



SUPPORTING ARAB WOMEN AT THE TABLE (SAWT)

PEACE BUILDING INITIATIVES AND ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SYRIA



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Supporting
Arab Women
at the Table



CTDC
مركز التنمية والتعاون عبر الأوطان
Center for Transnational
Development & Collaboration



RELEASE ME
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About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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Arab Reform Initiative

This research report was produced by the Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration (CTDC), in partnership with Release Me.

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Initially, and given the current circumstances in Syria, Release Me, through its local team spread across Syria's geography, carried out a preliminary assessment of accessibility to areas in Syria, where group sessions and individual interviews with women would be feasible.

Fieldwork conducted by the field researchers began on 10 December 2022, as Release Me started collecting primary data through forming a research team in consultation with facilitators in different locations in Syria.

At the same time, we as researchers were engaged in conversations and consultations with CTDC's experts Dr Nour and Dr Nof, as they were supervising the research and they have extensive knowledge about the current Syrian context and the situation of Syrian women. As both experts have extensive experience and knowledge in feminist research methodologies, the conversations and discussions were an enriching experience for us as an opportunity to exchange ideas and explore knowledge. The exchanges provided an opportunity for us to position ourselves as part and parcel of the research process, and this informed our analysis. The regular meetings were an important tool for us to overcome the barriers presented by our locations in different European countries and enabled us to engage in motivational debates around the research.

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Executive Summary

This research presents the points of view of 196 women from different areas in Syria about peace building initiatives and alternative forms of Syrian women's political participation through an analytical feminist lens using qualitative research methods. The research methods included individual interviews and collective consultations, in the form of focus covered, and covered different Syrian areas including: Damascus (Jaramana, Douma, al-Hameh), Al-Suwayda, Al-Raqqa, Homs, Salamiyah, Idlib, Qamishli, Dayr al-Zour, and Aleppo (Afrin and Qabasin). The importance of this research derives above all from its presentation of the viewpoints, attitudes, and roles played by Syrian women from different in relation to the peace and security agenda and its application, alternative forms of political participation, and peacebuilding.

The research resulted in several conclusions, including but not limited to:

1. Syrian women's engagement in grassroots political activism through some organizations and groups is driven by their desire to lead radical change and challenge political structural oppression, which reinforces stereotypes about women's roles. This participation and engagement is perceived as an alternative to counter the exclusion of women from political leadership and from engagement in public affairs more generally.
2. To guarantee Syrian women's active participation in politics, it is necessary to engage them democratically at all levels. The participation of Syrian women in political work and in decision-making positions is still impeded by the totalitarian regime, de facto authorities, and a traditional society that does not value engaging women in public affairs.
3. Peace from Syrian women's perspectives means positive and just peace, focusing not only on ending violence and conflict but also addressing all areas of private and public life.
4. The understanding of Syrian women's roles in peacebuilding cannot be limited to those women engaged in the political peace process or high-level negotiations; it must include all women regardless of their position in the public sphere.
5. As Syrian women have been greatly affected by the conflict that followed the 2011 revolution, peace agreements that do not take their perspectives and visions into account will always fall short of achieving justice.

The analysis also resulted in many recommendations of relevance to advocacy, further action, and other dialogues between different contexts. Here we summarize some of them.

1. Advocacy:

1. All Syrian feminist and human rights organizations must push for a clear and unified strategy for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. These organizations are urged to work on developing a national mechanism to ensure that all parties involved in the conflict apply the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda. Organizations are also encouraged to produce periodic reports on progress achieved in relation to the WPS and UNSCR 1325, to monitor the active participation of women in leadership positions in politics regardless of their positions, and to explore how women's nominal representation in political entities can be used to draw political and financial support from funders.
2. Advocate for future peace agreements to include provisions that are sensitive to gender, racial differences, abilities, age, location, and other markers of difference, particularly in relation to the restructuring of security apparatuses in Syria. It is highly recommended that advocacy efforts focus on: (1) demanding guarantees from all parties to end all forms of violence, including gender-based violence, and (2) on constitutional reform that takes the above-listed demographic differences into account.
3. It is important to support civil peace initiatives led by women and young women activists in all areas in Syria, to highlight their role through local and international media, and expand the space for the exchange of experiences between Syrian peacemakers and women in other countries that have witnessed conflict.

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2. Further Action:

1. Organizations are urged to develop programmes that focus on shifting the discourses and narratives that stereotype Syrian women as passive through highlighting women's roles as partners and peers. Future research should explore mechanisms to overcome barriers that face women, and to learn from international experiences in relation to reform and putting an end to discrimination based on gender.
2. Further action could be taken in relation to building Syrian women's capacities around conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and negotiations. Building technical capacities and expertise is vital for guaranteeing women's active participation in peacebuilding processes.

3. Bridging Gaps:

1. It is important to create safe feminist spaces that respect difference and value diversity. These spaces need to foster a collaborative spirit instead of reinforcing competition between different Syrian women's and feminist organizations. This would enable organizations to support women, promote their participation, and reinforce their role and ability to affect social movements in Syria.
2. It is important for civil society organizations (CSO) to undergo structural reform to reduce the participation gap between men and women and to develop clear and transparent policies that safeguard women in all sectors.

In the following sections, we explore the research in detail, and we present its methodology, the conceptual framework we relied on, and detailed findings and recommendations.

Introduction

This research aims to explore peace initiatives and alternative forms of women's political participation in order to formulate a new vision of women in politics. The research challenges the assumption that women's participation in politics should be limited to decision-making positions. The effect and value of women's political participation in challenging systems of oppression within the private sphere cannot be ignored and must be considered an agent for change and for building just societies. Women's vital and active role in rebuilding societies is considered a resource for conflict resolution and peace building, according to evidence from several countries in A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UN Women, 2015).

There is a need to understand the different types of challenges and barriers Syrian women face due to their gender, race, location, and other political factors from an intersectional perspective. The humanitarian disaster, destruction, and fragmentation affecting Syria as the revolution turned into an armed conflict have all contributed to creating barriers and problems for Syrian women including: displacement; poverty; and physical, mental, psychological, and emotional problems. To understand these different aspects of women's lives, it is important to acknowledge that women's experiences are diverse, and their perspectives unique; thus, their visions of women's political participation in peacebuilding and security are also diverse. This prompts us to assess the extent to which international resolutions and mechanisms, such as UNSCR 1325 and other initiatives in the WPS agenda, are suitable to the Syrian context from women's perspectives.

This also means that, for a better understanding of the situation, it is important to explore women's perspectives on political participation, justice, peace processes, and security, and to highlight the role they play in these processes from their own perspectives. To explore this through this research, we attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What local peacebuilding initiatives exist in Syria and to what degree have they been represented in high-level peace discussions?
2. What alternative forms of participation have emerged in Syria? And to what degree have these been informing official negotiations and peacebuilding tracks?
3. How can alternative and local forms of political engagement inform the implementation of international resolutions such as UNSCR 1325? How can these be used to ensure diversity and representation of different women's activist movements and groups in mainstream politics?

Twelve years after the popular revolution became a violent conflict, no advancements have been achieved in relation to future vision of Syria, and Syrians still face complex humanitarian, political, military, economic, and human rights crises. These complexities are also compounded by foreign military interventions and the political and geographical fragmentation in Syria (UN, 2023). Now, Syria is divided into four geopolitical areas, each with its own forms of governance and administration, and is run by various armed de facto authorities. Each area also has different security conditions and political and social structures. These differences mean that women's involvement in ending war and building peace takes distinct forms. It is important to highlight that "revolutionary uprisings and alternative modes of resistance to the injustice that is caused by the political class must be seen as a basic and necessary form of political participation" (Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin, 2020: 9); in this context, such resistance is one of the tools for attaining peace, security, and justice. In this research we cover: Damascus (Jaramana, Douma, al-Hameh), Al-Suwayda, Al-Raqqa, Homs, Salamiyah, Idlib, Qamishli, Dayr al-Zour, and Aleppo (Afrin and Qabasin).

As no political advancements have been achieved, in this research we also attempt to:

- Assess the applicability of international resolutions on WPS, its mechanisms, and the barriers that prevent women from engaging with it in the Syrian context. We do so with a focus on alternative forms of women's political participation in Syria, and we include those women engaged in CSOs, social and economic development, social initiatives, and activist groups.
- Explore the extent to which a group of non-representative women from different areas in Syria – northeast, northwest, and regime-controlled areas – understands and engages with the WPS agenda.

Context

The situation in Syria – particularly the revolution becoming an armed conflict, the state of destruction that followed and the deaths, detentions, and the forced displacement and refugeehood of millions of families, and the many resulting humanitarian disasters – has created an urgent need for alternative responses unprecedented for Syrians. The most significant of these responses is the emergence of a civil society operating across most Syrian areas with a wide range of programmes and a unique ability to rebuild social ties, promote tools for expressing and discussing human values, restore the vitality of society's diverse components, and enable citizens to build participatory political institutions. In this space, women's roles became more visible, and their engagement in CSOs represents an alternative form of political participation, particularly as many CSOs took on the task of empowering women politically and making them active agents.

