

# “Peacebuilding defines our future now”

A study of women’s  
peace activism in Syria



**BADAEL**



Kvinna till Kvinna

# Contents

Badael Foundation .....	2
The authors .....	2
Foreword: An exclusive insight into Syrian women’s activism .....	3
Executive summary: Empowerment for peace .....	4
Introduction: Peacebuilding in the midst of violence .....	6
Chapter One: Historical development of women’s activism in Syria .....	8
Chapter Two: General characteristics of women’s groups .....	10
Chapter Three: Perspectives and priorities .....	14
Chapter Four: Collective and individual efforts in peacebuilding .....	20
Chapter Five: Challenges and resources .....	31
Conclusions and recommendations: Crucial actors for change .....	36
List of acronyms .....	39
References and further reading .....	39
The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung .....	39

## “PEACEBUILDING DEFINES OUR FUTURE NOW” A STUDY OF WOMEN’S PEACE ACTIVISM IN SYRIA

Authors: Razan Ghazzawi, Afra Mohammad, Oula Ramadan  
Badael Research Assistants:  
Ayham Al Hussein and Raheb Alwany  
Field research: Badael team  
Project Manager at The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation:  
Saba Nowzari  
Editor: Malin Ekerstedt, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation  
Layout: Ida Svedlund, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation  
Publisher: Badael Foundation  
Funded by: The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and  
The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation  
Front page: Syrian women taking part in an anti-regime  
protest in Aleppo. Photo: TT/AFP/Dimitar Dilkoff

©Badael Foundation, 2015  
Istanbul, Turkey

All rights reserved. No parts of this publication may be  
printed, reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means  
without prior written permission from Badael Foundation.

ISBN 1 978-91-982827-0-2  
Printed by: Exellent Print & Design

## BADAEEL FOUNDATION

Badael means “alternatives” in Arabic. The Badael Foundation is a Syrian non-governmental organization (NGO) committed to strengthening civil society groups and NGOs in Syria. The foundation works with groups that are active or want to become active in the promotion and/or implementation of activities to reduce violence, break its cycle, respond to the conflict, and prepare for a future equitable pluralistic Syria. Visit: [badael.org/en/homepage](http://badael.org/en/homepage)

## THE AUTHORS

**Razan Ghazzawi** is a freelance researcher, currently studying her second Master in Gender, Sexuality and Body at the University of Leeds. She has been a blogger and journalist since 2006 and a grassroots activist during the Syrian uprising before leaving Syria in December 2013.

**Afra Mohammad** has an MA in International Relations. During the last three years, she has been working closely with Syrian civil society and women’s organizations.

**Oula Ramadan** is the founder and Executive Director of Badael Foundation. Her work focuses on human rights, conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Syria as well as on sexual and gender-based violence among refugees from the Middle East and North Africa region.

# An exclusive insight into Syrian women's activism

The alarming reports of human rights violations in Syria have not slipped past anyone. The vulnerability of Syrian women in particular has been constantly portrayed in the media and by various actors. These reports have once again put violence against women, especially sexual violence in times of war, on the agenda of the United Nations (and the international community), where resolutions have condemned such acts and protection mechanisms have been called for. However, these actions have led to a narrowed perception of the role of Syrian women in peacebuilding efforts. Treating Syrian women's rights as solely a question of protection has reduced the women to being passive victims of the war. Protection is a prerequisite for the security of Syrian women, but it must go hand in hand with the recognition of their role as agents for change and sustainable peace.

One of the greatest challenges of our time is to achieve sustainable peace and democracy in conflict-affected countries. Many theories exist about what is needed to achieve peace, stability and security, but one clear requirement is the equal participation of both men and women in conflict resolution. Violent conflict tends to be more predominant in countries with a low representation of women in decision-making positions and where violence against women is more prevalent<sup>1</sup>, so to recognize and utilize the expertise of women in conflict areas is a peacebuilding activity in itself. This has been the experience of The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, which was founded as a response to the atrocities committed against women during the war in the Balkans. During its 20 years of existence it has consistently worked not only to strengthen the protection of women, but also to increase their participation as actors of change.

20 years after the Balkan war the same challenges appear in other conflict-affected regions when it comes to the equal inclusion of women in peacebuilding efforts. Therefore, the message of the importance of women's


active roles in peacebuilding needs to be highlighted often to safeguard women's participation in transitional processes. This report, conducted by the Badael Foundation, with the support of The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and co-funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, is a testimony of how women carry out crucial peace work in the midst of violence and oppression. Efforts that often go unrecognized by the outside world.

The Badael Foundation is a Syrian non-governmental organization committed to strengthening civil society groups in Syria that are, or want to become, active in promoting peacebuilding measures. The foundation not only capacitates Syrian civil society organizations, but also produces evidence-based research about, and for, its work for sustainable peace. Given the current security situation in Syria, the data for this study would have been impossible to obtain without the Badael research team's access to a large range of women's groups in the country. The data collection was carried out between the second half of 2014 and the summer of 2015 – a time when security conditions in some areas worsened, putting the researchers at constant risk.

Thanks to the Badael Foundation's unique access, this report can provide exclusive insight into the activism of Syrian women, in general, and peacebuilding, in particular. It seeks to understand women's activism in Syria, in terms of countering violence and promoting peacebuilding, and to highlight the role the Syrian women activists have been playing in peacebuilding. It also identifies opportunities for the international community and Syrian actors to build upon this activism and assist in finding a peaceful political solution.



Oula Ramadan, Director  
Badael Foundation



Lena Ag, Secretary General  
The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

1. *Equal Power – Lasting Peace*, Kvinna till Kvinna, 2012

# Empowerment for peace

**L**ike any civil society activism in Syria prior to 2011, women activism either suffered from a tightly held state patronage or, for the few organizations and activists that managed to remain rather independent, a heavy monitoring. It was not until 2011, with the outbreak of the protests against the Syrian regime, that civil society, including old and new women civil activism, started to grow and diversify.

The increased militarization and ever-escalating violence in the country have, however, greatly diminished the scope of work of many of these newly emerged women civil society organizations and activists. Faced with this increased marginalization of their activism, many of them started to design and implement interventions to reduce the violence, combat armament, and promote a culture of nonviolence.

The facts and opinions presented in this study derive from questionnaires answered by 49 women civil society groups, interviews with 35 prominent women leaders, and focus group discussions with about 100 women activists in Syria. The research covers a significant percentage of all the Syrian territories. However due to security reasons some areas, like Homs, Hama and Raqqa, could not be reached and are consequently not represented.

## Peacebuilding for equal rights

The study shows that most of the women activists define peacebuilding as a process, which starts with an immediate ceasefire and inclusive negotiations to reach a political solution, and results in justice and equal rights for all citizens of Syria. The activists also perceived a direct link between a strong civil society and peacebuilding in Syria because they saw civil society as the only true representative of the people – in comparison to political parties and international actors that they believed were only pursuing their own narrow interests.

Many of the women activists had become active in peacebuilding work, because of personal experiences of discrimination or after watching others being subjected to oppression by the state. They also expressed that the deteriorating situation in the country had made them feel obliged to act. Most of the women activists



*Syrian women in Ghouta demonstrating against the extremist armed group Jayesh al-Islam (Army of Islam). Photo: Siraj press*



*Four women in Deir Ezzor, participating in the Planet Syria campaign. The campaign aims to engage people around the world in solidarity to stop the violence and extremism in Syria. Photo: Planet Syria*



*Women discussing their roles, rights and responsibilities at the first Women Conference in Ghouta in 2015. Photo: Hurras Network*

believed peacebuilding, amidst the ongoing violence, was their gateway towards reconstructing society.

Some of the women activists expressed negative views on the idea of peacebuilding. However, this turned out to primarily be based on a different understanding of what peacebuilding entails, rather than rejection of combating violence and/or building sustainable civil peace. Most of the activists who voiced these negative approaches were actually involved in activities to mitigate violence or spread knowledge on peaceful alternatives in activism, like campaigning against the spread of small arms or handling mediation efforts between different armed groups, but they did not necessarily think of these activities as peacebuilding.

Those who voiced the most critique against peacebuilding mainly referred to there being other priorities that have to come first, like the everyday struggle to stay alive. Some activists, mostly from regime-controlled areas or in other regions with intense fighting, like Aleppo, also said that peacebuilding could be perceived as an act of betrayal against all those having been killed, detained, displaced or in other ways victimized by the war.

### Different approaches in different regions

28 of the women's groups participating in the research carried out peacebuilding activities as defined by this study. These groups were spread out over the geographical area covered, with the largest number found in Al-Hasaka, followed by Damascus and its countryside. In Al-Hasaka, focusing on coexistence and civil peace seemed to be rooted in the region's history of conflicts between the diverse population groups in the region, in addition to systematic state discrimination against non-Arabs. In Damascus and its countryside, activities assumed a political and legal dimension, like producing drafts of what an engendered constitution could look like and organizing hearings for survivors of sexual abuse. This focus could be attributed to many veteran women human rights activists with extensive political knowledge being active in the region.

In Idleb and Aleppo, activities focused on reducing violence and working against the recruitment of children by armed forces, in addition to promoting women's rights and coexistence. The samples in Daraa and Deir Ezzor were rather limited but indicated a focus on combating child recruitment by the Islamic State (IS) in Deir Ezzor, and a realization and subsequent change of activities in Daraa of the need to work on reducing the violence and controlling its negative consequences in order for any other civil activities to be feasible.

Apart from women's groups working on peacebuilding, a substantial number of efforts carried out by individual women activists were also found. Many of these consisted of negotiation or mediation activities, like resolving a violent conflict between two parties or trying to achieve the release of detainees.

### Financial support and training of staff

Lack of funding was the factor most activists pointed out as having a negative impact on their ability to carry out

peacebuilding activities. The fact that many women's groups are not registered was one frequently mentioned reason for why they are turned down by donors. At other times, it has been the activists themselves who have been suspicious of preconditioned grant applications that they thought could alter their activities or donors simply having other agendas and interests than the groups. Many of the peacebuilding projects the activists talked about suffered from societal resistance, as in the aforementioned view of peace work being seen as betrayal, but a shortage of funds was the overall main reason behind activities being terminated.

In addition, all the women's groups working on peacebuilding stressed a need for the training of its staff, especially on peacebuilding issues. This, as they found those skills to be very important and in a regular need of updating in light of the escalating armed conflict. Women's political, social and economical empowerment were other areas in which training was requested. The main aim with increasing such knowledge was to raise women's awareness of their rights and thereby enhancing their role in peacebuilding.

Aside from the peacebuilding activities already mentioned, other examples of peace work that women activists carried out were education programmes for children on coexistence and tolerance, the creation of a festival which brought together cultural expressions of all the different ethnic and religious groups in a region with a much diverse population, and the use of craft workshops and other "safe" occasions to start dialogues with the participating women about non-violent conflict resolution.

### Handling challenges

The research clearly shows that peacebuilding activism in Syria faces many challenges, including the ongoing violence and security threats resulting from the regime's violent crackdown on its opponents and a lack of unified political discourse among the fragmented Syrian opposition. On top of that, women have to overcome society's patriarchal attitudes towards women and their involvement in the public domain, and outwit the many restrictions imposed on their movements, as well as the hostile view on activism in general, where extremist armed groups like IS or the Al-Nusra Front are in control.

On the other hand, peacebuilding activism can benefit from a growing support amongst the Syrian people for non-violent alternatives to the ongoing hardships. From the 2011 uprising and onwards, a dedicated civil society has been growing, with increasingly skilled activists who are focused on combating armament and the spread of violence. Women activists can build on these previous achievements to improve people's situation locally, call for peace and reconciliation nationally, and advocate for equal rights for everybody politically. In addition, the adversities of war have produced local leaders who have brought about peace or resolved conflicts in their own communities. Such successful local solutions provide invaluable opportunities for learning on a national level.

# Peacebuilding in the midst of violence

In 2011, men and women in Syria took to the streets in peaceful demonstrations. They initially demanded justice, but later also the ousting of the regime. This came shortly after the regime violently cracked down on its peaceful dissidents. The conflict soon escalated, and for the past four years increased militarization has been building up in the country. This militarization has prompted many local and international actors, agendas and interests to become involved and demonstrate influence.

