The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة
www.activearabvoices.org

Artist: **Houmam AlSayed**

Syrian Women and their Participation in the Peace Process

Kholoud Mansour

Syrian Women and their Participation in the Peace Process

Kholoud Mansour

2

ABOUT THE ASFARI INSTITUTE AT AUB

The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship is a regional hub of a dynamic community of academics, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and members of the general public interested in exploring traditional and innovative forms of collective actions, locally-grounded policy debates and in advancing realistic solutions to the obstacles to effective civil society and citizenship in the Arab world.

In doing so, the Institute provides training workshops and programs beside regular teaching at AUB, encourages and provides evidence-based research in areas related to political participation, accountability and good governance, produces policy/practice recommendations to improve citizens' engagement and civil society roles in mediation, deliberation and self-organization.

It also promotes public awareness of civil society and civic engagement best practices in the region through its monthly meetings and seminars and stimulates fruitful dialogue among the region's varied publics through its programmatic activities of workshops, conferences, blog and publications.

The Asfari Institute is a research center based at AUB since 2012 and is a solid partner in consolidating AUB commitment to serve, educate and engage the Lebanese society. The Institute is mobilized to develop a new minor program on civil society and collective action with relevant AUB faculties. Among its new activities is the consolidation of three new lines of work: Civil Society Law and Governance, Culture as Resistance, and Civil Society in Conflict and Post Conflict Setting.

P.O. Box 11-0236 Riad El Solh,
Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon
www.aub.edu.lb/asfari

📞 +961-1-350 000-1 ext 4469
✉ asfariinst@aub.edu.lb
🖹 ActiveArabVoices.org
🐦 ⓕ AsfariInstitute

Bridging Academia and Activism

4

CONTENTS

About the Project

THE LAY OF THE LAND:

A Social Mapping of Daily Practices in Informality amongst Syrian Displaced Communities in Lebanon

This research project examines how, in the face of conflict and crisis, Syrian displaced individuals and communities in Lebanon are attempting to (re) organize themselves within the informal sector to secure access to essential services. We understand informality as a sector of goods and services that is outside of, but not necessarily disconnected from the formal purview of the state. In Lebanon, most citizens are already accessing resources such as water and electricity from within the informal sector. Whereas access to such services might ideally be seen as indissolubly linked to the rights of citizens, the distribution of such goods in Lebanon is hardly equal in practice. The access to goods and services by displaced populations is consequently further compounded in such a context where, by the nature of the country's political economy, must also acquire and secure their rights through informal networks.

By addressing this question of informalization and displacement, we reflect on practices of exclusion as experienced amongst Syrian displaced communities from different socio-economic backgrounds who are otherwise perceived as non-citizens in Lebanon. We aim to document through qualitative methods and life history approaches some of the ways Syrian communities have attempted to harness basic livelihood necessities. In so doing, we examine how the Syrian crisis is contributing to the reassembling of these networks, their hierarchies, and ultimately reshaping modes of governance and state borders between Syria, Lebanon and among Syrians themselves.

Abstract

Kholoud Mansour [1]

Syrian women have been mostly depicted as mere helpless victims since the beginning of the Syrian uprising and subsequent conflict in 2011. Their representation in the media as vulnerable refugee women, usually featured in a refugee camp, tears out their agency, ownership and influence and mutates them into passive 'voices' rather than active and influential agents. Despite their continuous efforts and direct involvement in civil, social, economic, and cultural domains, their political participation[2] in the negotiations and peace processes is rarely recognized or supported in a substantial way. This article draws on existing scholarly works to women's representation and inclusion in peace processes as a global challenge.

This article aims at addressing the representation of the Syrian women in the media, the different barriers to their political participation and the politics of representation. The article uses contemporary empirical evidence to explore this subject, delving deeper into two experiences, the Women's Advisory Board (WAB) to the UN Special Envoy and Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) of the High Negotiations Committee and the international support to Syrian women in the negotiations and peace process. Further, the article aims at instigating further in-depth discussions and wo¬rk on this crucial, salient and understudied topic.

---

[1] Kholoud Mansour is an independent researcher and consultant, affiliated with the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Lund University

[2] Conway defines political participation as "those activities of citizens that attempt to influence the structure of government, the selection of government authorities, or the policies of government". The study "Women's Political Participation: Exclusion and Reproduction of Social Roles. Case Studies from Lebanon" defines political participation as "an activity that works either directly, by trying to influence government efforts to implement public policies, or indirectly, by influencing the actors who make these policies " and this study embarks a broader definition to also recognize that political participation can take on various forms including demonstrations and protest movements.

There are many factors that have hindered political activism in Syria for both men and women. Owning to the authoritarian regime, emergency law, traditional and patriarchal system, and discriminatory laws and codes, women have been deprived of their basic rights and that made them dependent on the male members in their family. The General Women's Union was established in 1967 and it is said to represent all Syrian women. The establishment of this union has obstructed the work of other women and feminist groups that could not register or have a legal status to operate in the country (Bellafronto, 2005). Women's political participation in Syria had no legal restrictions, yet, their representation remained very little. In 2005, women represented 8.7% in governorate councils; 4.5% in district councils, and 1.3% in village councils (Bellafronto, 2005). Before the Syrian uprising in 2011, women held 12.5% of parliamentary seats and 6% of the ministerial positions (Kapur, 2017). Mapping women in politics in 2017, the UN Women and Intern-Parliamentary Union ranked Syria 136 out of 190 in parliamentarian positions representing 13.2% and 156 out of 174 in ministerial position with only 2 female ministers out of 33 (6.1%) (IPU & UN Women, 2017). In an authoritarian state, even this low rate of women representation is ineffective since women do not have any leverage or political power. At the time when the Syrian uprising s erupted, Syria was ranked 124 out of 135 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report in 2011 and that was below other neighboring countries (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016). This informs us that there has not been any positive change or progress in advancing the weak representation of Syrian women in the political sphere.