To better understand the role organizations play in relation to women's political participation, we relied on Civil Society Gateway to explore the general reality of organizations, including their activities, locations, and contributions to women's political participation. Based on the mapping carried out as part of this research, we were able to identify over 1,000 Syrian CSOs, and we made the following observations:

1. There are 430 CSOs registered on the Gateway.
2. Only 36 of these organizations (around 8%) described "women's issues" as their main area of work.
3. Eleven CSOs described women's issues as their only area of work, or less than 2% of the registered organizations.
4. Twenty CSOs described women's issues as a secondary area of work, with their main areas of work being protection, livelihood, food security, advocacy, and human rights.
5. Twenty-four of the 36 women's issues-oriented CSOs are based in Syria; the rest are in the neighbouring countries of Turkey and Lebanon, and 2 are in diaspora (in France and the USA).
6. Some of these CSOs reinforce stereotypes about women's social roles, including women's reproductive and caring roles, and their livelihood projects include kitchens, selling sweets, and sewing.

Comparing this data with the data we collected in the field through 63 individual interviews and 13 discussions, we noticed the following:

1. The majority of Syrian CSOs were not able to integrate women into their structures, whether in relation to numbers represented within the organization or in relation to qualitative inclusion in activities.
2. Syrian CSOs have not succeeded in addressing gender stereotypes or the political, social, economic, and cultural barriers that limit women's freedom and prevent them from active participation. Most CSOs adopted traditional understandings of empowerment and integration into patriarchal systems and institutions.
3. Some CSOs that work on women's rights and gender equality describe themselves as women's, not feminist, organizations. The general discourse around feminist organizations is that they are mostly established outside of Syria, as they are more able to explicitly declare their feminism, unlike those with a presence in Syria. Those in Syria, where patriarchy is institutionalized in the constitution and in legal frameworks, find it difficult to declare their feminism openly. In his book *Masculine Domination*, Pierre Bourdieu explains how social groups are reproduced based on cognitive and value-based doctrines, and further how this manifests in discourse and practice (Bourdieu, 2009). According to Bourdieu, the international civil society is in fact under the control of donor governments and represents its own elitist agenda, while local civil societies are often caught between the hammer of state oppression and the anvil of the appropriation of the discourse by international organizations. This means that local CSOs in the global south face competing and opposing forces: complicity with oppressive state structures on the one hand, and rights and justice discourses that adopt the cultural imperialism of the global north on the other, which also reinforces neopatriarchal structures and systems of oppression (Abu-Assab and Nasser-Eddin, 2018).

Women's Experiences in Politics

Despite the importance of women's political participation in peacebuilding processes, according to international resolutions, the experience in conflict areas demonstrates that applying these resolutions on the ground is complicated by the community's conditions communities. Different factors can limit women's participation at national and local levels (Park, 2020) or undermine their participation. The Oxfam report (2015) sheds light on some of these factors, which included poverty, social and economic discrimination, inequality, lacking technical capacities, limited access to education, threats, violence, political marginalization, and tokenization and manipulation in political spaces. For instance, during the peace process in South Sudan, women who represented the opposing political parties were perceived as representing their leaders rather than the interests of communities affected by the conflict (Oxfam, 2015: 8). The report also highlighted that these women were a minority, they represented larger groups, and were given little time to coordinate and prepare for meetings. The political space is heavily influenced by the priorities of opposing parties, and formal or informal access to peace processes is not easily granted to women (Ellerby, 2012). Another limitation to these resolutions is that they address gender and sexual power dynamics in the binary terms of man or woman.

Women are still excluded from peace processes, despite the endorsement of UNSCR 1325 in 2000, and the seven resolutions that followed it emphasize that peace is very much linked with equality between women and men. Between 1992 and 2019, the percentage of women negotiators in major peace processes was 13%, and women were only 6% of mediators and 6% of signatories to peace agreements (ESCWA, 2017). In Syria, the absence of women's representation was visible during the constitutional committee's meeting in August 2020. In the meeting, only 13 of the 45 attendees were women (CFR, 2019), which is less than the representation recommended by UNSCR 1325 (O'Keefe, 2020).

However, women's representation in such positions – and increasing their participation – is only one aspect of their conditions. For example, Syria's endorsement of women's right to participate in elections, parliaments, and state institutions in 1950¹ did not actually improve women's conditions; the inclusion of women's civil and political rights was meant to build state institution legitimacy, but as their exercise was impeded by societal conditioning and expectations (al-Tabba'a, 2010). According to Akram Hourani, "granting women these rights was pending first and for all governmental approval, and also the conservatives not resisting" (Hourani, n.d.: 979). He adds that many progressive laws remained ink on paper, and in some cases were used to camouflage other political interests. Women's voices were used to empower the state's political authority, which was then able to preserve its own political interests. For this reason, the inclusion of women in Syrian state institutions and in the parliament, where women's representation was 12%, amounting to 30 seats out of 250 (Al-Hallaq, Hilou, and Mjani, 2022), was used to highlight "state feminism", and to reinforce oppressive systems and regimes by whitewashing their violations. The purpose of this representation is clearly not the actual improvement women's conditions or granting them social and economic rights and justice.

Syrian women have been exposed to multiple burdens imposed by the conflict and its disastrous humanitarian consequences; it is therefore important to include them at the community level, encouraging their direct participation and benefiting from their experiences and perspectives on ending the conflict. Women often have experience as mediators at the local community level and in social mobilization, and they can use such experience in formal peacebuilding processes (UN Women, 2000: 15). Accounts from Liberia, Colombia, and Sudan show that women have access to networks and committees of women's groups, which operate at the popular level.

For these reasons, it is important to explore peacebuilding processes and political participation from a perspective that includes local community initiatives and track II stakeholders in the peace process.² The exploration should also include organizations and women who are active as peace mediators in their communities and in conflict dynamics, such as promoting ceasefires or standing against conflict within their communities. This understanding goes beyond the political or military elite

1 Syrian women were granted the right to participate in elections on 22 June 1949 through Legislative Decree No.148, and this right was included in Article 38 of the constitution in 1950. According to Article 43 of the 1935 constitution, women have the right to participate in elections.

2 Peace processes have multiple tracks, and can adopt different forms or tracks depending on the needs of warring parties. Track I includes government officials, UN envoys, and leaders of armed groups. Track I often refers to parties directly involved in the conflict and relevant international stakeholders. Track II, on the other hand, includes national and local CSOs, non-governmental and international organizations, unofficial representatives of governments, former diplomats, social leaders, experts, academics, and third-party countries. Track III includes grassroots actors, activists, individuals, and demonstrators. This track focuses on engaging ordinary citizens and local communities who can use their voices to influence peace process efforts. (See Abir Wakid, 2021, on the three peace tracks in Yemen).

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and unpacks structural flaws within peace processes. It is also important to explore social and political factors that impede women's inclusion in peace processes (UN Women, 2015: 45).

There is important literature on women's political participation: some argued for its importance and others have investigated factors that impede it. However, we notice that much of the existing literature focuses on participation in decision-making positions, and has overlooked alternative forms of effective political participation, such as grassroots participation that strives to end discrimination utilizing different tools. In addition, some studies considered applying international resolutions and agreements related to women's rights, incorporating them in constitutions and legal frameworks, and ensuring that states, parties, and organizations abide by them the best tool to strengthen women's political role. In this research, we explore women's perspectives on peace, security, and justice, and the different political contributions women make as a key component of the political process. This perspective informs Tracks II and III of the peace process, through an intersectional feminist approach we explore in the following section.

Methodology

The methodology of this research revolved around a collaborative process between the researchers and CTDC experts, supported by ARI. The research commenced on 10 December 2022 and was carried out and written in Arabic. After its development, it was sent to CTDC for review, after which process CTDC provided the English translation of the research.

The research aimed to respond to the following questions:

1. What local peacebuilding initiatives exist in Syria and to what degree have they been represented in high-level peace discussions?
2. What alternative forms of participation have emerged in Syria? To what degree have these been informing official negotiations and peacebuilding tracks?
3. How can alternative and local forms of political engagement inform the implementation of international resolution such as UNSCR 1325? How can these be used to ensure diversity and representation of different women's activist movements and groups in mainstream politics?

Several conversations and discussions took place between us and CTDC experts to identify the most suitable feminist approaches for this research, and the most suitable data collection methods. We collectively decided to rely on in-depth individual interviews and group discussions to respond to the research questions, because these methods provide more accurate data since their data can be used to validate each other.

As we completed the data collection, we relied on an intersectional feminist analytical framework as an epistemology, as it provided us with the tools to understand women's experiences in relation to participation in politics, security, and peace processes from a wider perspective. This approach also enabled us to identify the different challenges and barriers women face, which are influenced by factors including location; political, economic, and cultural class; age; marital status; residence status; and others.

For this research, we used qualitative analysis techniques for interview data, and as we believe that all that is personal is necessarily political, we approached the data thematically to enable us to include the different opinions participants expressed. In addition to considering the diversity of women's perspectives, we also investigated the impact of economic, educational, and social factors on women. Obviously the war had affected them differently, due to the existence of the multiple social, political, and security contexts in Syria.