During this period, women activists and women's groups have been actively involved in almost every aspect of the ongoing civil activism in Syria. More recently, women's efforts have also begun to include projects and initiatives to mitigate the escalating violence and promote peaceful alternatives with the overall goal of building a modern state of justice and equality. However, very little is known about this activism, the women and organizations behind it, and the conditions under which they carry out their efforts. This study aims to explore the current forms and characteristics of women activism in peacebuilding and to identify the challenges it faces, as well as shedding light on the opportunities available to the growing women's peace activist movement in Syria.

To accomplish this, the research focused on finding answers to the following questions:

- How are women working with peacebuilding in Syria?
- What are the barriers for women's participation in peacebuilding?
- How can the international community, as well as Syrian actors, promote women's peacebuilding in Syria?

Although most peacebuilding processes occur when war or armed conflict is over, civil society organizations, including women's groups, can promote conflict resolution mechanisms or design projects that aim at reducing violence during ongoing armed conflict. Based on this, peacebuilding in this study is thus defined:

- Measures or activities undertaken to prevent violent conflict, reduce existing violence, promote or be directly involved in peaceful conflict resolution in the midst of ongoing war and violence, or
- Measures and activities meant to prepare for state building (such as preparations for transitional justice or towards engendering the constitution) after the end of violent conflict.

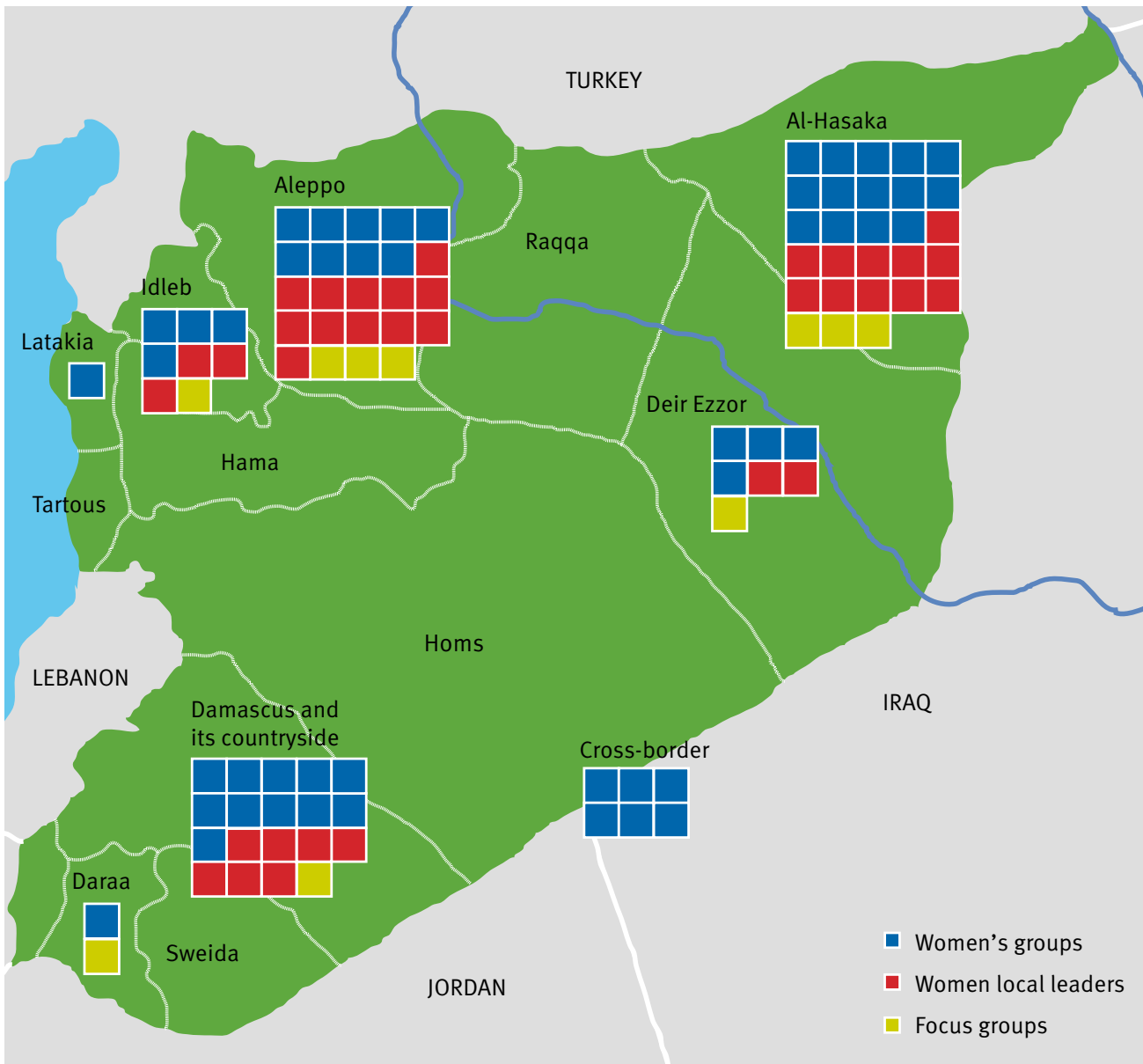
The backbone of this research has been the women activists' own experiences and opinions. This gives the report an inside perspective that otherwise would have been hard to access, thus allowing women's voices to be heard. Furthermore, it is in hope that this study will contribute to a broader understanding of the conflict and civil society's role in Syria.

## Research methods

The aim of the research was to include all women activism in Syria – prominent individuals as well as women's groups<sup>1</sup>. However, due to the difficult security situation in the country, some groups and individual activists either refused to participate or were outside the reach of the research team from the beginning. Fear of repercussions from the regime or armed groups in power, for example, was a major obstacle. Changing security conditions in some areas (such as in Idleb and Deir Ezzor) during the period of time when the data was collected also made updating some of the information difficult.

For all the aforementioned reasons, some examples of peacebuilding work, such as mediation efforts, also had to be omitted in this report because referring to it would put the execution of the work, as well as the lives of the activists organizing it, in danger.

In total, 60 civil society groups were identified out of which 49 were able to cooperate. 47 of these were women's groups, and the remaining two had a major focus on women's issues. Six of the groups had at least part of their



A map of Syria showing where the different parts of the research took place.

management team based outside of Syria, but carried out their activities inside the country and in the refugee areas of neighbouring countries. These are referred to as groups with cross-border activities. Information about the 49 groups were collected through a questionnaire.

In addition to the questionnaire, the research team conducted individual interviews with 35 prominent women leaders and held ten focus group discussions with local women activists across the Syrian territories.

The 35 women activists chosen for the interviews all have substantially impacted their local communities and/or fields and were thus considered leaders within these fields/regions. Several of them were also active in social and/or political affairs in Syria before 2011. All of these women activists were living and working inside Syria when approached by the research team<sup>2</sup>.

The ten focus group discussions each included 8–12 activists of various backgrounds<sup>3</sup>. The focus group discussions

were held at a later stage than the initial information gathering and after most of the interviews and questionnaires had been finalized in order to collect additional information.

The research was carried out from the second half of 2014 until June 2015. The map above shows the geographical areas covered. While some of these areas, most notably Damascus, are still under the control of the Syrian regime, none of the groups and individuals included in this research are affiliated with the regime<sup>4</sup>.

1. Groups founded and led by women. Most of these groups also had an overwhelming majority of women members.
2. Due to constant security threats and harassments by the regime, two of these women activists had to flee the country around the same time as the interviews took place.
3. Two persons that took part in focus groups discussions were also participants of the individual interviews.
4. One group and a few activists interviewed shared that they collaborated with the regime when their activities required it, for example, in humanitarian relief activities and/or negotiations involving the regime's fighting factions or political decision-making bodies. For security reasons, no additional information regarding this can be shared.

# Historical development of women's activism in Syria

The 1950s are generally regarded as the democratic phase in Syria's modern history due to the political and social freedoms the era enjoyed. This atmosphere highly influenced women's activism and lobbying, which resulted in the rise of pioneering groups advocating for women's rights<sup>1</sup>. Some of these emerged as women-only branches of political parties that were otherwise mainly dominated by men, as women did not hold decision-making positions in politics at the time. The focus of the women's groups revolved around women's empowerment and raising their professional and educational skills, in which fighting illiteracy was a major activity. In addition, the state approved the registration of many non-governmental organizations and charities. In 1958, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of the short-lived political union between Syria and Egypt known as the United Arab Republic<sup>2</sup>, imposed the dissolution of political parties. Nevertheless, some of the women's groups affiliated with these parties refused to do so and carried out their activities with no effect on their groups' registration.

In 1971, when Hafez Al Assad seized power, the Al Baath Party was named the state party<sup>3</sup>, and all civil society groups were subsequently listed under the party's unions; women's groups were asked to be listed under the General Women's Union<sup>4</sup> (GWU). No women's organizations were granted registration if not listed in the union, except for a few groups that had close ties with the regime. Some women's groups refused to merge with GWU, such as the Syrian Motherhood and Childhood Association (SMCA) which continued to work regardless of the newly imposed law of registration. At the time, the groups' work consisted of providing skills and empowerment trainings alongside organizing numerous panel discussions on women's issues such as equality and legal reforms. By the late 1980s, the discourse against gender stereotyping began to appear and resulted in the defection of women's organizations from male-dominated political parties<sup>5</sup>. Women's groups advo-

cated feminist ideals by calling for the solidarity and support of working-class and rural women.

During the 1990s, women's groups organized panel discussions on definitions of gender and how society plays a major role in shaping it. Furthermore, the era witnessed numerous campaigns launched against violence against women. In 1995, women's organizations, as well as the vast majority of civil society groups in Syria<sup>6</sup>, participated for the first time in the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW): Action for Equality, Development and Peace convened by the United Nations in Beijing, China<sup>7</sup>. The conference played a huge role in allowing civil society organizations to voice their criticism of state policy and suggest reforms.

With Bashar Al-Assad's inheritance of his father's rule in 2000, the country witnessed a brief celebration of freedom of expression<sup>8</sup> and the establishment of intellectual and political forums. This paved the way for the establishment of small intellectual and elitist women's groups. More issues related to women emerged on the agenda, such as divorce and so-called honour crimes, and how they both affect women, and sit-ins calling for the right of Syrian women to pass their citizenship to their children and celebrating International Women's Day were organized. The regime applied some artificial reforms when beneficial for its rule. For example, in October 2011, Bashar Al-Assad issued the presidential decree number 1<sup>9</sup> which maximized the punishment of so-called honour crimes from five to seven years in prison. However, it did not address the original violation of women's rights itself, but made the regime appear as if it was carrying out reforms to improve the status of women's rights in the country, possibly to boost its international image.

In general, women's rights activism, in comparison with political and other human rights, enjoyed a relative space of freedom. However, and specifically after the assassi-





Women demonstrating in Amouda in northeastern Syria as an attempt to question and break limitations of traditions. To ride a bike as a woman in this area is not considered appropriate.

Photo: Arta.fm Radio

nation of Rafic Harriri<sup>10</sup>, this space began to recede. The regime was under international pressure following the assassination and thus imposed heavy surveillance on women participating in international conferences. Some women were eventually banned from travelling for having voiced criticism against regime policies concerning women's status quo in Syria. Consequently, the absence of social and political freedom, discrimination against women<sup>11</sup>, and later on the war, all contributed heavily to the emergence of women's grassroots lobbying and organizing during 2011 and 2012. Some of these women's groups have continued to develop and are among those participating in this study.

Despite the relative freedom women's activism may seem to have enjoyed under Al-Assad's rule, this disappeared the minute it took on political or human rights dimensions. The regime may have tolerated campaigns to eradicate illiteracy amongst rural women or even campaigns to demand equal citizenship rights for Syrian women, but in reality, it did very little to change the country's various discriminatory laws. This is evident in their continued existence and executive power more than four decades later. Women who were politically active and who exposed human rights violations committed by the regime were met with brutality, similar to the destiny of all human rights activists and opponents to the regime's rule<sup>12</sup>.