Despite this weak representation, many considered the Syrian uprising as a turning point for the whole Syrian society, but even more particularly for women (Habib, 2018). The lack of socioeconomic and political freedom, discriminatory laws, patriarchal values, and later the uprising and subsequent conflict have all contributed to the emergence of women's grassroots lobbying and organizing during 2011 and 2012 (Ghazzawi, et al 2015). Today, Syrian women are fighting to ensure that they have a place not just at the negotiations table, but also in post-war Syria (Shackle, 2017). Whether inside Syria or in their refuge and exile, Syrian women have been playing a crucial role and working to ensure their inclusion in formal peace processes and in the post-conflict era. Representation and conflict undoubtedly impact and weaken women's participation in the formal peace process. However, this reflects a global drawback, beyond the Syrian context, in the whole international structure that has not proved to make a progress for women participation in the negotiations and peace process in general. In the next section, I examine how the weak representation of women in peace processes is not exclusive to Syria's case, rather it mirrors a broader and global enigma.

Women, Peace and Exclusion

Two decades have passed since the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR1325), in 2000. This resolution marked the first time ever when the Security Council had addressed the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women (WILPF, 2000). The SCR 1325 stressed on the importance of equal participation and full involvement of women in all peacebuilding efforts and agreements and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution (UN Security Council, 2000). However, women's real participation and signatory in peace processes remain scarce and peace agreements remain gender-blind. Kraus and Bränfors find that the number of female signatories has even decreased since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (Krause, Krause, & Braɴnfors, 2018) One UN Women study reviewed a limited, yet considerable, representative sample of 31 major peace processes between 1992 and 2011. The study shows that only 4% of signatories, 2.4 per cent of chief mediators, 3.7% of witnesses and 9% of negotiators are women. The same study shows that peace agreements rarely mention quotas or other measures to ensure the inclusion of women in decision-making, and they do not allocate responsibility and resources to monitor that equality is indeed achieved (UN Women, 2012) Recent statistics by the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) confirms that only one woman has ever signed a final peace accord as chief negotiator. Further, 81% of peace agreements between 1990-2017 contain no reference to women and 95% had no reference to conflict-related gender-based violence (CFR, 2019)

With this in mind, peace negotiations are considered to be a male-dominated sphere and women, in most cases, are deliberately excluded from the formal peace processes. This exclusion of women in formal negotiations structures instigate discourses and practices that are closer to men's realities (Sørensen, 1998). Consequently, this exclusion will fail to bring gender mainstreaming and address priorities, needs, concerns and aspirations of women. Along this exclusion, studies uncover the robust relationship between women's participation and peace durability. Peace processes would more likely result in sustainable peace when women shape them (Krause et al, 2018). Additionally, it is well-founded that peace agreements, when signed by women, have a higher number of agreement provisions and a higher implementation rate of these provisions. Women's participation has an even greater impact on the longer term: an agreement is 35% more likely to last for fifteen years if women participate in its creation (O'reilly, Súilleabháin, & Paffenholz, 2015).

There is a consensus on the importance of effective women's inclusion in the negotiations and peace processes. However, Julia Palmiano argues that there should be a different entry point to women's participation in the peace process. Albeit women rights and feminist approaches are important and crucial; they are insufficient and can be unconvincing to say that women should be included merely because they represent 50% of the population. She criticizes the feminist arguments and liberal recipe: 'add women and stir'[3] , and takes the argument further towards a different structural design of peace processes that ensures durable peace and inclusive representation from constituencies and higher legitimacy. Hence, she invites feminist scholars and policy and advocacy practitioners to try using the current architecture of conflict resolution mechanisms, albeit its structural flaws, as an entry point. She further analyses the impact of dynamics, performances and social processes in the present structure of mediation and negotiation processes to integrate and mutate women participation in peace processes into actual mediation and design (Palmiano, 2014).

Moore and Talarico argue that the competing and divergent priorities during conflicts prevent the inclusion of women. This makes women participation

---

[3] Add women and stir' is an expression concerning policies that increase the number and representation of women in places of power. It is used widely in feminist and political discourse. See (Palmiano, 2014)

of a secondary importance taking into consideration the involvement of several actors and the complexity of peacebuilding and mediation processes (Moore & Talarico, 2015). Although women, to a large extent, are excluded from formal negotiations and peace processes, their leverage and efforts remain significant through grassroots organisations and movements. Kaufman and Williams affirm that women start to coalesce and work for peace since early phases and throughout conflicts. Women in conflict-affected societies create the structures, organizations, and networks that enable them to work together to help facilitate the process of peace and reconstruction (Kaufman & Williams, 2010). As they challenge the authorities and social norms, women bring their demands of peace, education, human rights, accountability, social reconstruction, and other community-based activities for reconciliation and reconstruction (Sørensen, 1998). This participation in different informal mediums for peace never replaces the necessity of the direct involvement in the formal negotiations and peace processes; both should work together in tandem. Furthermore, and as it will be unpacked in the following sections, this participation is influenced, in addition to many other factors and barriers, by how women are stereotyped and presented in the media during conflict and so by the politics of women's representations in different formal coalitions and groups.