Intersectionality is a very useful analytical lens, as it pushes us to explore how authority uses identity politics and how oppression manifests differently. Through this lens, we were able to explore the different ways women resist from their own perspectives, experiences, and personal lives, and how they understand their realities. This helped us identify the barriers women face in relation to political participation, including peacebuilding processes. This research is informed by our belief that it is important to create a co-equal status with participants, as we believe that they can play different political roles and they are important and key players in attaining justice and peacebuilding. Based on that, we treated women's perspectives as a valid form of knowledge. In other words, we acknowledge women's experiences and voices as the driving force for this research. It is therefore important to acknowledge that this research is largely shaped by the visions and assumptions of its Syrian women participants (Nasser-Eddin and Mhaissen, 2020) about alternative forms of participation in politics, peace, security, and justice.

Data Collection

Interviews and group discussions were used as the data collection methods for responses to the research questions, as they allow more space for women to talk about their unique experiences. These methods were used to understand women's perspectives about participation, their justice and peacebuilding efforts, the barriers they face, and their visions and recommendations for peace and justice.

A research team was composed; facilitators and field researchers were selected based on their experience, their involvement in civil and feminist work in Syria, and their locations, as we wanted to cover Syria’s different control areas. Once selected, an induction meeting was held and the facilitators were introduced to the research and its goals. Data collection and locations of the focus groups and interviews were agreed upon with the facilitators, and they provided informed consent to carry out the interviews and discussion groups.

The facilitators were also consulted around the main research questions, and we agreed to elaborate and break down the research questions into more detailed questions to guide the interview and group conversations, and at the same time to leave a positive impact on women, as a form of action research. This approach has been described as providing a “safe space for expression”, as one participant described the questions as “able to open new horizons to individuals and particularly those that work in the sector”. The interview and discussion group questions are available in Annex I.

Sampling

In collaboration with the facilitators, the researchers selected participants based on their involvement in civil society, their relations, acquaintances, and networks in targeted areas. The facilitators carried out the interviews and led the discussion groups and were assigned assistants to document the discussions and take notes. The facilitators informed all participants of the research purpose, goal, and topics, and explained that participation is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. To guarantee their safety, privacy, and confidentiality, the research team did not collect personal information about participants.

Participants in interviews and discussion groups were selected to ensure wide representation of women’s groups in terms of age, marital status, race, religion, residence status, work backgrounds, etc. For a breakdown of participants’ profiles, see Annex II.

Research Limitations

One of the main limitations of this research is that it does not cover the nuances of Syrian women’s experiences, and there is a need for an in-depth analysis of how changing dynamics in Syria have affected women’s everyday lives, in their families and their communities, and the strategies they use to negotiate with them. From a feminist perspective, it is important to lay out the limitations and restrictions of this piece of research. For instance, the research does not cover all areas of Syria, but rather provides indicative data about the situation and the differences between the perspective of women participants. The sampling has also its limitations, as it relied on the facilitators’ capacities for outreach. For this reason, the data cannot be used for generalization, and instead it reflects participants’ perspectives on alternative forms of political participation, peacebuilding, and their roles and experiences. The data can be used to provide useful conclusions and recommendations that could help in improving the current situation and contribute to peace and justice. The research also had time limitations, as fieldwork was carried out over the short period of time from December 2022 to March 2023, with analysis taking place the following month. Longitudinal research might reveal other variables related to women’s roles, participation, and visions of peace.

Findings

This section explores the perspectives of women participants in the research, and their understanding of local peacebuilding initiatives, as well as the different types of political participation in Syria and the extent to which women are represented in high-level peace negotiations. The section also explores how Syrian women perceive their contribution to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and how they think about diversity and representation of different women's movements and activist groups in traditional political institutions. We do present their visions of their own political participation, their role in peacebuilding and security, based on their experiences. In this section we explore the challenges and barriers women face in relation to political participation and how they differ based on location, political, cultural, and economic class, age, marital status, residence status, and other factors. We hope that the findings in this section provide the most accurate representation of participants' views and perspectives.

The section is divided into six main subsections:

1. Forms of Syrian Women's Political Participation
2. Alternative Bodies and Forms of Political Participation
3. Barriers and Challenges to Participation in Official Peace Processes
4. Women's Visions of Participation and Contribution to Decision-Making
5. Women's Perspectives on Peace and Justice
6. Women's Understanding of Peace Processes

Forms of Syrian Women's Political Participation

Women in all areas covered by this research considered their participation in the Syrian revolution since March 2011 as a first step towards effective and influential action at all levels, and particularly in relation to changing traditional social culture and discourses about women's positions. They expressed that their participation in social movements and practising their national and social responsibilities have not been impeded by cultural traditions; in fact, women participated in all revolutionary activities and continue to participate in social change movements, a role that can no longer be sidelined. One participant said:

I felt that I became a human being after the Syrian revolution. I was 27, and I remember I never hesitated to join demonstrations. I was with five of my friends, and I remember when they used to ask us to move towards the back because "they worried about us". I used to scream, "this is our country too and you are not stronger than me". I think I was not aware of what I was saying back then, but with time I realized that I realize my humanity as a human being and a woman through action, as small as expressing our opinion on a piece of paper. Since then, everything in my life changed. I came into existence, and I was no longer a shadow that follows routine and life and social conditions. That is how my participation started and it continues in everything I do, no matter how small. (Displaced from Damascus Countryside, Resident of Azzaz, 41)

Women's political participation goes beyond traditional understandings – which focus on women's inclusion in decision-making mechanisms – to challenge the public-private sphere binaries. Women perceive all their actions as political, as these actions affect their own lives, their communities, and societies, as well as perceptions of their presence in the public sphere. One participant expressed that:

Political participation is not limited to joining political parties, it extends to presence in CSOs, engagement in development projects and in local community issues" (Damascus, 62). We learnt from experience in the past few years that political participation "begins from the smallest circles, it starts in the family, with participation in decision making and influencing the upbringing of their children. It also includes participation at higher levels. If women are affective in their smaller circles, this will be reflected in their participation in larger ones. This also enables women to voice their concerns, and change their realities, and be active at political, economic, and social levels. (Salamiyah, 31)

Research participants also perceived their social roles as political. As one stated: “when my son asks me about why we cannot go to Idlib, and I answer that is a very political and social role” (Afrin, 42). Another said: “my work as a teacher for generations and I teach them ethics, values and non-discrimination, that is political participation” (al-Raqqa, 42). When asked about her political participation, a participant said: “it is my work in media, journalism, and research, and in any field that benefits society or some of its components” (Douma, 23). In addition, “the basis of political participation is women’s agency and their ability to affect themselves, as that is how they build their confidence and develop tools necessary to confront patriarchal societies” (Al-Raqqa, 42). Some added that women’s political roles “cross cut ages; even my illiterate mother has political interests and opinions” (Camp resident, al-Raqqa, 41).

Participants also emphasised ethical values to political participation, as one said about engagement in politics: “it needs to be transparent and credible and must respond to people’s needs, concerns, and voices so they affect decision-making positions” (Afrin, 41). This, another added, “will not be achieved without engaging people on the street to understand realities on the ground, and engage with them about problems and solutions, and listening to their opinions about their needs with the hope of building the country in a way that guarantees the participation of all social groups” (Douma, 36).

Some women explained that the situation in Syria, and the revolution resulting in an armed conflict, gave women a real opportunity to participate, “as the advancements in relation to women’s participation was the result of economic conditions and pressures, and I noticed that many families have shifted their opinions about girls’ education, and in fact started encouraging their girls to continue with their education” (Homs, 38). As “political participation means that all of society must contribute and participate in political processes and must be fulfilling their duties as active social actors, the right to political participation should not be linked to sex or gender. Unfortunately, the roles imposed by society on women impede their active participation” (Homs, 46).

Women’s participation in politics must not be limited to addressing women’s issues: “we need to have a role in the electoral process, monitoring elections, and the implementation of international resolutions. It must also include lobbying and advocating at the governmental level and at the level of decision making, to guarantee positive social change in the short and long term” (Idlib, 52).

Political participation was linked to women participants achieving decision-making positions at the policy level and high-level governmental positions, as heads of organizations, women’s and feminist initiatives, or local council members. One participant said, “it means being in the government, in economic, political, international, and power positions, and to be involved in all state apparatuses, internal and external. Not being part of these positions makes peacebuilding efforts and processes limited in their impact” (Idlib, 47).

Participants also expressed that the limited access to such positions is not only due to inaccessibility, but also due to their lack of qualifications. In other words, guaranteeing political participation means “providing a real, unconditional chance for women’s participation through developing capacities and qualifications, and not only guaranteeing it as a right” (Idlib, 47). Another added: “the right to political participation must be granted to all social groups, without discrimination, so they are able to represent themselves, or represent political parties, or organizations, or groups, and to affect decision making in all walks of life. It is people’s right to self-determination” (Jaramana, 38). They also added that it is important to integrate women in political parties, but “it is not enough and does not guarantee a democratic political environment” (Damascus, 62).

Political participation was also linked to awareness and knowledge:

Political work needs women to be interested in the public sphere, and to participate in planning policies in high positions, in a way that pushes for equality between all citizens and guarantees women’s rights. This requires knowledge and awareness of political concepts, such as citizenship and democracy, and I believe that political awareness is the most important tool that we need to acquire to guarantee women’s participation in political life. (al-Qamishli, 28)

This way women will have “the ability to engage in political, social, economic, and cultural affairs, to express their needs and demands, and to create and protect their own spaces from patriarchal customs and traditions” (Jaramana, 52).