Today, women activists working in Syria are faced with multifaceted challenges and dangers. One example is human rights activist, Razan Zeitounah<sup>13</sup>. Due to her activism, the regime imposed a travel ban on her in 2007. After the 2011 uprising, she was constantly threatened and harassed by the regime's security forces and extremist groups due to her pivotal role in documenting human rights violations committed by the regime, the opposition, and Islamist factions against political dissenters and regular citizens. Razan Zeitounah was kidnapped in Eastern Ghouta in December 2014, and her fate, as well as that of her colleagues, remains unknown.

1. In this article in Arabic, Khawla Dunia and Nazer Ghazali list leading women's organizations that were active in the 1950s and 1960s. <http://www.mokarabat.com/rep.nesasy.htm>
2. The union began in 1958 and lasted until 1961, when Syria seceded from it after the 1961 Syrian coup d'état; an uprising by dissatisfied Syrian army officers which resulted in the restoration of the independent Syrian Republic. Egypt continued to be known officially as the "United Arab Republic" until 1971. The president of the union was Gamal Abdel Nasser. <http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/arabunity/2008/02/200852517252821627.html>
3. Article 8 in the 1973 constitution (up until 2012) stated, "The leading party in the society and the state is the Socialist Arab Baath Party. It leads a patriotic and progressive front seeking to unify the resources of the people's masses and place them at the service of the Arab nation's goals." [http://www.law.yale.edu/rcw/rcw/jurisdictions/asw/syrianarabrep/syria\\_constitution.htm](http://www.law.yale.edu/rcw/rcw/jurisdictions/asw/syrianarabrep/syria_constitution.htm) This was not amended until 2012. The article now states that "the political system of the state shall be based on the principle of political pluralism, and exercising power democratically through the ballot box". <http://www.voltairenet.org/article173033.html>
4. According to 33 law article 66 issued in 1975, put by Hafez Al-Assad, no organizations that have similar goals to the Baath Party unions should be established or registered. Women's groups were by default expected to join the GWU. <http://egyptsoft.org/awfonline.net/page/sr/2004/lo.htm>
5. In a 2015 Skype interview with a member of SMCA, she stated that SMCA, for example, defected from the Syrian Communist Party in 1986 and changed its group's name to Syrian Woman's Association (SWA) as a protest of the gender stereotyping roles of women as only mothers and child-bearers.
6. For example Musawat (Equality), Women's Islamic Assembly, Syrian Women's Association and Islamic Assembly.
7. <http://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/about>
8. Immediately after Assad took office, he shut down the Mezzeh prison and declared wide-ranging amnesty, releasing hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political prisoners, to name but one. However, within a year he enforced security crackdowns, for example, against the formation of political coalitions like the Damascus Spring of September 2000. Ever since, Syria has returned to the de facto police state enforced by Hafez Al-Assad, with crackdowns on dissents and prohibition of any civil, political or cultural initiatives. <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=48516>
9. In the first presidential decree (1) in 2011, Bashar Al-Assad amended article 548 from the penal code regarding prison sentences for those who commit "honour crimes". <http://www.voltairenet.org/article168085.html>
10. On 14 February, 2005, Rafic Hariri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, was killed along with 21 others in an explosion in Beirut. His death had profound implications on Lebanon, paving the way for mass demonstrations and the withdrawal of Syrian troops after 29 years in the country. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13978635>
11. The study will discuss in later sections how women face various forms of discrimination which affects their civil, as well as their political, activism.
12. As, for example, described by Hiba Al-Dabagh in her book *Five Minutes Only* (1995) which recounts her experience of imprisonment between 1982 and 1990, <http://www.shrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/07/5minonly.pdf>. Similarly, in her documentary novel *Negative*, Rosa Yassin Hassan presents documented narratives of women activists imprisoned during Hafez Al-Assad rule. <https://www.hayfestival.com/artist.aspx?artistid=1868&skinid=6&localesetting=en-GB>
13. Razan Zeitounah is one of the most notable human rights lawyers in Syria. In 2005, she established the Syrian Human Rights Information Link (SHRIL), through which she reported about human rights violations in Syria. Razan Zeitounah was also an active member of the Committee to Support Families of Political Prisoners in Syria. In December 2013, Zeitounah, along with her husband Wael Hamada, and her two colleagues, Samira Al-Khalil and Nazem Hamadi, from Violation Documentation Center (VDC) were kidnapped by armed extremist groups controlling the Ghouta suburbs of Damascus. The VDC was co-founded by Razan Zeitounah in 2011 during the uprising. <http://www.rawinwar.org/content/view/161/>

# General characteristics of women’s groups

► This chapter examines the data generated from the 49 women’s group questionnaires and the ten focus group discussions. To give a better picture of the terms under which women activists in Syria are currently organized, this chapter lists some basic characteristics of the women’s groups as well as the composition of their members.

## Geographical spread

As shown in Figure 1, the Al-Hasaka governorate hosts the largest number of women’s groups with 14 out of 49. The majority of these, six groups, are located in Al-Qamishli, followed by five in Amouda. Aleppo governorate has the second largest amount with nine of the 49 groups, most of which are located in Afrin, followed by Aleppo city. Damascus city and women’s groups operating both inside Syria and across borders host the same share with six groups each, while Latakia and Daraa only accounted for one group each.

When analyzing the geographical spread according to the population in each governorate<sup>1</sup>, it is clear how violence plays a pivotal role in the increase or decline of women’s groups. Al-Hasaka, for example, is only the fourth largest governorate in terms of population among the areas covered, yet it hosts the highest number of women’s groups. This can be attributed to the better safety and security conditions in Al-Hasaka, partly because Al-Hasaka is ex-

cluded from the regime’s airstrikes and bombardment<sup>2</sup>. Another reason may be that Kurds constitute the majority of the population in Al-Hasaka, and Kurdish women were politically active before 2011, mainly due to the decimation practiced against them by the Syrian regime.

Similarly, Afrin<sup>3</sup>, a suburb in Aleppo’s northern countryside that also has a Kurd majority, hosts four out of the nine women groups located in the Aleppo governorate, while Aleppo city, although with a higher population than Afrin, only hosts three groups. However, Aleppo city is under the control of various armed factions and is thereby subjected to both the regime’s shelling and barrel bombs as well as the overt control of armed groups and warlords. Deir Ezzor’s low emergence of women groups (three out of 49) can be attributed to the control of the area by IS<sup>4</sup> and the regime (a few neighbourhoods in the city).

Damascus city and Latakia governorates are solely under the control of the Syrian regime, which poses a direct threat to any emerging autonomous civil society organizations, women’s groups included<sup>5</sup>. This explains why Damascus city is only third in terms of the number of women’s groups it hosts (six groups out of 49) despite the city’s higher population than Al-Hasaka<sup>6</sup>.

It is worth noting that as many as ten of the 14 women’s groups in Al-Hasaka are involved in peacebuilding activities. Chapter Four details how stable security conditions are a contributing factor here as well.



Women at a training on journalism in Aleppo. Photo: Zaina Erhaim

Figure 1: Geographical distribution of women’s groups

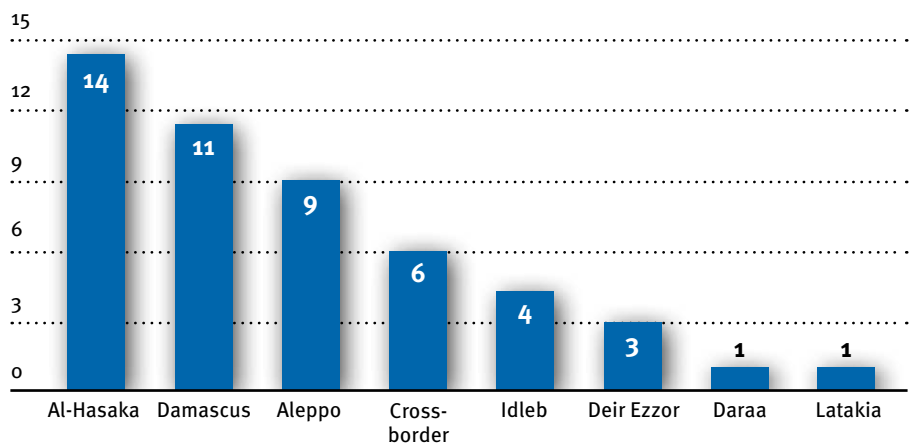
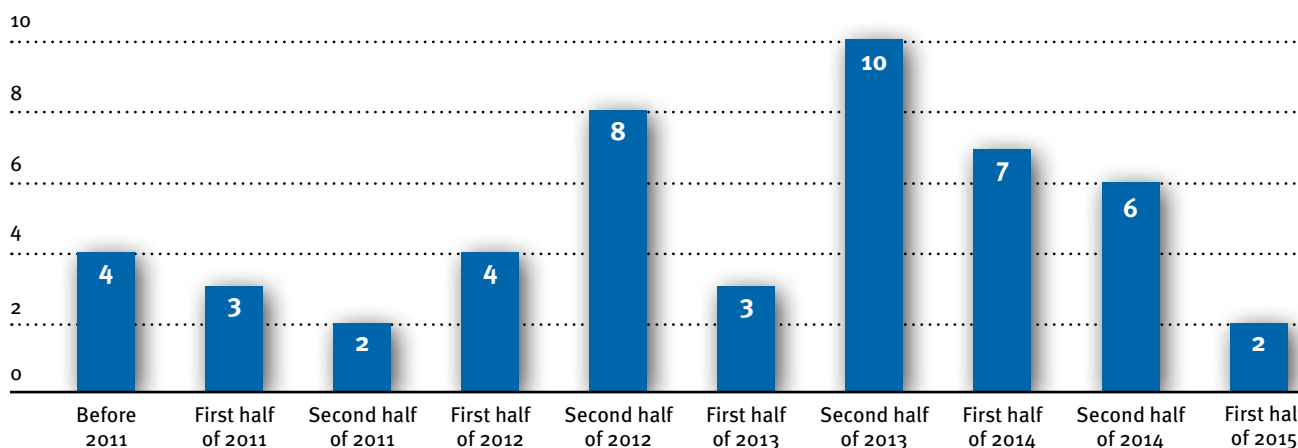


Figure 2: Chronology of establishment of women's groups



## Time of establishment

Only four of the groups were established previous to the 2011 uprising, two located in Al-Hasaka and two in Damascus city.

These groups have a long history and much experience in addressing political and societal injustices imposed upon Syrian women. Even before the uprising, they had been involved in advocacy campaigns against the Syrian government in regard to the legal discrimination of women. They are now all involved in peacebuilding, although they also expressed having experienced many security difficulties while carrying out their activities and that some of the activities must be held in secret.

The significant rise in the number of women's groups began in 2012 with the establishment of 11 groups in just one year. This can be connected to the parallel defeat of the Syrian regime's forces to opposition groups. For example, four groups were established in Damascus for the first time since the conflict outbreak, similarly in Daraa. The groups' focus was primarily various forms of emergency aid, but seems to gradually have become more women's-rights specific, such as empowering women on the economic and educational levels, documenting human rights violations – specifically those entailing women – and raising awareness of gender-based violence (GBV). Peacebuilding activities have also been observed in both Damascus and Al-Hasaka governorates.

2013 and 2014 were flourishing years for Syrian women's groups with 14 new groups established in each year. 2013 also marked the geographical expansion of women's groups across Idleb, Aleppo and Deir Ezzor governorates for the first time since the 2011 uprising. The regime continued to lose control over various towns and cities, and a vacuum in social and health services was noticeable after its withdrawal. The regime also systematically bombed state institutions and bodies days after its defeat. This highly contributed to the emergence of alternative groups providing services to residents, with women's groups being some of them.

Another factor that possibly contributed to the founding of these new groups is that most local and international non-governmental organizations favour employing men in Syria over women due to the latter's limitation of movement across cities. This indirect policy of women's exclusion could explain the women's motivation in organizing their own groups.

