance of amplifying women's voices and disseminating needs from the ground to international forums. She emphasized that the conference is one step further on the long common path that EFI and their Syrian partners are taking.

For nearly 15 years, EFI has been supporting not only Syrian women's rights organizations and activists, but also human rights and political activists who stand up and advocate for gender equality and women's rights as central to political transition, peace-building, and transitional justice efforts. EFI believes that without justice, there can be no peace or political solution, and shares the determination of its partners to combat impunity for crimes committed in Syria. She assured that that EFI will continue its efforts to shed light on the violence of the last decade and hold perpetrators accountable.



Lilian Halls-French - Co-President of the Euromed Feminist Initiative (EFI)

“ It is our responsibility to convey their voices and raise their demands to international forums, by seeking to expand the scope of dialogue and achieve synergy between organizations and initiatives to combat violence against women in Syria. ”

The final panellist Ms. Sawsan Zakzak, Gender Expert, Coordinator of the Coalition of Syrian Women for Democracy (CSWD) and a Member of Women Advisory Board for UN Envoy for Syria, emphasized that the oppression women face in Syria is the result of the patriarchal mentalities in society and politics, and that this should be addressed. She also discussed the dream of living as citizens in a democratic State that guarantees citizenship rights to all residents, whether they are men or women. The wish is for all citizens to be free of fear, poverty, and tyranny in all its forms and manifestations, whether patriarchal, political, or religious, and for them to be able to decide everything concerning their destinies.

“ They are our dreams of being equal partners in building our next Syria, with all what the word means, and all that the word equality carries with it. ”



Sawsan Zakzak - Gender Expert, Coordinator of the coalition of Syrian Women for Democracy, Member of Women Advisory Board for UN Envoy for Syria

May, the fourteen-year-old who was forced out of school to marry her cousin, was routinely beaten by her husband, and she was frightened to talk about it for fear of being exposed to additional violence. “He flung her against a wall with such force and hostility that she began to bleed from her head and, unknowingly, from her womb; she had no idea she was pregnant. Doctors at the hospital noted that she bled because she fell down the stairs. Noha, the seventeen-year-old girl, left her house and did not promptly return to school, therefore her punishment was death by her father's gunshots. In terms of marital rape, I contend that no Syrian woman has not been raped by her husband, because all personal status laws that rule in Syria make sex a right for the husband and a responsibility for the woman.

Sawsan Zakzak

3- KEY DISCUSSIONS ON MAIN AREAS OF THE COMMON AGENDA

This panel provided details on the main areas of the Common Agenda and recommendations under each area. Ms. Maya Al Rahabi, Gender Expert, Women’s Rights Defender, and Director of Women’s Studies Centre Musawa in Syria reminded the background of the Common Agenda and summarized the three phases of the consultative process leading to its establishment. She underlined the Common Agenda's principles and values and the Gender Advocacy Group required for the implementation.



Maya Alrahabi - Gender Expert, Women’s Rights Defender, Director of Women’s Studies Center Musawa in Syria

“ We hope that a solution will prevail soon and that the challenges we face due to the armed conflict will soon be resolved to pave the way for democracy in our country, Syria. ”

The main areas of the Common Agenda were then presented, followed by interaction discussions.

- **Women, Peace and Security and Women’s Participation**

Ms. Khawla Dunia, Gender Expert in Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) and Women's Rights Defender, reiterated that the voices of Syrian women and girls needed to reach instead international community. One of the most important demands was to stop the military conflict in Syria and to incorporate gender considerations into all peacebuilding activities and decisions. Recommendations included the necessity of conducting extensive research on gender issues and combating VAWG in Syria, and women’s participation in all aspects of society, particularly decision-making as well as voluntary, dignified and safe return of all displaced and refugees to their original places of residence in Syria, especially for women, who are the most vulnerable to discrimination. Social awareness was emphasized during the open discussion. Some participants expressed concern about developing a National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325.

- **Legislation**

Ms. Sawsan Zakzak presented Syria's legislation, emphasizing discriminative aspects that contribute to perpetuating VAWG. Syria has ratified and signed a number of international human rights and gender equality conventions, but discriminatory articles remain in the Personal Status Laws in matters related to marriage, divorce, guardianship, custody, and the legality of early marriage. Discrimination against women persists as well in the Penal Code, Labour laws, social security, and Nationality law which prevents women from passing on their nationality to their children. Following Ms. Zakzak's presentation, almost all participants agreed on one point: the critical importance of secularism and cancellation of all discriminative laws and articles of laws. A significant concern was that the reality on the ground is quite complicated, given the ineffectiveness of the Constitutional Court and its subordination to the executive authority.