Some participants highlighted the importance of distinguishing political participation from social participation, which they

considered “initiatives by individuals or groups that aim to improve societies and contribute actively in solving problems and identifying needs. Social participation is important, particularly as it emerges during crises” (Jaraman, 38). Others defined it as “engagement in community and civil work in organizations and establishments, other than those at the level of the state, in a way that brings benefits to all members of the society, through social participation or activism, and creates tangible change” (Al-Suwayda, 33). “Women also have an active role in social activism as they affect decision making in civil society organizations as they are highly represented in them” (Azzaz, 37).

Understandings of political participation did not differ much among participants in the different areas; however, Kurdish participants in the northeast and in Afrin and its surrounding areas expanded upon these understandings. One of them said: “everything we do is political and contributes to changing the general reality and the reality of women in their homes and at work. We cannot talk about Syrian women’s political participation without addressing our struggle for our identities and for being considered part of this country. Things have become more complicated” (Al-Qamishli, 35).

In relation to participation:

Kurdish women are part of Kurdish parties, and this is not new. However, it used to be limited to women from well-known and large families, and it used to be nominal to harness international support in my opinion. Today most Kurdish women in Syria are active in committees and organizations, participation used to be considered for men. This, however, has changed particularly under the autonomous administration, through starting joint leadership in committees and local administrations. This has provided us with the opportunity to become more active. (al-Qamishli, 42)

Between activism and their ability to effect change, all participants agreed that their struggle is a long-term one for Syrian women to effect change. One participant said:

We achieved a lot politically, economically, and socially since the beginning of the revolution, despite the armed conflict and our circumstances, including forced migration and displacement. However, our impact remains weak, although there are women nowadays in leadership, decision-making positions and, in the media, women still confront attacks and marginalization and are still blamed for shortcomings. The stereotypes about women’s roles also limit women’s ability to affect change. (Homs, 46)

In addition, the current political environment in Syria limits all types of participation in politics and decision-making mechanisms for both men and women. In regime-controlled areas, participation is nominal; in the northeast and northwest, armed forces controlled by de facto authorities are oppressive and are influenced by foreign agendas, and this curbs the impact of women’s participation. To guarantee real and active participation, “we must change the roles imposed on us, and change social inequality between men and women. When we have a free country, recovered from war, we must exert efforts to protect our rights through law” (Salaqin, 32).

The previous examples show that women understood political work beyond traditional understandings of politics. They also explained that any change in relation to social roles is due to challenging social authority, and to the continuation of the conflict, which women have used to change their realities and prove their ability to be involved in public life. This can be considered political participation, especially given that women affect not only their personal lives, but also the lives of their communities, as they share their daily lives and participate in civil, social, political, and community activities.

It is worth noting that participants believed that change starts at the individual level, through shifting power dynamics between men and women within the family and in child-rearing and decision making, and even in the workplace through promoting ideas about citizenship and influencing generations to come. The change women witnessed at the level of their family and community lives contributed to changing attitudes and behaviours and provided women with the chance to participate at multiple levels. Women’s actions create shifts in the hierarchies of power and authority. For instance, girls’ education prevents early marriage, improves women’s capacities and skills, and increases their chances of entering the labour market, which leads to improved economic independence and a woman’s ability to make decisions at different levels. As all women’s actions are political and can affect change, their participation in decision-making positions and in the public sphere can have a significant impact on societies.

Participants shed light on political work as an ethical value that revolves around transparency and credibility, and that the purpose of political work should not be attaining power, but rather improving people’s living conditions. They also added that political work revolves around people’s concerns, needs, security, and the protection of their rights. On the other hand,

the issue of capacities and skills was linked to political action, to overcome the nominal representation of women. Participants also explained that their vision of political work and participation is for it to be practised at different levels, starting at the grassroots level and leading up to decision making and state institutions. For participants, attaining positions of power, participation in community work (such as political advocacy campaigns to change laws or address other issues), monitoring authorities and acting to correct misuse of authority for the benefit of citizens, are all expressions of political activism and participation. Women's role in political work should not be limited to fighting for women's rights only; rather it should also address other forms of oppression and inequalities. While there was general agreement among participants about meanings of political participation, Kurdish women added another dimension relation to their identities and existence, which have been key factors in their marginalization as citizens of the state. Kurdish people have been deprived of basic rights, such as identity documents, and their right to learn their language and practise their customs.

It became clear that most of those who linked political participation to representation in positions of authority were leaders of organizations, initiatives, and members of local councils. This could be due to their own positions in decision-making bodies, and their adoption of a traditional perception of political work. This reflects elitism in understanding political participation, and this elitism is like that of oppressive regimes, as political work has long been associated with authority and the ruling elite. In addition, the political empowerment projects carried out by CSOs did not address this issue, and instead focused on increasing knowledge about the historical contexts and introducing concepts that are not relevant to the Syrian context. We noticed that many women repeated similar sentences from political empowerment projects, and this was evident in Al-Suwayda, Homs, and with some local council members in northwest Syria. It is important to argue that work at the grassroots level is not a substitute for women's participation in decision-making positions; rather, this means that political participation needs to be understood as activism at all levels.

Alternative Bodies and Forms of Political Participation

Since the first day of the Syrian revolution, women played political and civil roles: "Women participated in coordination units, gradually and forcefully. However, engagement with local committees and opposition bodies were not available to all women. The women who were able to engage with these bodies were mainly activists with previous experiences, and daughters of strong families... This is not fair" (Douma, 33). These spaces were not easily accessible to women, and for this reason women found the civil society space easier to engage with, in teams and groups, which later developed into CSOs: "Since the early displacements in Syria, we supported people through self-initiative that was spontaneous, to express our human responsibility towards each other, to support community peace, and to counter the regime's sectarian narrative" (Douma, 43). Another woman said: "I worked in journalism to report the reality on the ground. As women were not confined to one type of work, I worked with children, with women, in medical assistance, because we wanted to respond to the conditions created by the conflict between all parties, including the regime" (Homs, 37).

Women took advantage of every opportunity and exerted extra effort in facing their marginalization from social stereotypes, spread of arms, and patriarchal mentality, even within CSOs. One participant said:

I thought about establishing the first women's group to organize our participation in demonstrations and activities. Our goal was to say that we are here, and no one can set rules about when and where to participate. As a group, we felt strong and we sustained ourselves, and now we are a women's initiative that works on women's political empowerment and creating space for support and dialogue between women civil society workers. (Douma, 40)

Women participants also pointed that initiatives, groups, and organizations provided them with the chance to participate in politics and become real partners in building Syria. Women excelled in many fields, as one participant expressed:

Today in our area there are several women's and feminist groups and organizations that address women's issues and focus on women's inclusion in the education and health sectors, in social justice advocacy, and in work around stability and healing. Others were able to expand their work to have several teams across Syrian cities, and today we can say that we have set a strong foot in Syrian civil society, but there is a lot more work that needs to be done. (Salaqin, 32)

However, and importantly, "we did not play the role of the victims, and started building on our experiences in detention, under siege and in forced migration and displacement" (Afrin, 42).

Women exert great efforts to confront complex challenges including their culture and traditions, as “we often hear: ‘men could not do anything, how could you?’” (Displaced from Damascus Countryside, Resident of Afrin, 44). Another participant explained that she gets blamed for being at work and not focusing on her role as a mother (Azzaz, 37), and another said that sometimes she hears: “change needs states, you are a group of women, change your lives first” (Qabasin, 45). Despite these challenges, “we are going to continue working everywhere and, on all causes, and we will make use of every change, because our political reality diminishes the space through which we can change, and we believe that everything we do will contribute in a way or another to political change and peacebuilding in Syria” (al-Raqqa, 38).

Security conditions created by de facto authority forces, including the regime, also pose challenges to women's and feminist organizations, especially in northeast Syria. As one participant explained, the autonomous administration imposes censorship on their work; she added that “sometimes they directly send someone to attend activities; other times they indirectly use security authorities. I was once called for investigation because I facilitated a session about citizenship. The investigation was around organizing the event, the responsible parties, and the funders” (al-Qamishli, 33). In Idlib, a participant explained that her organization changes the title of its trainings to suit the Islamic discourse adopted by Tahrir al-Sham, saying, “we cannot use the words gender and feminism in our trainings, because we want to avoid security complications, and we do not want to be accused that we promote a western narrative that aims to destroy the fabric of the family” (Idlib, 45). Others had different opinions, and as one participant said:

We benefited from the civil society space: we have a large number of groups, initiatives, and organizations [supporting women and feminism]. The number exceeds the number of organizations in Aleppo. We carry out trainings on feminist governance, gender mainstreaming, legal trainings; we teach calligraphy, we address illiteracy in women and children, we carry out trainings about UNSCR 1325, and we hold group discussions with feminist groups outside Syria. (Salaqin, 33)

In regime-controlled areas, CSOs do not have much space, as registration and security permits are difficult to obtain. One participant said that “as groups that work with women, we have many security concerns. We try to work on a small scale in our areas, with support from some religious committees. We sometimes do legal advocacy and political empowerment projects under their names” (Salamiyah, 41).