Of all the governorates covered in this study, Deir Ezzor is the only one that is under IS control<sup>7</sup>. All of the women's groups there were established before IS took control of the governorate and part of its city in mid-2014. Many of the civil society organizations established in the area gradually vanished due to security concerns after IS took power. The activities of the two women's groups founded in 2013 in Deir Ezzor consisted of the schooling of children and empowering women with handcraft skills for them to generate an income. The groups also hosted a "women's dialogue club" and held literacy workshops for women. When IS took control of the area, they were only allowed to continue with some of their activities, such as child education.

In 2014, four women's groups emerged for the first time in four cities in the Damascus suburbs (Darayya, Douma, Harastah and Moadamiya). That so many emerged there in one year reflects the difficult conditions imposed by the regime's blockade of all of these cities. In addition, the increased militarization and male dominance of the cities' urban spaces affect the movement of women and their participation in the public space. During the 2011 uprising, women in Douma and Darayya, for instance, were highly active in arranging almost daily women-only protests<sup>8</sup> and organizing themselves in grassroots cells to distribute aid to the families of the detainees and those killed in the area<sup>9</sup>. Through these types of direct actions, women became leaders in their communities<sup>10</sup>. However, when radical groups gradually took control of these regions, women were faced with dramatically decreased possibilities to participate in social affairs. Compared to 2011 and 2012, women now face great challenges in

remaining active. This has prompted them to follow a different route and create their own safe spaces, like women’s groups, to address the needs generated from such a radically changed situation.

In 2014, three more women’s groups in Aleppo and Al-Hasaka and one in Deir Ezzor were founded.

Although the research only includes half of 2015, there appears to be a decrease in the establishment of women’s groups this year, with only two emerging, both located in the northern countryside of Aleppo. Given that the groups were only recently founded, their activities are still few. One group aims to document violations against women perpetrated by all the warring parties and provides shelter for women survivors of war, while the other focuses on advocating children’s and women’s rights and implementing literacy campaigns.



Participants in a gender workshop in the countryside of Aleppo. On the wall is a quote by Simone de Beauvoir. It says, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”. Photo: Badael Foundation

## Age dynamics and group size

A majority of the women’s groups members are between 31 and 50 years old (see Figure 3). This marks quite a difference compared to civil society organizations (CSOs) in Syria in general, where research shows that 74 percent of the members are between 16 and 30, a much younger average<sup>11</sup>. Within the women’s groups, members between 16 and 30 only constitute 42 percent. Similarly, CSOs in general only have 8 percent of members between the ages of 41 and 50, although it is the second largest age group within the women’s groups. Possible reasons for these distinctive differences are further discussed in Chapter Four under *Individual Efforts*.

When looking at administrative staff, members and volunteers (hence, all included in the term “members”),

what stands out is that the women’s groups are mostly relatively small in size<sup>12</sup>. 18 groups have a maximum of 16 members, and 17 groups have between 17 and 32, making the average group size 20. The lowest number was found in one group in a Damascus suburb (two members), while the maximum number (200 members) was held by one group in Daraa (see Figure 4).

Some of the women’s groups stated that having a small number of staff negatively affected their work and its sustainability. Some attributed these low numbers to a lack of funding, others to the dangers and threats imposed by war which forces people to flee the country.

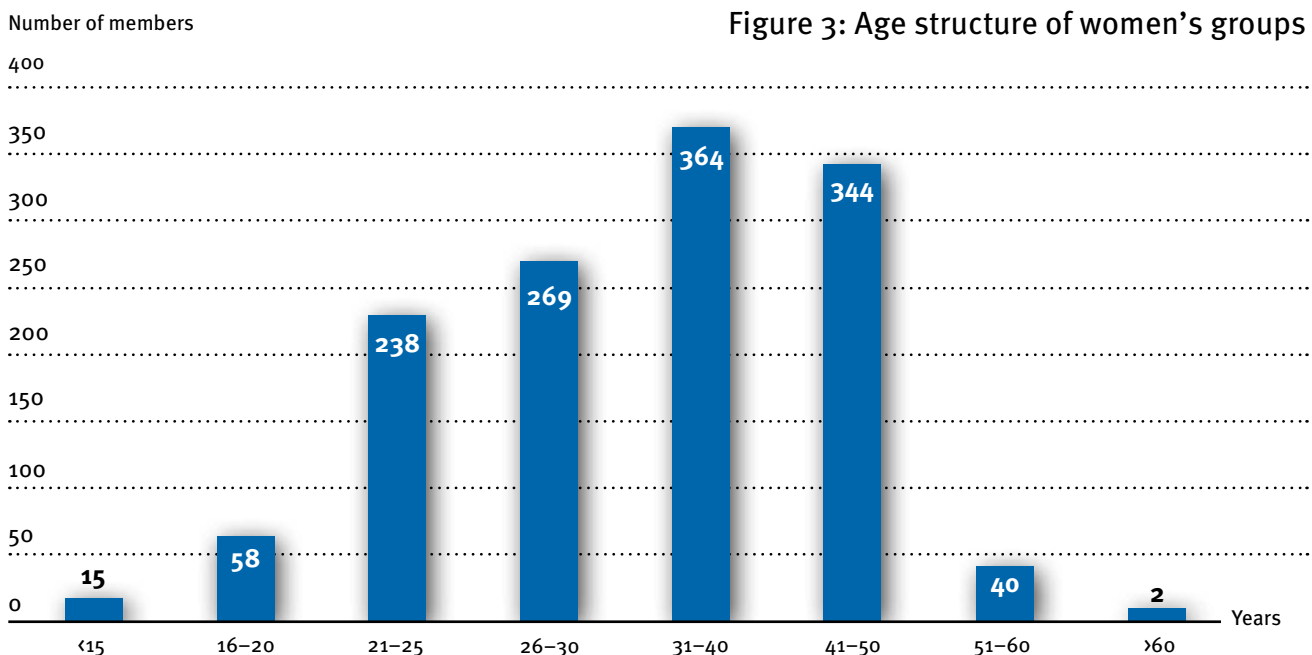


Figure 3: Age structure of women’s groups



# Perspectives and priorities

- ▶ *Perceptions of Peacebuilding* is based on all the data generated for the purpose of this research, except for 17 of the questionnaire groups that did not answer the later added questions on the groups' understanding of peacebuilding. The missing data from these 17 groups did not result in any changes to the geographical areas covered, as 60–100% of the groups in each respective area answered the additional questions on peacebuilding, except for in Idlib where only one group out of four did.
- ▶ *Peacebuilding Priorities* uses the data from the individual interviews.

## Perceptions of peacebuilding

Almost all the women activists defined peacebuilding in terms of justice, equal rights for all citizens and peaceful coexistence. While many identified safety and the immediate cease to the fighting in the country as the most essential prerequisites for any practical understanding of peace and peacebuilding, it was frequently highlighted that these alone could not build lasting peace in Syria.

The majority of the activists indicated or explicitly stated that they understood peacebuilding as a process that starts with an immediate, unconditional ceasefire and includes negotiations to reach a political solution that will result in justice and equal rights for all Syrian citizens. Many also emphasized that this process would be long and accumulative. Peacebuilding is seen as an opportunity to rebuild the country in a desired form. It was repeatedly highlighted that the future Syria should be pluralistic, democratic, and free from all forms of oppression and discrimination. A third of the women leaders interviewed said they have become peacebuilders either because they themselves had suffered from various inequalities (because they are women or belong to certain ethnic groups) or because they felt they needed to react against what they viewed as oppression in their country. The discrimination resulting from restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language strictly enforced in education and publications in Syria is one example that was mentioned<sup>1</sup>. One of the Kurdish women activists told of how the school where she used to teach gave her strict instructions to speak Arabic to her students, despite that it was neither her nor the students' mother tongue and that it made the students struggle to understand the lessons.

In addition to accountability and justice, some women

activists added that transparency and learning the truth about what has happened are equally essential in building lasting peace in Syria. Peacebuilding was clearly understood to be in the interest of all Syrians, as its success requires equal citizenship, nonviolent conflict resolution mechanisms and healthy relationships between the different groups of society. Therefore, all Syrians are expected and invited to take part.

The activists also agreed that peacebuilding is not an exclusively political endeavour. Most activists saw a direct link between a robust civil society and peacebuilding in Syria. Civil society should be tasked with spreading awareness of the virtues of peace or the culture of nonviolence and conflict resolution. The women also stated that in peacebuilding, a strong vibrant civil society was the only true representative of the people, as political parties and entities as well as the international community would only seek to pursue their own narrow interests and thus perpetuate the armed conflict.

## Why peacebuilding?

The women activists said peacebuilding gave them agency in the middle of the ongoing violence. A majority of them defined this agency in terms of mitigating violence and limiting the bloodshed. While some saw their role as connected to their positions as mothers who must safeguard the future of their children or as devout believers who felt obliged to defend their religion (Islam) from being misrepresented and portrayed as violent and intolerant<sup>2</sup>, more than half of the activists explained their agenda as simply being part of society and having a responsibility towards others.

A third of the participants in the individual interviews said they chose to become peacebuilders because of the worsening situation in the country and/or the problems local communities face because of it. 25 percent of them pointed out that years of violence and fighting have not only proved that military options are futile, but also have diverted the populist revolution from its quest for freedom and justice into an endless cycle of violence and destruction. The women activists said they felt obliged to step in and oppose this state of chaos and militarization before they or any other human rights and civil society activists could resume their activism effectively.

Women activists living in areas largely populated by people with different backgrounds specifically mentioned the

increased tensions between various ethnic and religious groups as a reason for why they felt obliged to step in and advocate peaceful solutions.

In addition, working with peacebuilding was also seen as an opportunity to represent the demands of the Syrian people and to bring about change. Although not being within the scope of this study's definition of peacebuilding<sup>3</sup>, the women activists unequivocally emphasized **economic empowerment** as example of peacebuilding activities that would effectively lead to this change. This was seen as key for enabling women to become active in the local, as well as the national, context. Given that the war has led to many men being killed, having disappeared or else joining the fighting, women who used to be confined to domestic life have suddenly become in charge of their families' survival and wellbeing. As a result, reaching out to these distressed women and helping them face their new financial challenges through vocational training and education has been an important task for many women's groups and a good starting point from which to further develop their activism.

A substantial number of activists connected working on economic empowerment directly to peacebuilding, arguing that economic independence will enhance women's self-confidence and produce women who have opinions of their own. This will then make them less likely to put up with societal and family discrimination against them or to stand by while their sons join the battlefields<sup>4</sup>. It was also mentioned that having an income is important for women to be able to become activists. When holding a job, women who otherwise are confined to domestic life become exposed to the world outside their home and the existence of alternative ways of living. In addition, contributing financially to their family has a positive impact on their status among family members as well as in society and can help them overcome others' objections against their activism. Underlining the high level of importance attributed to financial independence is that regardless of whether or not economic empowerment was one of the primary goals with their activism, half of the women's groups carry out these types of activities.

Another example of local peacebuilding frequently mentioned was activities to **raise societal awareness on issues**

**like human rights and equal citizenship.** The women activists argued that an increased awareness will gradually encourage more women to become involved in public affairs. It will also encourage society to accept and support women's rights and public roles. As put by Aleppo activists, "women do not participate in peacebuilding because they do not know their rights or the great effects their efforts could have". They attributed the emergence of many women's groups towards the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014 to the retreat of ideas promoting armament and more people becoming aware of the importance of working on peacebuilding.

The women activists in Deir Ezzor told about their peacebuilding efforts to raise awareness against the Islamic State's (IS) recruitment of children and men<sup>5</sup>. Disappointment and frustration were evident when they described how the security situation in their region has massively reduced the types of activism they can be involved in. Over the past couple of years their lives have become a struggle to survive the regime's bombardment and IS, and they have had to combat recruitment from the confinement of their homes. However, the activists firmly believed that they could make a difference and that their activism will have a snowball effect.

Almost all of the women activists agreed that peacebuilding promotes and guarantees coexistence because it offers nonviolent ways to resolve conflict. Here, transitional justice tools were mentioned many times: for example, those who have been forced to leave their homes or the country should be able to return and be compensated, those who have committed crimes against or caused harm to the Syrian people should be held accountable, and truth-finding missions should be formed. Justice and the rule of law were seen as key to a "safe society where families can raise their children without grudges", as one activist put it.