Representation of Syrian Women

Syrian Women's Representationsin the Media

Representation and images, specially of women and children, that emerge during times of conflicts and wars, shape and, to a large extent, determine their agency and even their future. The essential thesis for such representations of victimhood and dependency is dominated by the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) realm in order to obtain political and humanitarian support (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). The literature has discussed the serious ramifications of depicting women as helpless victims, powerless and voiceless and showed how such representations can lead to a destructive impact women's meaningful participation[4] in the negotiations and peace processes. Gender theorist Judith Butler explains how politics and representation are controversial terms. While representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; representation is also the normative function of a language that is either revealing to or distorting what is assumed to be true about the category of women (Butler, 1999). Butler, according to Moore and Talarico, also cautioned that women have been trapped in certain roles and that deprive them of legitimacy to meaningfully and actively participate in peace negotiations (Moore & Talarico, 2015). Others address the consequences for such representation by explaining how it dismisses true awareness and creative strategies deployed by women for the survival of their families and communities. Conflicts compel women to take on new independent roles and demonstrate capacities for decision-making in community management, peace processes and reconstruction activities (Manchanda, 2005).

The Syrian conflict, according to Marc Lynch et al, has been the most socially mediated civil conflict in history (Lynch, Freelon, & Aday, 2014). This has impacted how women are being represented in different media outlets during the Syrian uprising and subsequent conflict. Katty Alhayek analyses the representation of the Syrian woman in social media through a complex process; an orientalist and a self-orientalising discourse. That reflects the same Western hegemonic discourse that is essentializing of the Arab culture and shows how this prevailing representation continues to marginalize voices of underprivileged women (Alhayek, 2014). The report, Women in Emerging Syrian Media (2011-2016), observed from its reviewed media outlets that Syrian women are around three times more likely to be passive (having things done to them) than active (doers). Moreover, Syrian women are often portrayed as victims of violence, including rape, torture, death, detainment, ransom and human trafficking. (Khalaf, Asad, & Tawil, 2016). This depiction of powerlessness, dependency, and victimhood rip women of their agency and authority and limit their roles in the public realm. Such practices of representation go back to the long history of the similar depiction of Arab and Middle Eastern women in the western media that portray them as oppressed sexual objects. Alhayek discusses how the representation of Syrian women is constricted to 'a single faceless victim/ woman'. She rightly, argues how the stories, concerns, and needs of Syrian women were not only reduced to forced marriage in exchange for money but that there was also an exaggeration of the volume of the forced marriage phenomenon. Additionally, such representations 'invisiblize' the political and economic relationship issues as well as structural inequalities that impacted Syrian women (Alhayek, 2015).

---

[4] Meaningful participation of women in peace and negotiation processes is where women have decision- making authority - not only better reflects the diversity of society, inclusive peace frameworks increase the durability and the quality of peace. See Bache, C. (2019). Women's role in peace processes.
The UN women identifies for elements for women's meaningful participation in peace and security processes as: deploying agency, self-efficacy, being present and exerting influence. See UN Women. (2018a). Women's Meaningful Participation in Negotiating Peace and the Implementation of Peace Agreements. New York.

Albeit this representation, Sophie Petzelberger presents a different argument and stresses that Syrian women have created a whole discursive body of media material, presenting new concepts of gender identity and that could be utilized in the post-conflict society and structures (Petzelberger, 2017). Moore and Talarico suggest that the failure of the Assad regime to resolve the ongoing conflict has largely affected the full and meaningful participation of women in any eventual peace negotiation as the only place reserved for them in the conflict is as victims. (Moore & Talarico, 2015). Yumna transcends the most prominent perception of women as mere 'victims of war' and explores how Syrian women have not only survived the conflict but also challenged the norms and narratives and exhausted efforts and avenues, informally and formally, to build peace in Syria. (Asaf, 2017). As early as 2012, Charles and Denman analysed the participation and freedom of Syrian women through the lens of their capabilities approach. They argue that the agency of women in Syria had been restricted as a result of the political, economic and cultural landscape despite their willingness and efforts to have greater participation in the decision-making (Charles & Denman, 2012). Such capability approach and better understanding of the Syrian political and structural dynamics are crucial to understand the agency and unwavering roles that Syrian women have already played and can play in the peace process and in the post-conflict era. Asaf analyses how Syrian women survived the conflict while taking new gender roles and changing the dominant narratives. This is to accentuate that women's experiences as victims of conflict and violence and their active participation in peace building are not two mutually exclusive aspects and peace negotiations must acknowledge this fact (Asaf, 2017).

In the next section, we will address the different barriers that have particularly obstructed the work and inclusion of Syrians in the political sphere and peace process.

Barriers to Political Participation

In almost all conflicts, there are various constraints that hinder meaningful participation of women in the negotiations and peace process, and Syrian women are no exception here. These constraints are cultural, physical, and structural ones (Bandura & Blackwood, 2018). The nature of these constraints is intersectional, and they are relatively the same barriers that hinder women's participation in the Arab world, though increasingly intensified by violent conflicts.

The political realm is usually perceived as a corrupt, and sometimes violent, "dirty game" and an unsafe space for women (ESCWA, 2017). Physical barriers including security and protracted violence obstruct women from engaging or taking an active and advanced role in the political sphere. The militarization of the Syrian uprising and subsequent conflict have limited the space for Syrian women; despite the indispensability of their inclusion and meaningful participation. In 2014, Inclusive Security and the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria (CCSDS) surveyed 110 women activists living and working inside Syria to document their views on international efforts to broker peace and perceived barriers to women's full and meaningful participation. The survey found out that 93% of the respondents think women should be included in the international-level efforts to end the war and negotiate a political transition in Syria.

Structural barriers usually include economic, legal, and educational limitations in addition to discriminatory civil and religious laws that prevent women from taking leadership positions. Further, shifting governance structures negatively affect women's participation and their ability to position themselves and sustain their engagement in a fragile environment (Bandura & Blackwood, 2018). The unremitting large-scale displacement inside Syria and abroad has also disrupted their quest for such participation. On the one hand, this displacement has established novel networks and nexus that Syrian women in exile could utilize effectively to link with their fellow women inside the country. On the other hand, this displacement and the lack of mobility have burdened Syrian women with additional responsibilities and challenges that restrict their participation and inclusion in international fora.