We noticed that some participants described themselves as activists on women's issues, or heads of women's organizations or initiatives, although all their activities are feminist. This prompted it us to ask why these organizations and initiatives do not describe themselves as feminist. Some participants explained that they are all feminists and women, and work towards the same goal of guaranteeing rights and justice for women. One said, “we as women work together for a better reality, but the nature of our work in organizations necessitates that we use known terms” (Azzaz, 33). Another participant explained that they define their activities as women's due to the reality of their context, as the word feminist often raises concerns among men and women (Idlib, 41). These contributions from participants pushed us to pose a question around the discourse of the feminist movement in Syria, promoted by some groups. At least, one participant in each of the areas covered by the research described the feminist space as discriminatory, with traditional patriarchal guardianship.

Some expressed that the feminist space does not provide a supportive environment for women; as one participant said:

I attended a feminist meeting about UNSCR 1325 and peacebuilding. Whenever we, the younger generations, contribute, we get interrupted by someone saying that we do not have experience. I have even heard a well-known feminist saying that due to her experience she knows women's interests more than them, because they are ignorant about their rights. I believe this behaviour is discrimination based on age and denies our experiences as a generation over the past few years. She treats us in a patriarchal way, the way men treat women as their guardians. This goes against everything she claims she fights for. (Displaced from Damascus, Resident of Afrin, 44)

Other participants pointed to the violence that exists within feminist spaces, including feminist organizations:

I worked as a women's project coordinator for a feminist organization. I had to take two days of sick leave due to an ailment. I ended up working for a full week under pressure and having tasks assigned to me. I felt I was being punished. Each time I was assigned a task, I was told: “we hope you do not get sick”. I am scared to request leave days because I really need the work. (al-Suwayda, 33)

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Another participant said:

We are willing to volunteer and work, and women are known to be generous with volunteering, but being exploited and treated as inferior is not acceptable. I joined a group that is supposed to be feminist and understanding of women's economic conditions. In fact, we were used during discussions so that the group extracted project ideas and obtained funding to implement them. We were a small group that was used to recruit more women. Our area is small, and we know the activists. After I realised this exploitation, I stopped inviting my friends and acquaintances. (Al-Raqqa, 27)

Others added that the feminist movement was not able to create common safe spaces for expression. As one participant said:

We are a feminist group and we work on gender justice, but we noticed through our work with feminists outside Syria that our work on the ground is being promoted as their work as if they are partners in it. At the same time, we tried to draw their attention to contextual differences: being located in Syria means that being labelled as feminist can be interpreted as complicity with the west. Yet, they still use our participation, in activities they organized at international conferences and meetings, to show that they are in touch with the ground and coordinate with us, while this is not true and we pay the price of their discourse and confront additional challenges. (Afrin, 46)

There was consensus among participants about the difficulties funding bodies created, affecting the sustainability of their projects and limiting the impact of their work. A participant said, "we still target women directly in our work, and most projects led by women are political and legal awareness and empowerment, while other organizations focus on traditional professional trainings such as barbering, sewing and making pastries. The lack of funding meant that we cannot expand our work" (Dayr al-Zour, 36). In addition, networking between women's and feminist organizations and initiatives is "at the stage of defending rights through advocacy and awareness raising" (Jaramana, 38).

Women still demonstrate motivation and commitment to continue, as they wish to build on the successes achieved over the past years and seek to improve their work through building on their strengths, investing available resources, and making decisions through consensus. A participant said:

As an organization, we have a number of teams in most Syrian areas. Most of our work is voluntary but we are proud of our work because we work and connect with women unconditionally. We let the team decide their work based on women's needs in the areas and we coordinate many activities with other women-led or women-focused organizations. (Salaqin, 29)

Another participant said: "because we believe the problems can be solved by those affected by them, we work with women farmers, teachers, and civil society activists to develop tools that improve our realities and increase our participation and activity in the change process Syria is going through and to play a role in peacebuilding" (Dayr al-Zour, 26).

Data shows that women engaged in alternative forms of political participation, and even founding them in light of the absence of state institutions in some areas, the failure of de facto authorities in setting up alternative institutions, and the marginalization and exclusion of women. Women provided services including aid, health, education, and mental health support in response to community needs. Women also established mid- and long-term initiatives, campaigns, and projects to be active on all levels, and particularly to affect women's reality. They worked on building feminist knowledge, launched legal reform projects, worked towards the inclusion of women in CSOs, built women's capacities, and expanded networking opportunities. They were able to make use of opportunities and built on their own personal resources to effect change in society and to challenge cultural traditions. The fact that the number of women's and feminist organizations keeps increasing and that they continue their work despite all challenges is evidence that they are influencing social change. Women also engaged in building community peace through initiatives and projects, particularly in areas that host displaced people and migrants, and in areas that are diverse in terms of sects and backgrounds, such as al-Suwayda, al-Raqqa and Afrin.

Alternative bodies that include women often focus on developing women's life experiences and creating change at the level of the family and society. They attempt to build women's capacities to become able to make decisions on all levels, and to become active within their families, their communities, and in political work. However, it is important to be reminded that the patriarchy can infect even alternative bodies, and women are sometimes exposed to violence by other women.

Barriers and Challenges to Participation in Official Peace Processes

Women participants understood political participation to encompass all types of activism and work they do; however, they also emphasized that grassroots activism cannot be considered a substitute or a replacement for women's participation in decision-making positions. Instead, grassroots activism needs to be understood as a tool to attain decision-making positions in the political, economic, social, and legal fields. However, the Syrian context has imposed challenges and barriers to women's engagement in decision-making mechanisms. Real-life experiences from Syria, and from all contexts globally, show gender disparities in relation to political participation, especially in decision making and high-level positions. As one participant stated:

The barriers that prevent women from attaining high-level decision-making positions are systematic and historical, and that is a global problem, and the Syrian context is not an exception. Till this day, there are feminist movements in Europe and the US that call for gender justice, the protection of women's rights, and increasing women's participation in parliament and decision-making positions. (Idlib, 47)

In the following subsections, we present the barriers Syrian women face in relation to accessing decision-making and political positions based on participants' perspectives.

Patriarchal Authority

"Customs and traditions, and the husbands' and families' control, undermine women's capacities, their right to self-determination, and freedom of movement" (Qudsia, 26), and "lay the domestic and child-rearing burden on women, which creates a barrier for them to develop their professional lives and skills more generally" (Kafr Yahmoul, 39). Consequently, "women fear participation in politics and in decision-making positions due to the consequences they could possibly face" (Idlib, 47). In addition, "women are perceived as inferior even by women. I personally was fought because I nominated myself for the city council elections" (Al-Raqqa, 47).

Women repeatedly face demotivating discourses: one participant told us that she is often told that politics is none of her business (Douma, 23). Another said, "even when we invite women for discussions, men and women tell us that there are no women experts in the field or [they] do not have the skills and experiences", and she wondered how women could possibly develop their skills if spaces are not made available (Mari', 44). A participant from Salamiyah (32) doubted that people would even vote for women in elections, adding that women adopt patriarchal traditions and are very unlikely to elect other women.

In addition, media portrays women as "victims in relation to important and pressing issues, and this reflects a lack of confidence in women's abilities" (Qabasin, 41). A participant from Homs (46) stated that she had not heard of women leaders in political parties, as they are patriarchal and masculinist. Another added, "even when women are present in political bodies and in decision-making positions, they undermine other women and exclude them from participation, as we often see that women themselves are sometimes against each other" (Salaqin, 29). Participants also emphasized that men are entitled to express power and authority, among all sects, and "all religious leaders are males" (Homs, 54). Another participant said, "we notice that the most important decisions, whether that is at the level of the family, the community, area, or neighbourhoods, are made by males" (Hamma, 32). Another added that "tribes often nominate men to represent them, and it is considered shameful for tribes to be represented by women" (Dayr al-Zour, 32).

Favouritism

Favouritism plays a major role creating barriers to women's participation in official peace processes. This favouritism could be racial or national, and can be used to serve political interests: "authorities in our areas support women belonging to dominant groups for leadership positions" (al-Raqqa, 46). Regionally, "we notice that support and empowerment and service centres are mostly centred around cities, and women in the countryside and in camps are rarely offered such support, which adds to their marginalization (Idlib, 32). Another form of favouritism that was highlighted was discrimination between residents and

the displaced: “work opportunities and opportunities to access local councils are offered to original residents of areas. Decision-making positions are often given to residents belonging to dominant groups” (Azzaz, 30).

Economic Conditions

Women always bear a higher burden in conflicts, as their economic responsibilities become more complicated when they lose the breadwinner. In Syria, “women became preoccupied with providing for their families. The war left behind a lot of widows and families that do not have the minimum resources to guarantee their livelihoods” (al-Qamishli, 28). Women's participation in the labour force is still low, despite their involvement in difficult professions: “women's unemployment is high, and this makes them dependent on men and unable to make decisions related to participation in community and in public life” (al-Raqqa, 27). Poor economic conditions and poverty reinforce the patriarchy, “as the deterioration of economic conditions, and the fact that men become preoccupied in meeting the needs and demands of the household, push men to marginalize women, fearing that they might take their jobs and their positions in life” (Homs, 28). These conditions consequently affect women's interests, and “their interest in decision-making positions decreases” (al-Qamishli, 28).