While transitional justice could be the tool to reconcile the grievances of the past and the present, the activists also viewed peacebuilding as a chance to build a culture of diversity and build relationships where the "interests [of the citizens] intersected and not [become] conflicted". Thus, equal citizenship would be crucial for this coexistence to be peaceful and lasting.



*In places in Syria where public services no longer function unarmed volunteers, known as the White Helmets, risk their lives to help people in need. Two women teams with a total of 56 volunteers have been established in Aleppo and Idlib.*

*Photo: White Helmets  
www.whitehelmets.org*

## Different titles and negative attitudes

Despite their overall positive attitudes towards peacebuilding, five interviewees said they did not think they worked within that field. However, the interviews revealed that at least three of them had participated in peacebuilding efforts. One played an essential role in a campaign against the display and use of small arms<sup>6</sup>, while another said that she had used her social status and relationships to resolve a conflict between an armed group and a medical centre. The third had co-founded a women's group to capacitate women and encourage them to adopt methods of nonviolence in the uprising against the regime.

These stories suggest that the activists had quite a narrow definition of what peacebuilding consists of or maybe lacked the knowledge to make any definition at all. This might also be the reason why a few focus group discussions and group questionnaires revealed a disagreement with the majority's opinion that there is an urgent need for peacebuilding in Syria. These women activists argued that there are several **other priorities that must precede** any peacebuilding work, for instance, just being able to survive. In Aleppo, the women activists said making a living and economic empowerment wherever circumstances allow it were far more urgent than peacebuilding. Activists from a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) at the Syrian border almost forcefully pointed out that the realities of living there had deprived them of any possibilities of having a decent life and had left them struggling to make ends meet on a daily basis. Therefore, people were not going to "waste their time" even talking about peacebuilding.

In Damascus, those who took peacebuilding off their priority list stated that stopping the fighting and unifying the opposition were more important than learning about peacebuilding. Their top mission was to care for the families of the tens of people that were killed on a daily basis. Similarly, in Daraa and Lattakia, activists said society did not believe in peacebuilding, and the daily realities of war made stopping the violence the utmost priority.

It was not only the need to focus on other issues that was put forward, but also that the **obstacles of working on peacebuilding were too great**. In Aleppo, Damascus and Deir Ezzor jointly, activists said that the security situation made it almost impossible to perform any peacebuilding activities, as those who do so risk their lives. None of the warring parties will tolerate this kind of activism. In such contexts, reconciliation and forgiveness were referred to as being "a red line". In addition, the women activists said they had security and safety concerns when it came to travelling out of Syria to attend peacebuilding trainings and workshops<sup>7</sup>. Women's groups in Idlib and Aleppo reported facing difficulties when trying to find volunteers, activists or women staff that believed in peacebuilding and were thus willing to work with these types of activities.

Other negative stances against peacebuilding came from activists who were **critical of the peacebuilding training** they had attended, finding them to be ineffective<sup>8</sup> and "utopian". Another group with cross-border activities highlighted that peacebuilding in Syria should not be built on an imported, pre-made model, but **needed a tai-**

**lored approach** that took into consideration the unique context of the Syrian situation, including the differences in the situations among the regions across the country.

Many groups either working in the regime-controlled areas or in other regions with intense fighting, most notably Aleppo, argued that peacebuilding was viewed as **an act of betrayal** against all of those who had been killed, detained, displaced or in other ways, victimized by the war. "The scale of violence by the regime in the besieged areas makes it morally wrong to talk about peacebuilding with the families of the victims", stated one group in Damascus. Aleppo activists also spoke of peacebuilding as "an unjust national reconciliation" that would not bring about justice or avenge the victims, and thus, to get involved in it would mean betraying the uprising against the regime.

It was also pointed out that civil society activists may hesitate or refrain from getting involved due to what some of the activists saw as a worrying degree of corruption and commercialization of current peacebuilding activities.

However, despite the critique voiced against peacebuilding, most of the skeptical women activists and groups actually carried out work that falls under this category. For example, the IDP camp activists who argued that peacebuilding was less urgent, had participated in the designing and implementation of a successful campaign against the display and use of weapons in the camp.

Similarly, another group that was very vocal about its disapproval of peacebuilding said they sent delegations of their senior members with different backgrounds to pay their respects at funerals. The delegations were also tasked with evaluating the financial situation of the family of the deceased, and support was provided if necessary. This could be in the form of, for example, vocational training for women who had lost their male breadwinners and had to care for their families, or it could be to provide funding for them to start their own micro project. These were not considered by the group to be peacebuilding activities, even though they described them as being crucial for maintaining Syrian social cohesion.

A third example is a group that voiced doubts about now being the right time to work on peacebuilding, but at the same time, stated that their relief distribution was available for all displaced families who had come to their area, regardless of their background. The group also added that they used their awareness-raising activities on, for example, health care, which were usually attended by people from various backgrounds, to send positive subliminal messages of social integration and solidarity.

As mentioned earlier, the discrepancy between theory and practise among the women activists can, to a large extent, be attributed to a not-so-comprehensive view of what peacebuilding entails, rather than a negative attitude towards peacebuilding as it is defined by this study. On the other hand, the women activists rarely cared about labelling their activities, but rather were responding to what they felt was needed in their local contexts.



# Peacebuilding priorities

When stating what should be prioritized in peacebuilding in Syria today, the women activists listed actions that can be divided into two categories: chronological steps concerning issues like ceasefires, negotiations, and transitional justice, and processes addressing the crisis caused by the ongoing fighting and rebuilding of Syria.

## Chronological steps

### 1. Stopping the bloodshed

An unconditional cease to the ongoing fighting in Syria. Currently, all peace and state-building activities have been paused because of the ongoing violence. Many of the women activists argued that stopping the war requires that the international community have the political will and commitment to find a political solution. In addition, funding from outside governments and other actors supporting the fighters inside Syria must stop.

Once the bloodshed has stopped, the process of negotiation can begin.

### 2. Holding inclusive negotiations

These negotiations should include all Syrian conflicting and non-conflicting parties, free from the interference of any regional or international agendas in favour of a particular warring party, and be built in an atmosphere of trust and commitment to reaching a peaceful solution. Furthermore, a considerable number of women activists stated that the international community must be tasked with making these negotiations possible. That is, to stop the aforementioned outside support to the different warring parties and put pressure on these parties to participate in negotiations. Some of the activists with substantial political experience emphasized that future negotiations should be based on the Geneva 1 Communiqué<sup>9</sup> because this has already received international consensus.

Women who are influential agents themselves and not mere tokens of the various parties should be present at the negotiation table. The international community must impose a women's quota on the negotiating parties. In addition, the negotiations should include representatives of civil society who will be independent from the negotiating political powers and can thus represent the interests of the people.

A number of the women activists also highlighted that the negotiations would benefit from the contributions of local leaders and peacebuilders who have emerged and been successful in their communities during the conflict. Also, local and regional peace talks and settlements can be launched simultaneously in different parts of the country.

### 3. New social contract, justice & reconciliation

For the peace process to be successful, negotiations must result in a so-called new social contract in Syria. This means amending the constitution as well as the laws, including the Syrian personal status laws, to rid them from discrimination so they clearly guarantee equal rights for individuals from all social, ethnic and religious groups, re-

gardless of their gender. Furthermore, women's human rights should be explicitly adopted and mechanisms put in place to make sure that these rights are implemented.

The women activists also stressed that the new contract should pave the way for a democratic and pluralistic form of governance and guarantee separation of powers and accountability. Some of them favoured a decentralized form of governance where geographical regions enjoy a relative degree of autonomy, while others wanted a focus on equal citizenship and unity. This not to suggest that decentralization and equal citizenship were thought of as being mutually exclusive, but merely how they choose to describe the system they preferred in a new constitution. Those who voiced support for a decentralized system tended to come from geographical regions and/or Syrian groups that have suffered significantly from decades of state discrimination.

In addition to stopping the direct violence in the country, other forms of structural and cultural violence should be handled early on in the peace negotiations. Unless the peace settlement addresses the injustices and human rights violations of the current conflict as well as those of the past, the agreement itself will be in jeopardy. Detainees should be released and the fate of those kidnapped or forced to disappear be made known. As stated before, accountability is fundamental, and no perpetrator should have impunity. The activists repeatedly proposed the use of tools and mechanisms of transitional justice (as in truth-finding missions, the return of the displaced, and reparations) as the way forward to restore citizens' dignity and to reconcile the country with its past<sup>10</sup>.

## Processes of crisis handling & rebuilding

As most of the women activists approached peacebuilding as a long-term and accumulative endeavour, they similarly identified long-term and accumulative processes that need to start immediately and continue in parallel with the steps detailed above and beyond.

### 1. Humanitarian aid

Most urgent is responding to the dire humanitarian crisis inside Syria and in the refugee camps and areas in neighbouring countries. The Syrian state (assuming that there would be one that was representative of the Syrian people and lived up to its civic responsibilities<sup>11</sup>) and the international community have responsibilities to step up to, with over 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance<sup>12</sup>.

### 2. Building educational systems

Responding to the aggravating educational crisis is crucial. Displacement and the armed conflict have left millions of children with very little to no basic education, making them an easy target for recruiters from the different fighting groups.

### 3. Activating and strengthening civil society

A strong, active civil society is imperative for the success of any peacebuilding in Syria, and therefore, Syrian civil society needs to receive more attention from all stakeholders,



*According to activists from Aleppo, Damascus and Deir Ezzor the security situation in their regions make it almost impossible to perform any peacebuilding activities. Those who still try risk their lives, because none of the warring parties tolerates this kind of activism. The picture shows citizens of Aleppo fleeing from a barrel bomb attack by the regime.*

*Photo: Baraa Al Halabi*

both national and international. Civil society, the women activists reasoned, will contribute not only to the peace-making procedures and processes in the national negotiations and on the ground in the local communities, but also to long-term peacebuilding activities like campaigning to amend discriminatory laws and holding future local and national authorities accountable to the people. Some highlighted that once the armed conflict stops, a strong functioning civil society urgently needs to be put in place to support the country in its transition.

#### **4. Capacity-building and involvement**

For women to be able to assume their role in peacebuilding and have a positive impact within it, they need to receive training and be taken into the peacebuilding process. Having strong effective women involved in the negotiation process as well as in all subsequent state-building processes is indispensable to both guaranteeing and guarding women's rights in future Syria. For this participation to be fruitful, the participating women should

be empowered, supported and aptly capacitated. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and Syrian civil society are both tasked with organizing and/or sponsoring training and capacity-building opportunities for those women, and the women themselves are urged to seek such opportunities, request them when absent, and tailor them to their needs. In addition, women in general need to be educated on peacebuilding and its processes. Syrian women activists and politicians are urged to reach out to other women, learn about their needs, and translate this knowledge to programmes on the ground. Technical and financial support from INGOs and Syrian civil society is indispensable here. This, many of the women activists argued, is integral to the process of rehabilitating the whole society to allow for the development of a new culture of citizenship and conflict resolution.

#### **5. Raising societal awareness**

For this culture to develop, an extensive process of raising societal awareness and knowledge of peacebuilding is

needed. Here, the role of civil society is seen as most essential for creating and advancing this culture. Civil society is also tasked with designing and implementing awareness-raising activities while seeking technical and financial support from INGOs when needed. Also, the stronger it becomes, the more effective and supported civil society itself will be. The women activists argued that as Syrian citizens in the past have had very little knowledge of human rights, politics, and the public affairs made available to them, spreading political awareness and knowledge on the role and importance of active citizenship will be mandatory to create and maintain an environment conducive to peace in the country.

Raising societal awareness also includes building trust between the citizens and their government as well as building trust between the citizens themselves, and this could be a chance for the political parties to regain the people's confidence. The women activists repeatedly pointed out that the regime's tight security control and oppression against citizens in the past decades have left people in fear, not only of their government, but also of their fellow citizens, and that before 2011 most Syrian citizens believed they had no agency or voice of their own. Therefore, changing this will be the most central (although complicated and time-consuming) process in order to build and maintain peace in the country.