Social and cultural barriers including patriarchal structures, stigma, and conservative norms hamper women's efforts. One survey conducted by Bareeq Education and Development in 2017 found out that 81% of women surveyed said that the social norms in Syria truly impede women's success (Hilton, 2017). Syrian women are prone to much criticism, heavy expectations, and obstacles in comparison to their male counterparts when they seek leading positions or participation in the political sphere (Kapur, 2017; ESCWA, 2017). In many Arab countries, women who attempt to enter the political arena are exposed to see details of their private lives, real or fabricated, revealed in an attempt to ruin their reputation (ESCWA, 2017). Some Syrian women

who are politically active have been subject to personal attacks, offense and defamation and that halts many women from resuming their political activism (Yousef Haj, 2018).

Regardless of the different challenges and their representation in the media, Syrian women have been key and indispensable actors in the uprising since its earliest days in 2011. They have actively participated in non-violent protests, generated their own circles and coordination efforts to collect money, and provided assistance to the affected families in the worst-hit areas (Roman, 2012). They have further gained recognition among communities establishing networks of legal, political and social support for different grassroots organisations (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016).

Syrian women have demonstrated their agency, organized themselves, and founded several organizations and grassroots initiatives. They worked in different fields including aid and development, human rights, women empowerment, media, documentation and in peacebuilding activities. Some of those initiatives include the Syrian Women's Network, Syrian Female Journalists' Network, Musawa Women's Study Center, Women Now, Syrian Women for Democracy, Syrian Feminist Lobby, and Syrian Women's Political Movement. As such, Syrian women have been represented in civil society organizations (CSOs). One study shows that 6% of the reported CSOs have no women in their staff, 82% have up to 50 women in their staff, and 2% having more than 200 women in their staff (Ahmad, 2019). This however does not reflect the women in leadership and decision-making positions where women's participation is underrepresented unless, according to one study, the CSO identifies itself as feminist and/or its work mainly focuses on gender justice and women's issues (Abu-Assab & Nasser-Eddin, 2019).

Despite these facts and figures, there still exists an information gap to track all initiatives, groups and organizations that were founded by the Syrian women since the uprising in 2011. Due to forced displacement, constant mutating situations on the ground, lack of funding, depletion of resources, and the control of de facto authorities have resulted in the formation and disappearance of several groups and initiatives that have played key roles in the first few years of the uprising. The emerging patterns of militarization, intensified violence, and Islamization have affected the

role and space for women. Increasingly, these patterns identified the challenges and opportunities of women and somehow branded their participation in the private and public spheres as well as their agency and inclusion.

Politics of Representation

In addition to the cultural physical and structural barriers and gender-discriminatory state structures, the conflict's dynamics and political polarization has undoubtedly influenced the representation of women in the peace process. There is usually a lack of incentives from the part of the negotiating parties dominated by men to support the inclusion of women and their presence at the negotiations table. Political and negotiating parties include a number of women, one or two women at best, to get their votes and in many cases, with a few exceptions, they include women who conform and do not dispute or question decisions. The small number of representations do not reflect Syrian women at the decision-making level and their leverage in the peace talks and in politics in general. Another reason for political bodies to have fewer numbers of women is to give the impression that they are supporting women's inclusion and usually it only comes with the pressure from the international community. Furthermore, criteria that are requested to engage women politically are never applied or required for men. In some Syrian opposition spectrums for example, the selection criteria were the charisma and the loses and sacrifices that women had to offer or go through during the conflict such as losing husband or son. Although these criteria were removed, they still give an indication of how men perceive the political participation to women. Conflicting interests and dynamics, that are yet to be examined, among Syrian women individuals and groups themselves also affect their inclusion and shed light on the limitations of approaching representation in the political sphere.

The discussion on the politics of representation raises several questions regarding who has access to the peace process. Questions include: who are the women and women groups that are excluded from the peace process and why? How does the political polarization, not only in terms of the simple dichotomy regime-opposition, but also among the opposition spectrums themselves, affect women's, inclusion and meaningful participation? How can international support to women's inclusion in the peace process ensure better representation but not necessarily more representation?

In the following section we will examine the inclusion of Syrian women in the peace process and the international support highlighting empirical evidence on the two experiences of the Women's Advisory Board (WAB) to the UN Special Envoy and Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) of the High Negotiations Committee.

Representation of Syrian Women in the Peace Process

There is a handful of reports on women participation in Syria's formal negotiations and peace process. Yet, there is still a knowledge gap that could systematically measure and analyse the impact and effectiveness of such participation. Critics have thoroughly discussed the exclusion, or weak representation of Syrian women from the political process despite considerable international efforts to include them. Albeit some intended genuine efforts in their initial essence, those efforts were either highly contested or perceived as using the classic formula of "add women and stir". Prior to the Geneva II Talks in January 2014, several international organisations and commentary called to act immediately and ensure full women participation in the Talks. However, some of these policy calls suggested the participation as a third party compromising an all-women independent delegation, with equal rights and responsibilities to participate, negotiate and determine the agreements and the future (WILPF et al, 2013). Others suggested the same rational of including the voice of civil society in a more diverse and inclusive way. On the other side, some endorsed women's direct participation as a third, civil society party to Geneva, and also suggested an alternative package including consultative body, quotas on all sides, and gender expertise to establish further vehicles for more engagement in the process (Leimbach, 2013). Despite the fact that the Geneva Communique confirmed that "women must be fully represented in all aspect of the transitions", it was evident that the one thing all delegations had in common during Geneva II peace talks was the complete absence of women among all parties including the Syrian government, the Syrian oppositions, or the UN (Osman, 2014).