Lack of Political Life and Freedoms

The political changes that accompanied the conflict in Syria did not result in democratic political spaces for women to use in their struggle. Even with the formations of civil institutions such as local councils and other organizations, “some areas still do not have political parties to support organizing women in decision-making positions. We also do not have electoral processes that could support women's participation in politics” (al-Qamishli, 28). Additionally, the fact that people in decision-making and high-level political positions monopolize politics makes it difficult for women to access such positions, as “positions are controlled by certain groups that have influence and power, even if they lack the qualifications” (al-Raqqa, 46). Feminist political bodies were also described as ineffective; as one participant shared: “I have experience with two political feminist groups. Unfortunately, their work only focuses on meetings, conversations, and publishing statements and opinions, but when a political issue emerges on the ground, they cannot affect politics and our situation keeps deteriorating” (al-Suwayda, 50).

De Facto Authorities

The absence of women in politics due to the patriarchal regime has been a historical phenomenon, “as women have for long been marginalized in politics due to the dictatorship of the regime in Syria, and participation was limited to one political party and to persons close to the region” (Abu-Qbaih Camp, 41). De facto authorities have also reinforced this marginalization, “as the conflict in Syria gave authority to parties that are patriarchal and masculinist” (Qah, 38). Although some forces claim to be supportive of women's participation in decision making, these have historically used women's participation to their political benefit: “Authorities restrict women's work. They want to be present in positions only if they share the same political interests, and so their participation only serves the interest of authorities” (Idlib, 47). As another example, de facto authorities may ban all political work in their areas: “they oppress all political movements, particularly those led by women, and strive to stop them” (Salaqin, 29). Religious authorities are used to spread false information about religion to add to the marginalization of women and impose guardianship that limits women's activities and engagement in politics: “they do so through spreading misconceptions about religion that restrict women's work and rights. Religion never prevented women from participating in decision-making positions, and there are examples from Islamic history that show that women have participated in all aspects of life, political, social, and economic” (Termanin, 45).

Context Specific Challenges

The conflict posed several barriers and challenges to women's participation in politics, as some CSOs prevent their employees from engaging in political bodies or in other fields of work to ensure there would be no conflict of interest: “There are restrictions imposed on women workers in civil society organizations, which prevent them from political activism, including expressing their views, and also prevent them from attempting to attain decision-making positions” (Idlib, 47).

In addition, forced migration, displacement, and the fragmentation of Syria deprived many women of the opportunity to ob-

tain identification documents, further restricting their freedom of movement. "Some women cannot access decision-making positions and political life due to the lack of identification documents, and particularly passports, as this means they cannot travel to political conferences and meetings" (Attmeh, 52).

Women's Visions of Participation and Contribution to Decision-Making

Due to the barriers that Syrian women face in participating in all political processes, including official peacebuilding processes, very few tools have been available to women and they have had to exert tremendous efforts to affect the political, cultural, economic, and social processes in Syria. Syrian women continue to make efforts to attain decision-making positions and actively participate in shaping political solutions for a comprehensive and just peace, particularly for women and marginalized social groups. Some of our participants offered possible solutions to overcome this marginalization and push women into active participation in decision-making positions, which are summarized below:

- Highlight success stories of women's participation and work on multiple levels, including confronting patriarchy, in order to "support women's efforts in social change, and building on the advancements made by them and that changed perceptions around women's roles" (Idlib, 34). This in turn will "increase women's confidence in their ability to overcome barriers and lead change, as agents rather than victims" (Homs, 54).
- Move beyond theoretical awareness-raising to actually organizing work for general social change that does not only focus on women, "so women's participation in politics becomes more familiar. I realize this needs time as it is accumulative work" (Salaqin, 29). This way, "women's problems become social problems, and not only women's concerns" (Al-Suwayda, 33).
- Support economic empowerment programmes and shift the focus from livelihood projects towards projects that provide women with the chance to achieve economic independence "through providing work opportunities, as this supports their independence and enables them to make decisions within social pressures" (Al-Suwayda, 50), which would in turn allow them to access public affairs.
- Co-ordinate efforts between rights organizations and feminist organizations to: pressure de facto authorities to create legal frameworks that protect women's rights; "put an end to violations and the violence women get exposed to, and protect girls from early marriages" (Termanin, 45); and "put an end to the recruitment of girls in the northeast" (al-Qamishli, 42).
- Develop and implement gender-sensitive protections and safeguarding policies and procedures in all institutions and organizations, which should be integrated into "the structures and governance of organizations to guarantee the protection of women's rights and to ensure a continuous accountability process" (Al-Suwayda, 39), "to protect women who participate in politics and public affairs" (Attmeh, 52).
- Develop women's knowledge, skills, and experiences, without discrimination, and make opportunities for everyone, particularly in relation to "the constitution, laws, and authorities, and providing women with tools that enable them to get their rights" (Qahh, 38).
- Create opportunities for women's involvement in politics, economics, social issues, and legal affairs by supporting the development of the capacities needed for effective participation. This could be done by "creating working and conversation spaces for women to understand the importance of their roles in peace processes and in decision making, to also ensure they are aware of the rights they need to be fighting for, and aware of the role of every woman in politics, decision making, and peacebuilding" (Qahh, 38).
- Create a democratic, political, feminist body that believes in participation and making opportunities accessible to all women without discrimination or guardianship: "We really need a feminist body that is able to deal with all different Syrian groups, so that they are more able to influence de facto authorities and to guarantee women's active participation in decision-making positions" (Kafr Loosin, 40).

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- Confront the discrimination against Muslim women in feminist bodies and in CSOs by “supporting moderate feminist Muslim voices, aware that Islam does not prohibit women’s participation in all walks of life. These groups can provide support and influence de facto authorities, which use religion to marginalize women” (Termanin, 45).
- Conduct comprehensive research studies on the legal framework that regulates political life, including “the constitution and different legal frameworks that support women’s participation in politics, because obstacles are reinforced by a number of laws” (Hama, 30).
- Pressure the different countries involved in Syria to push for a political process that could result in a sustainable solution, as this “could help end conflicts, and end foreign control of Syria, to enable us to make independent decisions and work on women’s participation in all walks of life” (al-Qamishli, 28).

This brings us to the question of how decision making is defined and how it is understood. For this reason, it is important to explain that decision making is a complicated process, shared by several parties, official and non-official, internal and external; decision making can also be done by leadership or the elites. It is important to point out the difference between authority and influence, as an influential person might not necessarily be in a formal position of power (Masaad, 2010: 25).

Currently in the Syrian context, most political groups are not influential at the level of leading political change and peacebuilding, and for this reason it is important to rethink what spaces and positions of power and decision making exist in the context. One participant said that “when we have decision-making spaces, we will participate” (Idlib, 44). Despite the complexity of the Syrian context, women have acquired experience through their work in organizations and participation in alternative political bodies. Women’s success in different fields and the efforts they exert to change their conditions and the general reality reflect how media institutions contribute to a shifting stereotypical discourse, as the media was able to highlight the women’s achievements and leadership in the personal, social, and public spheres.

CSOs, according to participants, are responsible for creating opportunities to build women’s capacities in relation to decision making and political participation. This could provide support for women interested in obtaining decision-making positions and could contribute to protecting women from Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV). CSOs can also promote democratic and civil values that revolve around concepts of citizenship, equality, and gender justice, and can also organize legal reform campaigns to tackle discriminatory laws. This requires networking between women’s and feminist movements and groups, political bodies with social influence, and men who support women’s rights.

Women’s Perspectives of Peace and Justice

Many participants linked justice to the existence of an impartial independent judiciary able to hold all parties accountable without exception: “General peace requires taking necessary measures to end conflicts and war, and to apply laws to hold all criminals and oppressive parties accountable for the crimes against the Syrian people” (Damascus Countryside Discussions). As one participant says, “where there is justice, there is peace, and justice is guaranteeing the rights of all social groups, legal equality, non-discriminatory fair distribution of resources, offering reparations to all those affected, and allowing women to have decision-making positions, as there is no justice if women do not have equal rights to men” (al-Qamishli, 28).

One participant who is a member in the Coalition of Syrian Women for Democracy, which includes a number of women activists with access to UN agencies and the consultative council, said, “there is a need to apply all forms of justice, including transitional justice and social justice, and for them all to be treated as priorities” (Damascus Countryside, 38). Another participant, who is a member of the Syrian Women’s Political Movement, said:

Peace will not be attained in Syria without guaranteeing citizens’ rights without discrimination, fair and just laws, equality and justice, a good governance system that is accountable and fights corruption, and empowering individuals and raising their awareness about their citizenry rights and duties. Only through this we will be able to apply principles of gender-sensitive transitional justice, and this will be the building block for Syria’s peace process. (al-Raqqa, 38)

Another activist emphasized that “without transitional justice for all, we cannot achieve desired peace, where we have justice

and accountability mechanisms that prevent violations” (Jaramana Discussions).