This was also seen as an opportunity to find what activists call the "unifying values" of the Syrians. They stated that concepts like nationalism no longer appeal to people, and that it is time to rebuild the Syrian state as a political entity that treats all of its citizens equally. "We must", the activists argued, "admit that other forms of radicalism besides religious ones are present in Syria and that not only the conflicting groups, but also groups of regular citizens are becoming ideologically radical in their rejection of each other". Society must be made aware of the scale of damage this can bring to the country and its inhabitants in the short term as well as in the long term.

## 6. Political participation of women a must

It is not just in peace negotiations and state-building that women need to be involved, but in all political and decision-making processes in Syria. "Politics is defining our future now, and lack of women's participation is very likely to result in the negligence of women's rights!" the activists stated. They believed that women who intend to take part in political groups should be experienced, have a "strong character", for example, not be afraid to voice their opinions, and possess negotiation skills as well as in-depth knowledge of the dynamics of Syrian politics. They also stressed that these women should already be politically active or involved in other types of activism, as this would help them represent the interests of the people, as opposed to those of the warlords.

To achieve this crucial inclusion of women and urge the political entities to capacitate their women members, the women activists argued for imposing a quota on all political bodies and processes. The current regime as well as the various political opposition groups they called "unreliable", "discriminative", and "elitist", and only having women

representatives hold "decorative positions" without any effective role in decision-making processes. Women activists from Damascus and Al-Hasaka who used to be active during Hafez Al-Assad's rule, stated that similar to how the regime had "forever waged a battle against [them]", the opposition groups could not be any more explicit in their "negligence of women's demands and rights".

To guarantee that Syria eventually reaches the point where enough women are qualified and influential, a women's quota is therefore invaluable. Some women activists, most notably in Damascus, also added that this tactic was part of a long-term strategy to challenge what they called the outrageous amount of discrimination against women.

Mentioning other ways to support women in politics, the activists emphasized the importance of women solidarity as political action. This could be expressed in different ways, for example, through advocacy campaigns that highlight the achievements and strengths of women politicians or fundraising activities to help women gain leadership skills so they have the means to pursue this potential. Some activists also stressed how important it is for women to communicate their demands to women politicians and keep them updated with documentation of the violations against women taking place in and outside of Syria. The activists largely expected all women in politics to actively fight for gender equality.

1. For further background information on this issue. [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1109webwcover\\_o.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1109webwcover_o.pdf)

2. These were mostly activists from women's groups in Aleppo and Deir Ezzor who sometimes held Quran teachings or Islamic studies courses. Many women activists explicitly stated that they sought to teach the true principles of religion as being tolerance and kindness, and use this knowledge to oppose the terror spread by radical Islamic factions.

3. See definition in Introduction. These differences in views on what can be considered as peacebuilding is further discussed under *Different titles and negative attitudes*.

4. The women activists seemed to agree that all Syrian women were inclined to choose peace over war, and only a minority of opinions allowed room for the idea that at least some women can be as militant as men. Only one group told that they actively targeted women who supported the fighters, with peacebuilding activities.

5. These activities are further described in Chapter Four, *Examples of Peacebuilding*.

6. Also further described in Chapter Four.

7. The women activists living in regime-controlled areas said they mostly feared detention by the regime, while those living in northern regions like Aleppo and Al-Hasaka said they had major safety concerns when it came to crossing the northern Syrian border.

8. One group added that sometimes the training proved to be pointless later on, as the groups participating did not stay in touch or coordinate with each other afterwards.

9. Statement issued after the Geneva-1 meeting, held in June 2012. The meeting was called by the UN Peace Envoy Lakdar Brahimi. 14 foreign ministers and heads of intergovernmental organizations attended. <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf>

10. This not to be confused with the current Ministry of Reconciliation established in 2012 and run by the regime. Based on Badael's field researchers' daily encounters with Syrian civil society, a vast majority of Syrian activists are cynical about the Ministry and its proposed mission of reconciliation. The regime putting its claim on the concept of reconciliation has contributed to the negative attitude towards peacebuilding and reconciliation among grassroots activists in Syria because the regime is considered to be the main perpetrator of the current crisis.

11. The activists did point out that this idealistic proposal was problematic given that state institutions are being exploited by the Syrian regime to oppress people. Therefore, the state is currently the primary reason behind the humanitarian crisis.

12. <http://www.unocha.org/syria>

# Collective and individual efforts in peacebuilding

- ▶ *Collective Activism* presents an analysis of the data from the questionnaires of the 28 groups working on peacebuilding<sup>1</sup>.
- ▶ *Individual Efforts* uses information from the individual interviews, as well as from the focus group discussions.
- ▶ For *Examples of Peacebuilding Activities* all the generated data was used to identify potential example stories. Additional research was then conducted to gather more information about the projects.

## Collective activism

### Geographical distribution

28 of the 49 women’s groups researched are involved in peacebuilding activities. The groups are spread over the geographical areas covered, as shown in Figure 5.

The largest proportion was found in Al-Hasaka, where ten out of 14 women’s groups were involved in peacebuilding. Such a high rate of involvement can be attributed to several factors, including the relatively stable security situation in the region and a functional environment for civil work. In addition, due to historical disputes between different groups of society and decades of state discrimination against some of these groups, the region, which has a diverse population, is at risk of new conflicts. As civil society organizations are aware of this fact, their focus on the importance of civil peace, coexistence and reconciliation has also increased. In Damascus and its countryside, eight out of eleven women’s groups<sup>2</sup> worked on peacebuilding. Here, the relatively high level of involve-

ment can be explained by Damascus having several more established women activist groups than in other regions. Many women’s organizations are centered in Damascus, and although the majority of them have emerged after 2011, their founders and activists are veterans who have been active long before the uprising. In addition, because it is the capital, Damascus enjoys much religious, ethnic and political diversity. Similar to Al-Hasaka, this diversity, when combined with the scale of the violence and the oppression by the regime, has prompted many women activists to be proactive and implement projects promoting peaceful coexistence or else respond with peacebuilding initiatives whenever there are suspicions of potential violence.

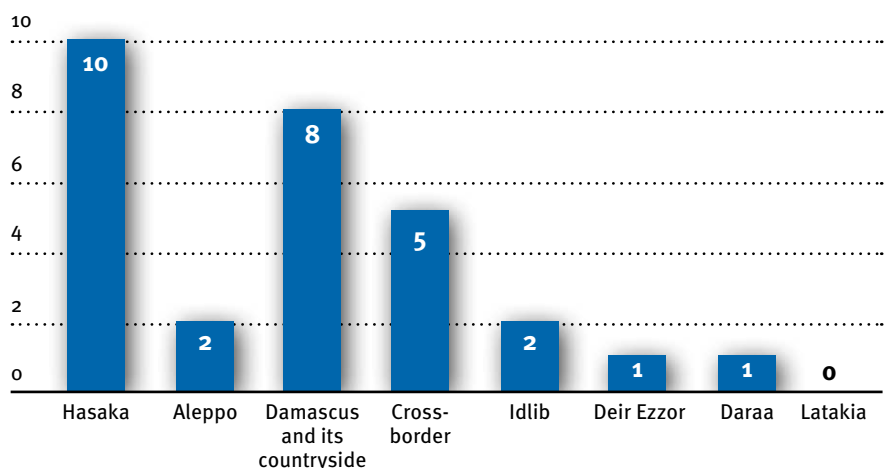
The majority of peacebuilding activities of the groups in this region have targeted the countryside, especially Eastern Ghouta, which has long been out of the regime’s control. The women activists said that in the first years after the uprising they were respected in Ghouta and enjoyed a relatively good level of communication and access to negotiations with the armed factions there, most notably the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Occasionally, these armed factions even facilitated the implementation of women activists’ projects. However, the situation changed dramatically when Jayesh al-Islam<sup>3</sup> (Army of Islam) took power.

In Aleppo, only two out of six women’s groups carried out peacebuilding activities. The majority of the remaining groups focused on economic empowerment to improve the wellbeing of the women they targeted<sup>4</sup>. The spread of various armed forces in Aleppo and its countryside is one reason for this poor involvement, as most of these forces



Street art in Aleppo, saying “Hand in hand, we build it together”.

Figure 5: Women’s groups working in peacebuilding





*Children attending a makeshift school in the cellar of a building in the eastern town of Deir Ezzor in 2013. After IS took power in July 2014, it has been increasingly difficult for women to take on public roles, like teaching. Photo: TT/AFP/Zac Baillie*

view peacebuilding work as acts of betrayal<sup>5</sup>. In addition, some of the groups and other women activists in Aleppo expressed rather negative views towards peacebuilding<sup>6</sup>, which might have had a negative impact on these particular groups' involvement.

In Idleb, two out of four groups conducted organized peacebuilding activities. Here, social traditions that view women primarily as childbearers and caretakers of the home significantly have affected women's roles in society and resulted in their marginalization both before and after 2011<sup>7</sup>.

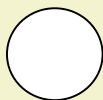
According to the women's groups and activists from Idleb, during the first years following the uprising in 2011, while women's participation in public civil activism was evident and increasing in other Syrian regions, Idleb women's participation mostly took on a developmental aspect (economic or educational). The two women's groups examined here did not even dare to explicitly declare that their programmes included peacebuilding activities, because they will be held accountable to the armed factions in the region, especially the extremists. In addition to the

aforementioned challenges of talking about peacebuilding with armed groups, radical factions in Idleb have been trying to limit women's roles to only entail handicraft work. Even women's economic empowerment groups have been targeted by the extremists, as demonstrated in the attack on the Mazaya Center in Kafrnabel in 2014<sup>8</sup>.

In Deir Ezzor, only one of the three groups in the research was explicitly involved in peacebuilding. The remaining two, despite having received training in this field, remained committed to other issues. Since July 2014, when IS took over Deir Ezzor, women's roles have been much reduced within all fields and women's activism, including peacebuilding efforts, have had to resort to absolute secrecy and quite different frameworks than those used before.

In Daraa, only one of the women's groups reached by the research team agreed to participate in the study. Consequently, the sample is too small to be used as a basis for an overall analysis of women's groups' involvement in peacebuilding in this region. However, the one group that participated did carry out peacebuilding activities.

## Types of peacebuilding activities by region



Number of peacebuilding projects in that area.

### ALEPPO

#### Combating child recruitment

Literacy workshops as gateways to communicate with women and raise their awareness of the serious implications to their children if they are recruited to armed groups. This tactic was adopted by the women activists after they encountered a great deal of resistance when directly addressing the issue, as the participating mothers believed their children's engagement in the fighting was important to defend their homeland.

#### Promoting civil peace and co-existence

Awareness-raising sessions and the publishing of a newspaper on issues like peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms.

### IDLEB

#### Raising awareness of women's rights and roles in society

Addressing issues related to women's rights to emphasize women's roles in society. Activities include economic, political and educational empowerment projects.

#### Enhancing women's roles in peacebuilding through political empowerment

Raising women's awareness of numerous political issues including democracy, corruption, transitional justice and women's political participation. In their approach to discussing democracy, the women groups held discussions to show links between Islamic principles like Shura\* and democracy.

#### Promoting co-existence

When organizing craft workshops and other programmes aimed at building trust among women, ideas of tolerance and co-existence were also indirectly addressed.

#### Controlling existing and potential violence

For example, a campaign organized and implemented in the Atmeh IDP camp took a stand against the use and spread of small arms.

