

Position Paper: Roundtable discussion on Syria | 5 March 2025

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Introduction

Women in Syria face profound challenges due to prolonged conflict, social constraints, and economic instability. Despite these obstacles, Syrian women have shown remarkable resilience and a strong desire for greater participation in public life. This position paper outlines the current state of women's rights in Syria, highlights key challenges, and provides recommendations to strengthen their rights and agency both locally and through international support.

Background and Current Situation

The Syrian conflict has led to shifts in traditional gender roles, with women stepping into new responsibilities mainly out of necessity and resilience due to the loss or absence of male family members rather than policy shifts. Women now occupy roles in manufacturing, public transport, agriculture, and entrepreneurship sectors that men traditionally dominated. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, this shift has been so profound that Syrian women now represent seven workers for every man in the labor market. Initially, this trend was driven by displaced women, but as the economic situation worsened, it extended to all Syrian women, compelling them to seek employment regardless of their displacement status (Aljsem, 2023). Women's contributions to entrepreneurship have also seen growth, increasing from 4.4% in 2009 to 22.4% in 2017 (The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2017). Regardless of these advances, over 80% of female-headed households continue to struggle with poverty due to the economic crisis, as highlighted by UN Women (2023). In the healthcare sector, women have stepped up as essential providers as challenges persist, with UNFPA reporting that in northwest Syria alone, 500,000 women and girls have limited access to vital sexual and reproductive health services. Meanwhile, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has incorporated women into both military and civilian spheres (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Key Challenges

Despite growing participation, there are no systematic policies to support these changes, and many fear that women's rights could regress further in a post-conflict Syria.

1. **Economic Barriers:** Women-run businesses have increased, yet economic participation remains restricted by societal norms and structural barriers. Many women are engaged in informal, low-paying jobs with little job security, and vocational training programs still largely focus on stereotypically female roles, such as tailoring and hairdressing, rather than high-paying fields.
2. **Institutional and Legal Barriers:** Women in Syria continue to face systemic legal discrimination and inadequate institutional protections. Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a significant concern, with domestic violence not explicitly criminalized, leaving survivors with limited legal recourse. Women lack equal rights in personal status laws, particularly concerning marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Many legal frameworks reinforce patriarchal norms, restricting women's autonomy and decision-making power. Additionally, law enforcement and judicial institutions lack gender-sensitive approaches, making it difficult for women to access justice when their rights are violated. **Religious and cultural norms** further perpetuate gender disparities, reinforcing male guardianship structures and preventing women from fully asserting

their rights in both public and private life. Extremist groups and conservative norms continue to restrict women's mobility and participation in public life, making it even more difficult for them to access education, employment, and leadership roles. Without comprehensive legal reforms and awareness campaigns, women's progress in Syria remains fragile and at risk of regression.

3. **Displacement and Poverty:** An alarming 90% of Syria's population now lives below the poverty line, with at least 12 million Syrians facing food insecurity (World Food Program, 2023). Women and girls constitute a significant portion of displaced populations, and displacement camps report that 92% of female-headed households face insufficient means to meet basic needs, heightening their vulnerability to exploitation and GBV (OHCHR, 2023).

Recommendations

All recommendations should be implemented by including local voices, not just as an implementing party but as core partners in designing their projects, as they are the experts in their contexts.

1. **Ensuring an Inclusive Transition Process:** Advocate for a democratic, inclusive governance transition that protects the rights of minorities and women to prevent marginalization. Support legal guarantees for equal citizenship, mechanisms for women's and minority groups' political participation, and safeguards against discrimination in new governance structures.
2. **Facilitating Humanitarian Aid:** Increase sustainable funding for women-led civil society organizations providing healthcare, education, and economic opportunities to displaced and conflict-affected women.
3. **Supporting Meso-Level Initiatives:** Encourage community-based programs that foster long-term gender equity, ensuring women's agency is sustained beyond immediate crisis response. Implement initiatives focused on dialogue, social cohesion, and engaging Syrian men in addressing gender-based violence.
4. **Ensuring Political Participation:** Support leadership and political participation training programs to facilitate women's involvement in governance and legislative-making process. Support the inclusion of women from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds in politics, ensuring meaningful participation beyond representation quotas.
5. **Strengthening Judicial Participation and Protections for Women:** Support the Syrian judiciary and civil society in establishing gender-responsive judicial mechanisms to address historical and ongoing violations of women's rights. This includes ensuring women's participation in the judiciary, transparent legal processes, accountability for arbitrary detentions, and access to justice for women who have faced imprisonment, abuse, or forced disappearances. Provide technical assistance and necessary resources for civil society organizations to help build an inclusive and accountable justice system.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has disrupted and reshaped gender roles, bringing both challenges and opportunities for Syrian women. While women have demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency, systemic barriers continue to stand in the way of gender equity. A multi-level approach that addresses economic participation, legal rights, and social empowerment is essential. The Netherlands, through strategic diplomatic engagement, targeted economic investments, and sustained humanitarian and development support, can play a crucial role in strengthening Syrian women's rights.