Data showed that justice for participants must be attained at multiple levels, as women face discrimination due to their gender and other intersecting factors. Starting with the family, participants expressed that “it is very difficult to achieve justice in a broader sense; however, if we achieve it at the level of the family, and if we end discrimination, then this on its own is a great achievement (Homs Group Discussions). The family is considered the first place where power dynamics form, and through which power and resources are allocated. Patriarchy, which intersects with other factors and manifests in gender inequality and dividing communities, plays a major role in impeding women’s pursuit of justice. These structures cannot be challenged without reconsidering power relations within the family, which existed before the war and which pushed women into child-rearing and domestic roles, making it difficult for them to balance their domestic burdens with participation in public affairs (CEDAW-Syria, 2009).

It is worth noting that it was easier for participants to describe injustice, oppression, and lack of peace than it was for them to attempt to define justice. The question about what justice means was confusing for many participants, as some were not able to respond to the question and instead pointed to oppression and injustice. For instance, one participant described justice as “working for the better”, another “real and not fake”, another “protecting minorities to be able to live and co-exist”. Other participants provided general responses such as “applying a quota and justice everywhere”, “transitional justice”, or “a free democratic country”. Through these responses, we were able to identify different forms of injustice and lack of peace, as expressed by participants, and we summarize them in the following subsections.

Legal Injustice

Many participants from across all areas stated that one of the main causes of inequality and gender injustice is the direct and clear discrimination embedded in personal status laws, and that “legal justice is the most important form of justice” (al-Suwayda Discussions). Personal status laws are considered the main challenge to justice and to building societies, as it is unfair in relation to social partnerships. The patriarchal laws regulate marriage rights and how marital duties are assigned, and differences between men and women are reinforced to build hierarchal societies that place women in inferior positions. Through these laws, women face violence, exclusion, and deprivation of other basic citizenry rights. In addition, the fact that women cannot pursue legal formal remedies to address discrimination against them, coupled with the general lack of laws that protect women, contributes to the oppression women face and impedes their pursuit of justice.

Economic Injustice

The economic conditions in Syria – which include poverty, unemployment, war economies, increase in corruption and favouritisms, and the destruction of the health and education sectors – play a major role in the injustice Syrians are facing due to the conflict. Data showed the importance of issues such as equal pay, equal opportunities, and ending the discrimination, favouritism, and exploitation that women face in the workplace. Women’s visions of justice varied, and these variations depended on different factors, such as the sector they work in – government, private, or civil society – and poverty and economic conditions, as well as discrimination based on race, sect, gender, disability, and favouritism. Corruption and favouritism are considered one of the main contributors to economic injustice, and they make it difficult for women to access work opportunities. Women also referred to injustice in the workplace due to the lack of laws and policies that protect women from discrimination and harassment. As participants said, “we need laws that protect women in the workplace” (Displaced, Hama, 42). There are also no laws that provide protection to disabled women. Other participants referred to the absence of laws that takes women’s circumstances, such as ailments and pregnancy, into consideration; one participant stated that authorities are not obliged to grant women maternity leave: “they just let her go” (Homs, 38).

Lack of Security

Women’s feelings of insecurity, also understood as a form of injustice, have been caused by military operations, de facto authorities, the fragmentation of Syria, forced displacement, loss of homes and belongings, no freedom of movement, and having to leave families behind. One participant said that “justice for me is being able to see my family. As a displaced person, I lost everything, and this affects me psychologically” (al-Raqqa, 27).

Women's Understanding of Peace Processes

While international resolutions acknowledge the importance of integrating women into peace processes, attempts to implement this intention on the ground are not effective. The research demonstrated that the spaces available for political participation are narrow, and are not accessible for Syrians in general, both men and women. We also noticed that there are several barriers that impeded women from accessing first knowledge about political work, and second decision-making positions in all bodies, whether alternative or mainstream. When asked whether they were familiar with UNSCR 1325, a minority of research participants were able to define it, and similarly their understanding of the three tracks of the Syrian peace process was limited. In this section, we explore participants' definitions of different types of the peace they envision. Instead of exploring the actual tracks of the peace process, we present participants' demands of peace processes in the following subsections.

Ending War and Restoring Security

Many participants expressed that peace cannot be achieved without putting an end to military actions by all warring parties, including the regime and de facto authorities, and ending foreign aggression. One participant said, "peace is the cessation of war and arms, a state of security and serenity, and keeping communities away from war". This demand represents the minimum that needs to be done to promote stability and is often achieved through ceasefire and ending military operations. This is sometimes called "negative peace", which pushes for ending material types of violence without addressing the root and structural causes that led to the conflict or providing justice for war victims. Women have been exposed to violence throughout the conflict and since the beginning of the revolution in 2011. Women confronted different forms of violence, physical and sexual, in regime detentions, during conflict between de facto authorities, and radical Islamic factions. All these were compounded by patriarchal violence. As a participant said, "the war in Syria, like all wars, is led by men and women are harmed by them". The lack of security at the personal and public levels was one of the main challenges participants highlighted as they defined peace: "peace means security at the personal and the public levels, to be able to live humanely, with your needs addressed, and under no threat. It also means not feeling uncomfortable or in danger or at risk, physical or emotional" (Homs, 46).

Economic Stability

UN reports confirm that 90% of Syrian people live under the poverty line, which is considered the highest rate globally (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Humanitarian aid has been used as a tool to oppress women, since the Syrian regime controls humanitarian aid through its civil and economic institutions, de facto authorities in other areas control the remaining food baskets, and humanitarian works distribute aid without monitoring their distribution.³ The difficult economic conditions confront women across Syria, and there is no peace without a dignified life, as a participant expressed. Many participants also explained that the deteriorating economic conditions have a negative impact on peace, as many pointed that economic stability is a necessity to guarantee peace. Economic instability also affects women on another level, as many of them became the breadwinners of their households due to the absence of the male breadwinner, or due to inflation or displacement. A displaced women in northeast Syria said, "peace is to have control over my resources and work, and to be treated as a human and a Syrian citizen, not as a displaced or refugee" (Afrin, 27).

Democratic Peace

Many participants said that democratic systems that respect human rights and freedoms are a precondition for peace, and some even went on to link this to their feminist struggle. For instance, a feminist activist from al-Suwayda said, "women cannot build peace if we do not get rid of political and religious tyrants, opponents to women's rights". Another activist from Azzaz's survivors' association explained that peace means establishing a democratic state that respects culture and traditions is needed to build an inclusively democratic Syria. Democratic peace was also emphasized by civil society activists and workers, as for them peace means "the ability to do political and civil action freely". Participants emphasized that inclusion and diversity are essential to allow for active political participation for everyone, regardless of sect, nationalism, and class, and this was particularly relevant to Kurdish participants who saw peace as allowing them to express their identities and cultures without restrictions or discrimination.

³ Some reports indicate that "food for sex" has been used against women in regime and opposition areas.

Peace and Gender Equality

Many participants agreed that women have a role to play in peacebuilding, and that women need to participate in decision making and policy shaping to reinforce peace and security. In addition, some believed that gender equality must be a precondition for peace; as one participant said, “we cannot achieve peace without women’s presence and participation” (Salamiyah, 32). She added: “women’s rights and all other rights must be guaranteed by the state’s legal framework”. Many participants also believed that the absence of a fair legislative environment and the existence of discriminatory laws in a patriarchal society add to the exclusion of women and girls and limits their opportunities to participate in public affairs. Syrian women wish for a peace that creates an environment that does not allow gender inequality and provides them with support. As one participant said, “as a woman I would like to have the right to participate in governing the country, to be safe in my society and my home, and to have all my political and civil rights” (Idlib, 39). This, however, cannot be achieved without rethinking power relations and how they exclude women from public affairs.

The research demonstrated that Syrian women demand positive, just peace processes that do more than only ending the war. As women are invested in achieving that, they are also demanding more effective roles in resolving the prolonged Syrian conflict to build on their current peace activism.

Conclusions

Women participants provided a wide range of perspectives on their peacebuilding and security efforts in Syria. For many of them, peacebuilding is not only an issue for women involved in track I of the peace process, or in the political and negotiations process. Participants provided a more comprehensive perspective on peacebuilding and believed that all women, from all class, educational, and religious backgrounds, are active in peacebuilding in their local communities. As one said, "Any woman who plans and implements her own project builds peace. Any woman who provides for her family builds peace. Any woman who rejects her oppression and the oppression of others builds peace. Any woman who succeeds and mainstreams her success and shares her experience also builds peace" (Homs, 42). These definitions of peacebuilding as starting with the individual show that women have a real desire for their labour and roles, even the stereotypical ones, to be acknowledged. In addition, some participants emphasized the importance of building on women's collective initiatives, such as joining women's groups, which played a major role in mediation processes between the warring parties, and on working through CSOs, which provided spaces for action particularly in relation to mobilization, advocacy, aid, and empowerment work. The impact of Syrian women-led initiatives cannot be denied. For example, women in al-Kuswa and Zabadani were able to play a part in the negotiations on behalf of their communities to set up an area for the entry and provision of services, for purchasing crops and fertilisers, and the establishment of local schools and medical dispensaries (UN, 2022).