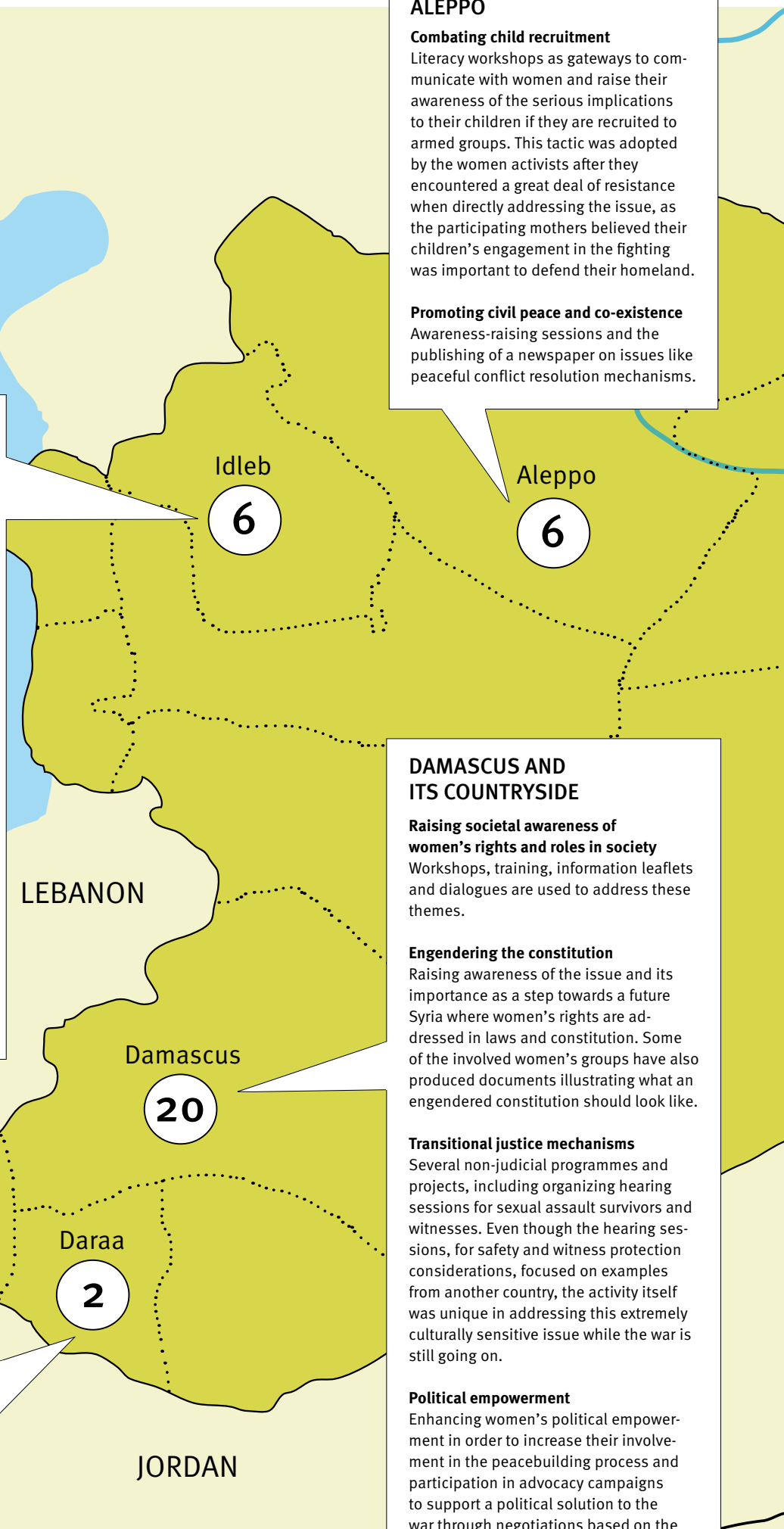
\* The principle of consultation in Islam.

### DARAA

Only one group worked on peacebuilding. However, that group carried out a great number of activities with this particular focus, mainly through:

#### Promoting women's political empowerment

Enhancing women's abilities and leadership capabilities to increase their involvement in the political process and provide them with the tools to be more efficient on the political level. Holding awareness and consultation sessions conducted over Resolution 1325 to identify its adaptation to the Syrian case and activate women's roles in peacebuilding.



### DAMASCUS AND ITS COUNTRYSIDE

#### Raising societal awareness of women's rights and roles in society

Workshops, training, information leaflets and dialogues are used to address these themes.

#### Engendering the constitution

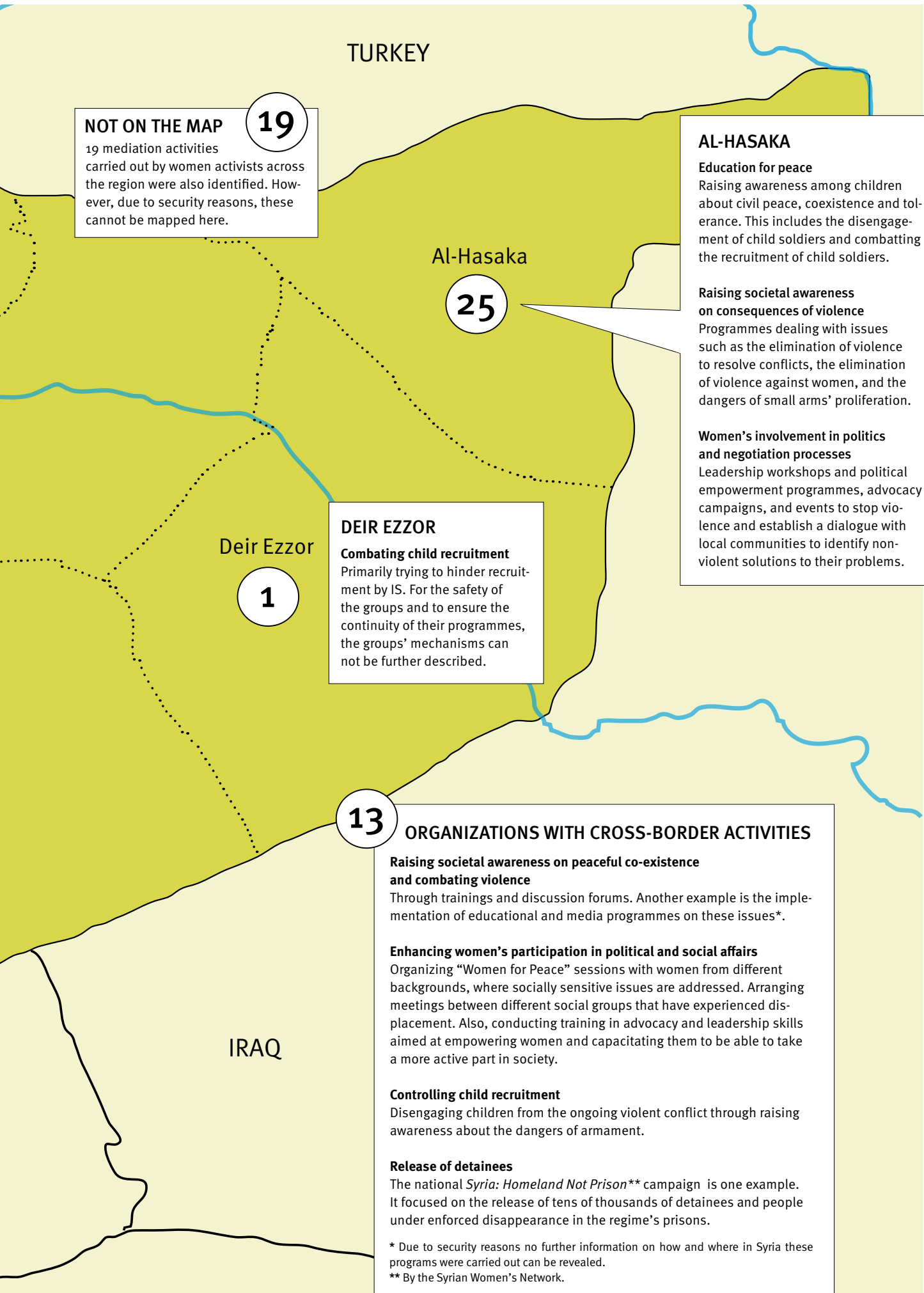
Raising awareness of the issue and its importance as a step towards a future Syria where women's rights are addressed in laws and constitution. Some of the involved women's groups have also produced documents illustrating what an engendered constitution should look like.

#### Transitional justice mechanisms

Several non-judicial programmes and projects, including organizing hearing sessions for sexual assault survivors and witnesses. Even though the hearing sessions, for safety and witness protection considerations, focused on examples from another country, the activity itself was unique in addressing this extremely culturally sensitive issue while the war is still going on.

#### Political empowerment

Enhancing women's political empowerment in order to increase their involvement in the peacebuilding process and participation in advocacy campaigns to support a political solution to the war through negotiations based on the Geneva I Communiqué.



TURKEY

**NOT ON THE MAP**

**19**

19 mediation activities carried out by women activists across the region were also identified. However, due to security reasons, these cannot be mapped here.

**AL-HASAKA**

**Education for peace**  
Raising awareness among children about civil peace, coexistence and tolerance. This includes the disengagement of child soldiers and combatting the recruitment of child soldiers.

**Raising societal awareness on consequences of violence**  
Programmes dealing with issues such as the elimination of violence to resolve conflicts, the elimination of violence against women, and the dangers of small arms' proliferation.

**Women's involvement in politics and negotiation processes**  
Leadership workshops and political empowerment programmes, advocacy campaigns, and events to stop violence and establish a dialogue with local communities to identify non-violent solutions to their problems.

Al-Hasaka

**25**

Deir Ezzor

**1**

**DEIR EZZOR**

**Combating child recruitment**  
Primarily trying to hinder recruitment by IS. For the safety of the groups and to ensure the continuity of their programmes, the groups' mechanisms can not be further described.

**13**

**ORGANIZATIONS WITH CROSS-BORDER ACTIVITIES**

**Raising societal awareness on peaceful co-existence and combating violence**  
Through trainings and discussion forums. Another example is the implementation of educational and media programmes on these issues\*.

**Enhancing women's participation in political and social affairs**  
Organizing "Women for Peace" sessions with women from different backgrounds, where socially sensitive issues are addressed. Arranging meetings between different social groups that have experienced displacement. Also, conducting training in advocacy and leadership skills aimed at empowering women and capacitating them to be able to take a more active part in society.

**Controlling child recruitment**  
Disengaging children from the ongoing violent conflict through raising awareness about the dangers of armament.

**Release of detainees**  
The national *Syria: Homeland Not Prison*\*\* campaign is one example. It focused on the release of tens of thousands of detainees and people under enforced disappearance in the regime's prisons.

\* Due to security reasons no further information on how and where in Syria these programs were carried out can be revealed.  
\*\* By the Syrian Women's Network.

IRAQ

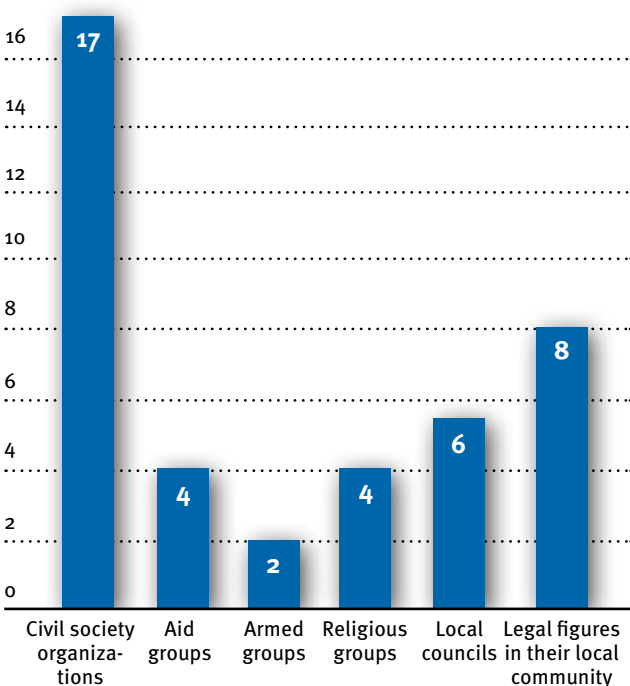
## Networks and alliances

Working closely with other women activists seems to be difficult for the women's groups. Only nine out of the 28 women groups, mostly those in Damascus and its countryside, have formally joined a women's network or civil alliance. The majority of the remaining groups said they had no official alliances of any kind. The reasons they gave were security conditions, the difficulty of communication, and also not having been invited to join any network. Some said they had chosen to have no alliances because they wanted to work individually, without any external pressure from other organizations.

In addition, they thought that the existing networks had vague operational frameworks and decision-making mechanisms. It was argued that the birth of many of these networks was heavily influenced by international actors, and the networks seemed to adopt a top-down approach to networking and alliances, with very little room for newcomers to effectively participate in the decision-making process. Several groups said that they mainly cooperated with other organizations if these organizations had already secured funding for a certain project, thus making it possible for the groups themselves to get financial support for similar activities.