- **Access to Justice**

Ms. Joumana Seif, Legal expert, Women’s Rights Defender, Member of the Gender Advocacy Group, and Ms. Michelle Jarvis, Deputy Head, International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), portrayed the horrendous situation women and girls face in Syria. Ms. Seif emphasized that incorporating a gender perspective is critical for both the peace and justice processes, particularly transitional justice. In terms of accountability and justice efforts, she explained that activists are still fighting for recognition of gender-based violations, recognition of women's experience in armed conflict, and all forms of political, social and economic violence.

Ms. Michelle Jarvis gave the participants information about IIIM and how it has been working to provide Syrians with access to justice. IIIM is referred to as a "justice facilitator" because it collects, preserves, aggregates, and analyses information and evidence for international crimes committed in Syria. The IIIM was able to assist in 102 instances by sharing relevant evidence, analysis and other expertise with national jurisdictions (like Germany and France) working on cases involving crimes in Syria. During the open discussion, participants emphasized the challenges that families of the missing and disappeared face, as well as the heart-breaking reality of not knowing whether their husbands, fathers, brothers, or loved ones are alive. This panel and follow up discussion offered a ray of hope for future accountability.



Michelle Jarvis - Deputy Head of the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) and **Joumana Seif** - Legal Expert

- **Access to Economic Resources**

Ms. Sabiha Khalil, Women's Rights Defender, Member of the Gender Advocacy Group, underlined that women's structural exclusion from access to financial assets, which is enforced by cultural norms and the legal system, prevents women from participating equally in the economy. This was true even before the war, but war and conflict only exacerbated the situation. The significance of education was also emphasized, with education varying depending on where one lives, and which political party controls the region. Despite this, some stereotypes have shifted since the war, as women were forced to take on the role of family breadwinners in the absence of husbands and fathers.

- **Challenging Gender Stereotypes, Changing Public Opinion**

Ms. Doris Awwad, Women's Rights Defender, Member of the Gender Advocacy Group, spoke about the different types of abuse women face in Syria, and how much the conflict has exacerbated the situation. She laid great emphasis on the issue of stigmatization and provided a testimony of how stigma follows a woman in all aspects of her life. Ms. Awwad underlined that the Common Agenda evokes many useful means to mitigate the challenges that Syrian women face. The topic was followed by a discussion where participants underlined the severe lack of shelters for women victims of VAWG in Syria, making it difficult for them to assist women victims. They also stated that unless the armed conflict is stopped, there is no way to end violence against women.

4-WORKING GROUPS ON PROMOTING AND IMPLEMENTING OF THE COMMON AGENDA AND PROVIDING RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EU AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

On the second day, participants discussed in working groups mechanisms to promote and implement the Common Agenda and provided recommendations for building coalitions across sectors, setting up a feminist platform to enable gender approach and expertise from grassroots to policymaking, and supporting the freedom and independence of Civil Society in Syria where women's rights organisations can prepare the ground for a long-term process towards peace and democracy integral of gender equality.

After a plenary session, the groups resumed their work and drafted recommendations to the EU and the international community in three main areas:

- **Enabling international commitments to support the availability of services for victims of VAWG**
- **Enabling international commitments to support women's participation at all stages of peace negotiations**
- **Enabling international commitments to support women's rights organisations, networks and platforms**

Working group's discussions



5-RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EU, UN AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

At the end of the conference, the following recommendations for the implementation of the Common Agenda were shared with the European Union.

Enabling international commitments to support women's participation at all stages of peace negotiations

- Exert pressure on all local and international parties to end the armed conflict and efficiently implement the international commitments related to women's rights and gender equality within the UN political process, while supporting pro-actively women's participation in all processes and at all levels, through the implementation of the international resolutions related to Syria, especially UNSCR 2254 together with UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security.
- Encourage all the local and international parties to adopt and consult the Common Agenda for Combating VAWG, which responds to specific needs and considers the current and evolving situation of women and girls in Syria and in hosting countries.
- Continue promoting women's rights and gender equality, including in terms of women's participation at all levels, as key element in all EU funding mechanisms for humanitarian assistance and international partnerships.
- Keep up in the public debate on the issue of forced returns to Syria, especially from European and neighbouring countries, highlighting the heightened risks of all forms of violence for Syrian women and girls in the current context of political pressure on returns. Draw the attention of European asylum countries to the gaps in asylum policies that allow male family members to practice violence against women by preventing family women from learning the language, integrating, and working.