16

In her comprehensive and nuanced literature review and analysis of the participation of the Syrian women in political processes, Bela Kapur suggested that the efforts of international support to meaningful participation of the Syrian women in the peace talks has been overly narrow, failing to promote a more holistic leadership approach and to mirror women's daily concerns, experiences and needs (Kapur, 2017). Notwithstanding, some special international efforts have been exhausted to include women in some forms, Syria peace talks have been widely criticized for failing to do so and each step continues to exclude women from any form of substantive representation (Monash University, 2018). This, however, never stopped Syrian women from organising and lobbying to push for more inclusion.

Analyses over women's political participation usually ignore, intentionally or unintentionally, the economic factor that curbs their involvement in the politic sphere. Alsaba & Kapilashrami deploy for example, the political economy framework to better understand how gendered dimensions interact with existing structure to reinforce gender inequalities and violence against women in the Syrian context (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016). Such framework is crucial to unpack the normative barriers that obstruct women participation in the peace process amidst violent conflict. In their study on Women Peace's Activism in Syria, Ghazzawi et al found that a considerable number of women activists link economic empowerment directly to peacebuilding as economic independence will enhance women's self-confidence and produce women who have opinions of their own (Ghazzawi et al, 2015). Dia Al-Shami links the weak political participation of the Syrian women to the existing weak political dynamics in general. She contends that all Syrian women assemblies and coalitions came as a result of the pressure, encouragement, and support of the international community for the purpose of political merits rather than established based on solid grounds and the development of social demands. This has led to the abrupt formation and launching of these groups, leading to their rapid collapse. As such, according to Al-Shami, such women groups lacked robust administrative foundation, transparency, and blatant decision-making , in addition to the fact that some groups had to follow the non-binding advisory role (Al-Shami, 2018).

Two Experiences of Women's Advisory Group

In this section, two models of international support to Syrian women participation will be examined: The Women's Advisory Board (WAB) to the UN Special Envoy and the Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) of the High Negotiations Committee.

The Women's Advisory Board[5] was formed of 12 women in February 2016 to consult and meet with the UN Special Envoy to Syria without participating in the peace talks. The WAB has a consultative role and an advisory role in the UN Special Envoy. The establishment of the group created a lot of controversy, particularly after their first press conference, and it was believed to include members with a pro-regime agenda (Asaf, 2017). The role of the WAB is purely advisory and that undermines their efforts during the peace process in the international arena (Farhat, 2016). The WAB was described as unrepresentative, elitist, and non-inclusive. Further, critiques have evolved around the lack of transparency and clarity in the criteria of the selection process of the WAB's members. The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre argued against the selection process and inadequate vetting to the Board's members (SJAC, 2016). Another critique highlighted the confusion that the WAB created when trying to generate a consensus around the political process while using neutral language (Haid, 2016). Others criticized the WAB for demanding an immediate end to economic sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime under the pretext that those sanctions are blocking access to food, medicine, and the necessary means for the survival of the Syrian people (Mahmoud, 2016). Several opinions blamed the exclusion of the direct women participation in the negotiations on the creation of the WAB. On the other hand, many others blame the Syrian opposition spectrums that have not seriously worked to include women in the negotiations and the political processes (Muwatana, 2017). One UN Women's report refers to the criticism concerning the UN asking the WAB's members to reach consensus positions, which meant they were silent on important issues where agreement could not be reached. In fact, the WAB often presented non-papers that outline different options reflecting the needs and priorities of diverse constituencies of women's groups

---

[5] The Board was supported by the UN Women, the Governments of Netherlands and Norway and Hivos.

(UN Women, 2018a; UN Women, 2018b). Albeit all the critics, the WAB is still functional and supported by the UN. The WAC members have been present during the meeting of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva in October 2019.

The Women's Advisory Committee[6] was established in February 2016 as a recognition to the need for more representation and participation of women in the political process. The WAC was working on articulating a gender perspective to the Higher Negotiations Committee (HNC) in the short term and getting more women on it in the long term (Gambale, 2016). It consists of 12-14 women, though there were constant changes and withdrawals of WAC members. Similarly, the WAC received criticism over its ambiguity, representation, purpose, and selection criteria. Members from the WAC itself and other women activists argued that the WAC suffered from a significant lack of transparency, ambiguity, and inconsistency. It also lacked clear selection criteria and mechanisms that would facilitate and regulate the work between the WAC and the HNC. Some highlighted that the HNC members had the quotas and changed the list based on clientelism, personal interests, and individual decisions. Additionally, the HNC did not take the consultations and advice of the WAC in a serious manner. Other members were concerned that the WAC contributed to further weakening of any direct women participation in the formal peace process (Kannout, 2017). The WAC was additionally criticized for a lack of connection to women on the ground, and overall the lack of clarity on decision-making power vis-à-vis the HNC (UN Women, 2018a). The creation of the WAC reflected the weaknesses of broader opposition in terms of structures, leadership and dynamics and that led to question the level of the real influence, impact, and weight of the WAC over the HNC and the whole political negotiations. It is admitted that there is no transparency among the WAC members themselves and there was a selective process over who would attend the meetings. According to one WAC member, it was agreed to dissolve the WAC during Riyadh II in November 2017 since it was "dysfunctional anyway, had no more fund, no process, no institutionalization and there was no systemized way to keep the WAC together".