In addition, it became clear through the data that women have very shallow knowledge about UNSCR 1325, even though most participants either worked for or benefitted from CSOs, or were local activists in different areas. It was clear that women who attended trainings about UNSCR 1325, held by feminist organizations, have theoretical knowledge about the resolution, but do not have any knowledge or insights about the mechanisms through which it could be implemented in the Syrian context. The main point participants understood of the resolution was that encourages including women in decision-making mechanisms during conflict. Many participants also highlighted the weak coordination that takes place between women in Syria (who should be represented in track III) and other women involved in tracks I and II of the peace process. For them, this has meant that the political process does not reflect the visions and ambitions of women inside Syria. Finally, it is important to add that a solution for the Syrian crisis cannot be implemented and peace cannot be built without the willingness of international parties involved in the issue. As one participant expressed, "it is not up to women, and it is not up to men either, especially as we are facing a political impasse" (Azzaz, 35).

Finally, we provide a summary of our main findings:

- Research demonstrated that it is very important to expand our understanding of political participation and to consider the personal as political. This enables women to more highly value their experience and power, because all activities that challenge power dynamics are political.
- Grassroots political participation is effective and leaves an impact on the long run, as it challenges systems of oppression and power hierarchies, and because solutions must always be collective.
- Women began forming different types of resistances to customs and traditions, as they strive to achieve more self-determination and develop their creativity and capacities. Women have begun playing different roles, and this does not conflict with their roles in their families. This change has also reinforced women's desire to live in dignity and enjoy all their rights.
- Syrian women fight for political participation in a society governed by dictatorship and de facto authorities. Despite the shifts and changes, women's active political participation remains limited, and is often used to serve political interests.
- Despite the surge in the number of alternative bodies led by women, women's political empowerment endeavours remain weak, especially in relation to leadership skills. Women's role in CSOs is still governed by societal realities, culture, and politics, which collectively assign gender roles.
- Women's participation in politics and in decision-making positions is still governed by the power relations of de facto authorities and of societies. This impedes women's ability to exercise their political and civil rights. For this reason, participatory democracy has a direct impact on women's participation, and women cannot have active roles without participatory democratic mechanisms.

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- For women, justice is multi-faceted and multi-layered. Women's awareness of different structures and systems of oppression makes them more able to achieve justice at a small scale within the family, but this ability remains limited given that legal frameworks, including personal status laws, remain discriminatory and affect their private and public lives.
- The general situation in Syria has pushed women to become breadwinners; however, discrimination against women at the workplace still exists, and there are no laws, policies, or regulations that offer fair treatment for disabled women or for women subjected to exploitation and harassment. CSOs have not yet addressed women's needs and have not offered them enough to highlight their visions of justice.
- Peace from the perspective of Syrian women refers to positive peace, which is not only about ending violence and conflict. For them, peace addresses all aspects of their lives, both public and private. Peace agreements that do not take their perspectives and visions into account will always fall short in relation to achieving justice.
- Syrian women's roles in peacebuilding cannot be understood as limited to those women engaged in track I of the political peace process or in high-level negotiations, and it needs to be understood to include all women regardless of their position within the public sphere.
- Turning international resolutions that address women, such as UNSCR 1325, into trainings and workshops is not enough to inform women of the resolutions or of mechanisms for their implementation in the Syrian context. This reflects a weakness in the way knowledge is transferred, and prevents women from turning the theory into reality.

Recommendations

Advocacy Related

- All Syrian feminist and human rights organizations must push for a clear and unified strategy for the implementation of UNSCR 1325. It is highly recommended for organizations to work on developing a national mechanism to ensure that all parties involved in the conflict apply the WPS agenda. Organizations are also encouraged to produce periodic reports on progress achieved in relation to WPS and UNSCR 1325, and to monitor the active participation of women in leadership positions in politics, regardless of their positions.
- Advocating for protective and supportive legal and policy frameworks to increase women's access to leadership positions and in decision-making mechanisms is very important. This could be done in CSOs and in political bodies and their institutions. Organizations, institutions, and different stakeholders must focus on tackling the nominal representation of women in civil and political committees, and on addressing the exploitation of women for political interests.
- Women should be present not only as experts, but also as negotiators and participants in all stages of the peace process, at a ratio of no less than 30%. This is particularly important in negotiations committees, transitional governance positions, and political parties.
- Security sector reforms must be included in peace agreements, and these must include security provisions and measures that are sensitive to gender, race, disabilities, age, location, and other markers of difference. Guarantees must be provided by all parties to end all forms of violence, including gender-based violence.
- Constitutional reforms must take into consideration markers of difference, including but not limited to gender, race, disability, age, and location.
- Offer support to community peace initiatives led by women in all areas in the country, and highlight their work in international and local media.
- Support feminist activism among the youth, offer spaces for the advocacy of their issues, and allow them the chance to contribute to decision making.
- Exerting pressure on the international community to work towards positive just peace for all of Syria remains important. This cannot be achieved without the active participation of women, and without attaining justice and fairness for all Syrian women and marginalized groups.
- The fight against patriarchy in Syrian society is important to address the stereotypical gender roles that prevent women from active participation in politics. Guaranteeing justice and ending oppression is reliant on people's day to day behaviours and attitudes.
- Legal literacy and advocacy allow women to more effectively articulate and demand their legal rights. It is important for this type of advocacy work to include network building with other groups to advocate for their rights and to address their discrimination.

Findings Related

- It is important to set up programmes that work on changing the stereotypical discourse around Syrian women, which portrays them as passive and sees them primarily as partners. It is also important to conduct research about mechanisms and tools to overcome barriers that prevent women's participation through international exchanges of experiences.
- Organizations are urged to develop programmes that focus on shifting the discourses and narratives that stereotype Syrian women as passive through highlighting women's roles as partners and peers. It is further recommended that future

research explore mechanisms to overcome the barriers that women face, and to learn from international experiences in reform and ending gender-based discrimination.

- As change is a process that begins at the grassroots level, from the ideologies and practices of individuals and extending outwards to society and institutions (whether these are familial, religious, cultural, educational, etc.), women's capacity building programmes are important to equip women for active participation in public political life. These need to link theoretical knowledge to practice, and must build on women's experiences and expertise in a way that suits the Syrian context.
- Gender and sexual justice are important at the individual, organizational, and structural levels, and it is important for it to be addressed through more research and for efforts to be intersectional and comprehensive.

Bridging Gaps

- Creating safe feminist spaces that respect difference, believe in diversity, and support these values is vital. These spaces need to foster a collaborative spirit instead of reinforcing competition between different Syrian women's and feminist organizations. This would enable these organizations to support women, promote their participation, and reinforce their roles in and ability to affect social movements in Syria.
- Civil and feminist committees must work on expanding the circles of local consultations in relation to the WPS agenda, and on improving the communications for track III with tracks I and II to ensure the inclusion of Syrian women and the representation of all social groups. It is also important to develop strategic partnerships and coordinate efforts among different feminist and political Syrian organizations to pressure the international community to push for the implementation of UNSCR 1325.
- It is important for CSOs to undergo structural reform to reduce the participation gap between men and women, and to develop clear and transparent policies in relation to safeguarding women in all sectors.

Annex I: Interview Questions

1. Forms of women's political participation, alternatives, and representation in peace processes:

- How do you define political participation? Social participation? Social change?
- How do you practise your work and political activism in organizations and in available spaces? Do you consider them an alternative given the lack of political institutions?
- What are the barriers that prevent you from being in decision making positions?
- How do you overcome or address these barriers?
- Do you have access to women in politics or in decision-making positions able to voice your concerns?

2. Justice and Peace Building:

- How do you envision the justice you would like to see, achieve, or attain?

3. Peace and Security and UNSCR 1325:

- How do you define peace?
- What does the peace you would like to see look like?
- How do you define security? How do you feel it?
- How do you see your role in peacebuilding processes?
- Have you ever participated in formal decision-making processes, such as consultations around UNSCR 1325?

Annex II: Participants Profiles

Interview Participants

Area		Northwest	Northeast	Regime Areas	Total
Residence Type	Displaced	12	6	3	21
	Home	8	13	21	42
Marital Status	Married	11	12	7	30
	Single	6	5	12	23
	Divorced	1	1	3	5
	Widowed	2	1	2	5
Age Group	18-25	1	1	1	3
	26-35	5	9	9	23
	36-49	13	9	10	32
	Over 50	1	0	4	5

Discussion Group Participants

Area		Northwest	Northeast	Regime Areas	Total
Residence Type	Displaced	26	11	12	49
	Home	10	19	45	74
Marital Status	Married	25	20	22	67
	Single	7	7	32	46
	Divorced	1	1	1	3
	Widowed	3	2	2	7
Age Group	18-25	2	6	16	24
	26-35	20	13	21	54
	36-49	11	11	15	37
	Over 50	3	0	5	8

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About the Partner **Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration** **(CTDC)**

CTDC is an intersectional multi- and interdisciplinary feminist consultancy, with a transnational social justice agenda. We strive for social justice through our innovative-ly transformative programmes and problem-solving solutions. We aim to build communities and movements, through an approach that is both academic and grassroots centred.

About the SAWT project

The SAWT project seeks to quantitatively and qualitatively increase women's meaningful inclusion in political and peace processes in the MENA region in order to increase their ability to influence outcomes and establish post-conflict gender-egalitarian frameworks through supporting women's integration in all phases of the peacebuilding process. Taking a broader and more holistic view of what "peace processes" mean and look like and focusing on the emergence of a new generation of women activists in MENA, the project proposes four broad areas of work and will involve collaboration with civil society actors, academics, activists, and networks in both Europe and the MENA region.



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