Enabling international commitments to support women's rights organisations, networks and platforms

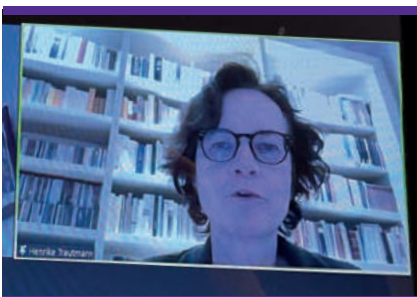
- Continue acting as an important agent in supporting and funding women's rights organizations, platforms and projects, studies and research on the situation of women in Syria as well as of Syrian women residing outside of Syria.
- Address the issue of sanctions, considering the negative effects that these sanctions have or have had on the work and existence of women's rights organizations and defenders.
- Design mechanisms to offer protection to women's rights organizations and defenders, specifically on combatting VAWG (support the provision of a safe environment for them to participate and play their effective role in every step of the political decision-making process). This includes facilitating access to visa for women's rights organizations and defenders.
- Rely on and support the grassroots expertise from women's rights organisations and women's rights defenders to support the monitoring, evaluation and learning system of Gender Action Plan (GAP) III.
- Collaborate with women's rights organizations and defenders including the Gender Advocacy Group as a means of better understanding the field reality and the experiences of women while promoting the recommendations stemming from the Common Agenda.

Enabling international commitments to support the availability of services for victims of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)

- Provide additional and focused political and financial support to women's organizations and initiatives aiming at enhancing availability, accessibility, acceptability, and affordability of services for victims of VAWG in Syria and in hosting countries:
 - Shelter/homes provided for emergency and longer-term protection to women and girl victims of violence and their children.
 - Emergency toll-free number available 24/24 and a mobile application.
 - Access to health services (including medico-legal certificates, psychosocial and mental healthy support.)
 - Free legal aid and counselling.
 - Capacity building to organizations to enhance the capabilities of workers in this field.
 - Economic support and income-generating initiatives.
 - Spreading information on all available services.
 - Support organizations to establish an appropriate referral system.
- Promote collaboration of EU partners with women's rights organizations and defenders, relying on their grassroots expertise to ensure effective implementation of humanitarian and international cooperation priorities planned within the GAP III, including gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, the Gender-Age Marker and women's rights.
- Support civil society efforts in creating a code of conduct in the prevention of VAWG.

6-RECEPTION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ms. Henrike Trautmann, Acting Director, Southern Neighbourhood and Turkey, Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) emphasized that there should be a coordinated action on the ground for the sake of Syrian women, and added that the Common Agenda serves as a strategic guide for determining what should be accomplished and what actions should be taken. She explained that Syria, like all other countries in the region, faces enormous challenges in terms of youth participation, participation of the minorities, and women's participation in the political process or the labour market. She emphasized the EU's willingness to support women's roles in the political process toward negotiated peace to achieve equality, as well as evoking many useful means to alleviate the difficulties that Syrian women face. As the Syrian political process is extremely difficult, she concluded that the EU intends to encourage advocacy.



Henrike Trautmann - Acting Director, Southern Neighbourhood and Turkey, Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR)

“ There must be action on the sake of women in Syria. ”

Mr. Carl Hallergard, Deputy Managing Director for the Middle East and North Africa, European External Action Services (EEAS), stressed that women and girls are the most vulnerable victims of conflict, but they should play a significant role in bringing about change and peace. He stressed the need to educate men and boys to understand that there's a new reality that they should adjust and adapt to and be part of. Lastly, he thanked the participants and EFI for their work, recommendations, encouragement, and support and stressed the EU's openness to welcome the activists in Brussels and continue the exchange with such initiatives



Henrike Trautmann and Carl Hallergard received Syrian Civil Society Women's Rights Conference Recommendations

In her concluding remarks, Ms. Sawsan Zakzak stressed that the discussions helped shed light on the difficulties and challenges the Syrian civil society organizations and women face, and the options of in-person and online participation allowed everyone to be present and participate.

Ms. Boriana Jonsson, Executive Director of EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI) underlined the importance of the conference in highlighting the role of women, who have been at the forefront from day one of the peaceful protests and never backed away from the goal of reaching a political transition in Syrian towards democracy. For this to happen, violence against women should be addressed to structurally ensure women's participation. Women's participation in the peace process is critical to its success as women's involvement is not only ensuring a lasting and durable peace but is also a matter of justice



Boriana Jonsson - Executive Director of EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI)

“ **The Common Agenda is the next step and the cornerstone of the political movement for a more democratic Syria.** ”