Albeit both the Women Advisory Board and Women Advisory Committee received similar critique, the WAC did not spark the same controversy as the WAB did. This could be debated and attributed to many reasons. The WAB was formed by the UN and hence included women from both the regime and opposition, many considered the members who opposed the regime as not the 'real' opposition. This, however, made the WAB subject to more intense criticism and attacks from both sides. Some political activists and feminists conferred that the WAC was created as a reaction from the HNC to prove that they also have their advisory women group and to compensate for the discreditable representation of women in the opposition. Hence, the WAC is perceived as a tokenistic and ineffective body and it did not have a real presence in the media. It is deliberated that no one actually knew about the existence of the WAC and no one knew it was dissolved. According to one WAC member, the WAC was unprofessionally done, personally controlled, and badly managed. Others further discuss that the WAB stalled the presence and the potential work of the Syrian Women Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD)[7] and highlighted that the original intention and purpose of SWIPD was to create the Women Advisory Board and hence there was no need to continue or activate the SWIPD afterwards. The UN has obviously invested in the WAB in terms of resources, training, facilitators, and media appearance. With this main support to the WAB, the outcome of the WAB's work is not communicated with other Syrian women in an open and transparent way and this consequently leads to more confusion, disengagement, and contention between the WAB and other Syrian women groups.

International Support or Hindrance

Sumie Nakya states that the categorization of women's participation as an "international priority" is a short-term solution and it does not guarantee the sense of ownership for social transformation at the local level (Nakaya, 2003). International support to Syrian women's participation in the negotiations and peace processes are true and well-intended in their essence. However, the formula and structures deployed have not enhanced a meaningful participation or instigated multilevel work and analysis that ensure the

---

[6] The Committee was supported by the governments of Sweden and Canada.

[7] The SWIPD is an initiative that was established of 40 Syrian women in January 2014 was supported by the UN Women together with the Government of Netherlands.

effectiveness and inclusiveness of such participation. Lisa Davis states that the international community has marginalized Syrian women in the failing peace process that continue to show poor chances of producing a cease-fire or any signed peace accords (Davis, 2016). In her quantitative analysis of female peace-making and how women transform conflict, Laurel Stone found that women's participation as a third-party does not aid in the peace process as their presence is more likely to be imposed and supported internationally rather than built by the local parties (Stone, 2014). In the case of Syria, international support to advisory groups as a third party did not practically serve or enhance women to be at the negotiation tables. Bandura and Blackwood mention that this participation at the negotiations table or any other peacebuilding efforts must be mainstreamed from the grassroots level and Syrian women have to be viewed as credible actors once they are selected (Bandura & Blackwood, 2018).

Syrian women, directly involved in the WAB, WAC and SWIPD, expressed their frustration with the international support over the issue of including Syrian women in the peace process. They asserted that the favoritism of international support to a handful number of Syrian women has its big disadvantages and has resulted in the exclusion and contention among the Syrian women. In the case of the WAC, some members referred to the destructive role of international support that granted the authority to a few numbers of Syrian women to personally control the process and therefore the exclusion and corruption. This created unnecessary conflict over who will be attending the meetings and who makes such decisions based on connection and favoritism.

One of the controversial mechanisms to ensure women's participation in the political and peace processes is the quota. Stone states that the institutionalization of gender through gender electoral quotas establishes more durable peace over time (Stone, 2014). Women activists in Syria envisage that imposing quota is invaluable in order to achieve essential and substantive political participation of women and to eventually reach the point where enough women are qualified and influential (Ghazzawi et al, 2015). International support and initiatives might exhaust more efforts to pressure reaching the required quota (by at least 30%) of women representation and

meaningful participation. However, some argue that the decision is eventually an internal one and must come as a national priority to all negotiating bodies and political parties (Kannout, 2017).

In addition to the two advisory groups, another model is the international support to women participation through organising big conferences and fora for Syrian women from all spectrums. For example, the UN Women has organised one conference titled Syrian "Women Peacemakers" in May 2016 for more than 130 Syrian women to build consensus, forge a statement of unity, and overcome significant political divides. The 3-day conference was described as one with 'emotionally charged exchanges' (UN Women, 2016). A similar conference titled "Toward a Framework for the Syrian Women Movement" was organized by the UN Women for 200 Syrian women in June 2018. According to the UN Women, Syrian women participants identified some key elements for a common framework for the Syrian women's movement despite their significant differences and diverse backgrounds across political, ideological, and geographic spectrums (UN Women Arab States, 2018). There was no report issued eventually after the conference in June 2018 and there was no reason or clarification on why there was no shared report. Admittedly, organizing such conferences require massive efforts and resources and place huge challenges on different levels. Yet, their real impact on advancing women participation is not only ambiguous; but it can also be overestimated.

Kapur reflected on the experience of Syrian women and how they are required to demonstrate that they can work cross-party/ideology and come up with common positions before they are taken seriously in relation to their participation in formal peace processes (Kapur, 2017). Such international support only helps in sustaining the narratives of women being peace doves and emotionally charged. Most importantly, women are expected to be depoliticized and come to an agreement in a very politically polarized context.

At the margins of the second UN-EU conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region in Brussels 24-25 April 2018, one side event was organized to feature a discussion between policy makers and ten Syrian women who presented their distinct perspectives on the conflict (UN Women, 2018b). At this conference

titled "Syrian Women and International Policy Makers" there was a discussion around the role of women in humanitarian action, resilience, and political dialogues. Syrian women demanded to oblige the negotiating parties to include 30% of women at all phases of the peace process; in case of lack of commitment, women' seats must be kept empty and never be replaced by men. This direct and strong demand together with other demands and priorities shared by the Syrian women should be highlighted and must be available to the public to ensure that follow-up actions are seriously considered by the international community.

One year later, at the two days of dialogue at the third UN-EU conference in Brussels III Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region', the co-chairs declaration stated that the conference "put a special emphasis on Syrian women and on organizations representing their views and recognized their importance in efforts to bring sustainable peace to Syria." (Council of the EU, 2019). This special attention to Syrian women was materialized into real efforts to meet with Syrian women in one of the two days of dialogue. The new UN Special Envoy for Syria , Geir Pedersen and the High Representative met a delegation of Syrian women from the Women Advisory Board and a dinner with Syrian women was organized by the European Union and UN (European Union, 2019). During the two days, many Syrian women and men expressed their frustration about not having a separate panel discussion, dedicated in the official program, to address the needs, concern, priorities, and perceptions of the Syrian women in the political, socioeconomic, humanitarian, negotiations, and peace fields.

From the brief examples of international support to women participation in the political and peace process, there are several concerns on the accountability, transparency and evaluation of such support that are yet to be addressed. For example, the number of women members in the WAC dropped and kept changing with no clarification for public opinion or for the other members themselves. In the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD), several women withdrew or suspended their membership around the time of the establishment of the WAB and their press conference. There has been no, at least in public, situational and risk analysis on the SWIPD, the reasons for members' withdrawal, and whether or not the creation of WAB has led to the total death of SWIPD. As Kapur suggested, to this point, there is no independent review of the international support to identify what is working and what is not, what needs to be done differently, and if this support is doing no harm (Kapur, 2017). Most importantly, funding allocated to different models of international support to women in the peace process must be transparent with a real-time impact evaluation.

Conclusion

Representations and images of women that emerge during times of conflicts and wars, shape and, to a large extent, determine their agency, and even their future. Women's weak representation in the negotiation and peace process is not restrictive to Syrian women or women in conflict; it is a global drawback in the international system that continues to fail in its core principles of diversity and inclusivity. According to the UN Women, the absence of women in peace processes cannot be explained by their alleged lack of experience in conflict resolution or negotiations. Instead, there has been a lack of effort to integrate them in formal peace processes.

The weak political participation of Syrian women reflects a broader problem of an architecture that is designed to continue excluding women from formal peace negotiations and political process. Both the WAB and the WAC received international support and attention; they were provided with the political and financial support, and with the required avenues for lobbying and advocacy. However, advisory groups cannot and should not, by any means, be perceived as an alternative to the women seats and their direct impact in the peace process.

International support has undeniably made exerted efforts to ensure Syrian women's political participation and representation in the negotiations and peace process through different mediums and fora. The question that remains is how to move from rhetoric to practice and ensure the impact and efficiency of international support through direct and meaningful participation at the negotiations table rather than the designation of advisory roles. Moreover, international support to women in conflict, in general, tend to idealize the experience and disseminate this support as a successful story regardless of its concrete and real outcomes.

Despite the heavy criticism to the role of international support, there is still a big room to continue supporting Syrian women and find alternative ways and strategies to enhance women meaningful participation in the peace process. It can continue to pressure and oblige all negotiating parties to have more women representation to meet at least 30% in all decision-making levels and in all phases of the peace process as it unfortunately might be the only way to have not only more but also better representation. The onus, however, is still on the society and local structures to enhance and institutionalize women's participation in the peace process on the long-term. This does not only entail creating new local societal and structural mechanisms, but also reforming an overarching international system for peace and negotiations processes that genuinely and inevitably enable and advance the meaningful political participation of women.

International support must strengthen non-traditional structures and mechanisms that create a nexus between formal and informal processes, to ensure women participation and that facilitate linkages between women engaged in the international mechanisms, and women working at the community levels and ensure that the latter are informing the peace and negotiations processes (Kaput, 2017; Bache, 2019). In addition, international support should not demand women to use neutral language and come to a consensus in a very politicized and polarized environment. This tendency towards depoliticizing Syrian women rips them of their political agency that must be invested in peace building. Syrian women, as women in all other conflicts, practice politics and agency on a daily basis. Their daily suffering is a political act, and their daily acts of survival and resilience are a clear practice of political activities.

Bibliography

Abu-Assab, N., & Nasser-Eddin, N. (2019). Gender Dynamics within Syrian Civil Society. Berlin: IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development.

Ahmad, J. (2019). Changing Contexts and Trends in Syrian Civil Society. Berlin: IMPACT Civil Society Research and Development.

Alhayek, K. (2014). Double Marginalization. The Invisibility of Syrian Refugee Women's Perspectives in Mainstream Online Activism and Global Media. Feminist Media Studies, 14(4), 696-700.

Alhayek, K. (2015). Untold Stories of Syrian Women Surviving War. Syria Studies, 7(1), 1-30.

Alsaba, K., & Kapilashrami, A. (2016). Understanding women's experience of violence and the political economy of gender in conflict: the case of Syria. Reproductive Health Matters, 24(47), 5-17.

Al-Shami, D. (2018). دراسة: حول مشاركة المرأة السورية في العمل السياسي. مركزعمران للدراسات الاستراتيجية.

Asaf, Y. (2017). Syrian Women and the Refugee Crisis:Surviving the Conflict, Building Peace, and Taking New Gender Roles. Soc. Sci., 6(110).

Bache, C. (2019). Women's role in peace processes. Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs. Brussels: European Parliament.

Bandura, A., & Blackwood, M. (2018). Women's Role in Achieving Sustainable Peace in Syria. U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace and Security. U.S. CSWG.

Bellafronto, C. (2005, October 14). Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa - Syria. Freedom House

Butler, J. (1999). Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. NewYork and London: Routledge.

CFR. (2019, January 30). Women's Participation in Peace Processes. Council of Foreign Relations

Charles, L., & Denman, K. (2012). Every knot has someone to undo it." Using the Capabilities Approach as a lens to view the status of women leading up to the Arab Spring in Syria. Journal of International Women's Studies, 13(5), 195-210.

Council of the EU. (2019, March 14). Brussels III Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region': co-chairs declaration.

Davis, L. (2016). Syrian Women's Inclusion in the Peace Processes. Journal of International Law and Politics, 48(1157), 1157-1190.

ESCWA. (2017). Women's Political Representation in the Arab Region. Beirut.

European Union. (2019, March 15). Record pledge at Brussels III Conference, EU supports future of Syria and the region.

Farhat, H. (2016). The Status of Women Human Rights Defenders in Syria. The WHRD Coalition In The Middle East And North Africa.

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2014). The Ideal Refugees: Islam, Gender, and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Gambale, M. L. (2016, May 10). How Syrian Women Landed at the UN Peace Talks and What It All Means. PassBlue

Ghazzawi, R., Mohammad, A., & Ramadan, O. (2015). "Peacebuilding defines our future now". A study of women's peace activism in Syria. Istanbul: Badael Foundation.

Habib, N. (2018). Gender role changes and their impacts on Syrian women refugees in Berlin in light of the Syrian crisis. Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin fur Sozialforschung (WZB).

Haid, H. (2016, March 29). Don't misrepresent Syrian women, again. NOW

Hilton, D. (2017, December 22). The Shifting Role of Women in Syria's Economy. Retrieved from Syria Deeply.
IPU & UN Women. (2017, January 1). Women in Politics: 2017.

Kannout, L. (2017). المشـاركة السياسـية للمـرأة السـورية بيـن المتـن والهامـش. اللوبـي النسـوي السـوري.

Kapur, B. (2017). Syrian Women in Political Processes. Participation of Syrian Women in Political Processes 2012–2016 Literature Review.

Kaufman, J. P., & Williams, K. P. (2010). Women and War: Gender Identity and Activism in Times of Conflict. Kumarian Press: Kumarian Press.

Khalaf, R., Asad, R., & Tawil, R. (2016). Women in Emerging Syrian Media (2011-2016). Amhem: The Stichting Female Journalists Network.

Krause, J., Krause, W., & Branfors, P. (2018). Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace. International Interactions, 44(6), 985-1016.

Leimbach, D. (2013, December 26). At Geneva II Talks in January, It Is Not Enough to 'Add Women and Stir'. PassBlue

Lynch, M., Freelon, D., & Aday, S. (2014). Syria's Socially Mediated Civil War. Washington, DC : USIP United States Institute of Peace.

Mahmoud, Z. (2016, April 20). Women's Advisory Board in Geneva Sparks Controversy. Retrieved from Syria Deeply.

Manchanda, R. (2005, Oct. 29 - Nov. 4). Women's Agency in Peace Building: Gender Relations in Post-Conflict Reconstruction. Economic and Political Weekly, 40(44/45), 4737-4745.

Monash University. (2018, July). Syria: A Situational Analysis Of Women's Participation In Peace Processes. Monash Gender, Peace & Security. MONASH University.

Moore, C., & Talarico, T. (2015). Inclusion to Exclusion: Women in Syria. 30 Emory International Law Review, 213.

Muwatana. (2017, April 03). حيـن يطالـب ديمسـتورا بتمكيـن المـرأة السـورية !! *Retrieved from* مواطنة.

Nakaya, S. (2003, Oct-Dec). Women and Gender Equality in Peace Processes: From Women at the Negotiating Table to Postwar Structural Reforms in Guatemala and Somalia. Global Governance, 9(4), 459-476.

O'reilly, M., Súilleabháin, A. Ó., & Paffenholz, T. (2015). Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes. New York: International Peace Institute.

Osman, H. (2014, January 23). Where are the Syrian women at the Geneva peace talks? The Guardian

Palmiano, J. (2014). Fighting 'Feminist Fatigue'? Women and Peace Negotiations. Bern: swisspeac.

Petzelberger, S. (2017). Nation in Conflict, Gender in Conflict. How do Syrian activists reflect on gender identities challenged by the civil war? Momentum Quarterly, 6(1), pp. 17-27.

Roman, J. (2012, January 22). On the front lines in Syria, women's role is still undefined. The National

Sørensen, B. (1998, June). Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Issues and Sources. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies.

Shackle, S. (2017, August 17). Syrian feminists: 'This is the chance the war gave us – to empower women'.

SJAC. (2016, April 7). The Controversy over the Syrian Women's Advisory Board. Justice and Accountability Centre SJAC

Stone, L. (2014, May 13). Women Transforming Conflict A Quantitative Analysis of Female Peacemaking.

UN Security Council. (2000, October 31). Resolution 1325 (2000).

UN Women. (2012). Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations: Connections between Presence and Influence.

UN Women. (2016, May 23). Syrian women rise above differences and forge a statement of unity.

UN Women. (2018a). Women's Meaningful Participation in Negotiating Peace and the Implementation of Peace Agreements. New York.

UN Women. (2018b, April 24). The second UN-EU conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the region starts in Brussels.
UN Women Arab States. (2018, July 05). identified some key elements for a common framework for the Syrian women's movement.

Williams, K. (2014). Perspectives on the Peace Process: A Survey of Syrian Women. The Institute for Inclusive Security & The Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria (CCSDS).

WILPF. (2000). Security Council Resolution 1325. Retrieved from WILPF: https://www.peacewomen.org/SCR-1325

WILPF; ICAN; Human Rights Watch; Kvinna til Kvinna; Oxfam; DemocraShe. (2013). Ensuring the Effective Participation and Rights of Women in the Syrian Peace and Mediation Process. Working Paper .

Yousef Haj, L. (2018, November 2017). هـل المـرأة السـورية السياسـية مُعنّفَـة أيضـاً؟. Retrieved from Rozana.

The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship

معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة

www.activearabvoices.org

American University of Beirut

الجامعة الأميركية في بيروت

1866

AUB