In contrast, 12 groups said they had good relations with prominent Syrian women politicians or with internationally supported women's organizations for the purpose of support or advice. The groups located in Damascus and its countryside, followed by those in Al-Hasaka, were the ones most connected. In the case of the Damascus' women's groups, this is probably due to the aforementioned fact that many experienced and thus well-connected Syrian women politicians and activists have formed or belong to them.

Figure 6: Local partners



## Local partners

When it comes to local connections, 18 of the 28 women groups stated that they had local partners of some sort.

As seen in Figure 6, other civil society organizations (CSOs) accounted for the highest percentage of the local partners. The groups stated that they and these organizations have similar missions and ideologies and that other CSOs also are more open to involving women in public affairs.

Following civil society organizations, partnering with local, legal and social figures were most common. It was stated that many women's initiatives to resolve conflicts (through negotiation or mediation, for example) depend more or less on the support from these types of key figures, including religious ones that have a good reputation in their communities.

Local councils<sup>9</sup> came in third place. This type of cooperation was especially common in the Al-Hasaka governorate, with three of the six groups there mentioning it.

Armed groups, followed by religious groups, were the stakeholders least cooperated with. Extremist groups were perceived as a huge impediment against the implementation of many projects and an obstacle to any activity organized by women, as exemplified with the case of Eastern Ghouta mentioned earlier in this chapter.

## Support needed

At the top of the women's groups list of what support they need are financial support and training for their staff, which was mentioned by 17 groups each (see Figure 7). Some of the groups reported that their projects have been suspended due to lack of funding, while other groups, as also stated under Networks and alliances, have had to cooperate with other organizations in order to obtain the funds needed to implement their activities.

Lack of registration was one reason mentioned by the women's groups for why their funding applications were turned down. This is a huge obstacle because they are not able to register in Syria, and countries hosting groups working from outside Syria either prohibit such registration or make it extremely difficult to achieve. In addition, groups were suspicious of grant applications with preconditions that they thought could interfere with their policies and alter their activities. Other reasons for funding refusals could be different donors' agendas and interests or poor proposal writing and planning skills on the part of the groups themselves.

In regard to staff training, the women's groups highlighted the need for training in peacebuilding. In fact, all 28 groups expressed that they wanted this, even though 18 groups said they already received it. This is because they found these skills very important and in regular need of updating, especially in light of the escalating armed conflict and the consequent increase in violence.



Number of groups

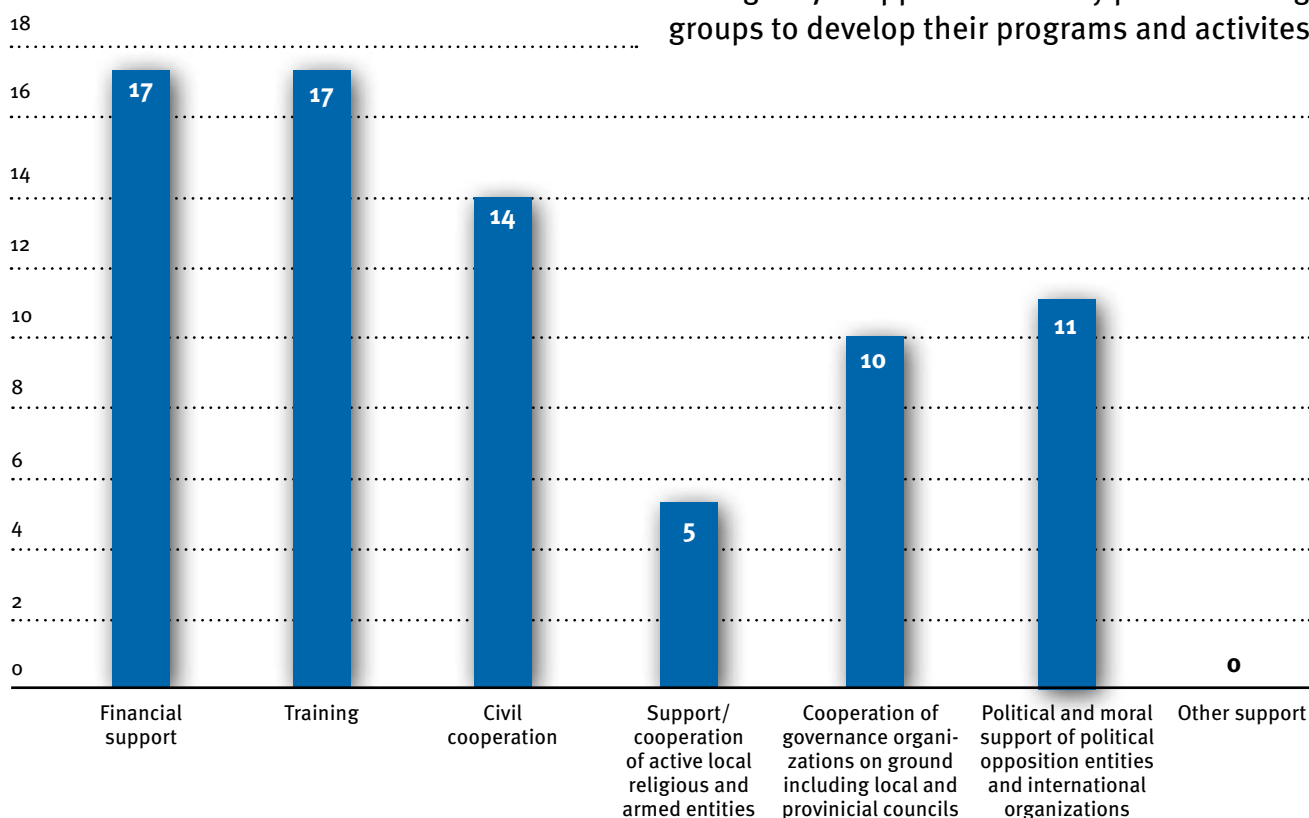


Figure 7: Support needed by peacebuilding groups to develop their programs and activities

Another top-requested training subject was women’s empowerment at all political, social and economic levels. This is to raise women’s awareness of their rights, promote gender equality, and also, to enhance women’s roles in peacebuilding.

Many of the groups pointed out that the organization of this training will face multiple obstacles, like the restrictions on movement in the besieged areas, the deteriorating security situation (mainly in Damascus and its countryside), societal resistance of these sensitive topics in some regions, the lack of trained staff, traditions preventing women from travelling abroad, and the lack of specialized training centres. However, the groups pointed out that these hindrances do not make the urgent need for peacebuilding skills any less urgent, but rather, the opposite.

Half of the groups highlighted the need for civil cooperation, mainly because the occasional societal resistance to peacebuilding constituted one of the biggest challenges hindering the implementation of their projects (as explained in Chapter Three). The groups also pointed out that society’s resistance to peacebuilding activities is particularly strong when organized by women, as it means more women becoming involved in politics and public affairs. In contrast, when women activists carry out income-generating projects, like sewing workshops, the objections are much less frequent.

In their answers to a question on cooperation with the official and political entities in their respective areas, 19 groups said there was none. So, it is no surprise that 11 groups stated a need for this type of cooperation for

them to be able to develop their work. If any good relationships existed, the groups said, they were mostly personal between individual activists and individual senior figures working in official or political bodies.

Five groups stated that they did cooperate with officials and described this cooperation in terms of receiving encouragement, the provision of safe spaces to undertake activities, and even some officials participating in their work.

The least mentioned need for cooperation was that of armed and religious entities, followed by that of local governing bodies. This not to say that that kind of cooperation already existed on a satisfactory level, but rather that the women’s groups saw it as unwanted or even impossible.

Despite the fact that local councils are non-military administrative bodies, they have marginalized women’s presence and roles and deny their participation even at minimum levels. A majority of the groups stated that both military and religious entities also are neither partners to, nor supporters of, women’s initiatives. On the contrary, they often prevent the implementation of any programmes which would activate women’s social roles in general and their political participation in particular. This is especially the case in areas dominated by extremist groups where women are largely marginalized.

Some of the groups said they had negative experiences that diminished any hope of cooperation. Fear of dealing with armed or religious groups was also expressed by several groups.

## Individual efforts

Women organizing themselves has a distinctive and effective impact on enhancing women's overall role in society and increasing their participation. However, when performing the research for this study, many significant individual initiatives were also found. These initiatives were conducted by local women activists working alone or within a small group of acquaintances outside any mother organization. The majority was found in Damascus and its countryside<sup>10</sup>.

Many factors seemed to be important in facilitating individual peacebuilding efforts. One was the **previous experiences** of these women. Although some activities were undertaken by younger activists, individual peacebuilding initiatives – most notably in Damascus and its countryside – were primarily carried out by prominent women activists who had vast experience in political and feminist work.

Coupled with that experience, many of the women also had **substantial knowledge in human rights**. This seemed to be a particularly positive factor for their participation in negotiating or mediating processes and in training and building the capacities of younger women.

In addition, the activists benefited from **good relationships** with local women or prominent figures in the community and the subsequent local support. In many cases, activities were carried out under local supervision or participation. This proved to be especially true in conflict-resolution activities in Damascus and its countryside, including the previously mentioned example of Ghouta.

Another equally helpful trait was to carry a so-called **good reputation**. Such a reputation could have been earned through previous activities of the woman or her organization in the region. In many examples, economic empowerment projects for women had served as a bridge for the activists to build trust in local communities, including the most closed and conservative ones. Gradually, the activists had then been able to influence the communities and through their continuous projects earn an esteemed position.

Another factor that seemed to be of importance for individual women activists to be able to carry out peacebuilding initiatives is **age**. In several cases, more senior women were those who ventured to interfere in resolving conflicts between armed factions or mediation to get prisoners or kidnapped individuals released. Of course, this could be attributed to older women having more experience and knowledge of how to act and react to these types of situations. In addition, being “uncorrupted” or “truthful to the community's aspirations” were pointed out as crucial qualities for women activists to possess to succeed with peacebuilding. And if those are part of their characteristics, being older has given these women more opportunities to demonstrate that.

The research finding more senior than younger prominent women activists could also be because many younger women have fled Syria during the last four years of con-



flict and therefore were not available. However, based on repeated examples in the information gathered, it can not be overlooked that Syrian society in general seems to respect and respond to older, married women more than to younger, single ones, regardless of their accomplishments.

The peacebuilding activities that the individual women activists were involved in were mainly connected to **negotiations** of some kind, like resolving a violent conflict between two parties or protecting civilians from an armed conflict in a region. Similar initiatives mentioned were mediating in disagreements between two political parties, adjacent villages or opposing entities (at a demonstration, for example). For security reasons, the information in the examples provided by the activists was very brief, especially concerning negotiation efforts that were still ongoing. The women activists overwhelmingly stressed that women's ability to initiate and participate in negotiations had been greatly reduced due to both the rise of violence and to the dominance of extremist factions.

Nonetheless, and despite the increased complexity and dangers, several initiatives were still taking place. One example is the *Mothers' Movement*<sup>11</sup>, where local women



*A Syrian woman in the Zabadani neighbourhood in Damascus talks to the head of the UN observers team (2012).  
Photo: TT/AP Photo/Muzaffar Salman*

activists organized demonstrations demanding the release of their children who were seized by the armed group, Jayesh al-Islam, while the men avoided criticizing the group's behavior for fear of further repression and arrest. Such increased difficulties do not appear to be as prominent in the Kurdish autonomous areas in northern Syria.

Some of the women activists pointed to the ruling autonomous administration's commitment to the involvement of women in negotiation delegations and decision-making positions through the so-called mutual administration<sup>12</sup> and a woman participation quota in all political and negotiation delegations. Other activists highlighted that the lower amount of violence present in their regions allowed for more women's agency, for example in their participation in local negotiations.

Other activities carried out by the individual women activists were **mediation efforts to release detainees** kidnapped by various armed factions. Many of the activists said this role was facilitated by the stereotypical image of women as being peaceful and not having any political or military missions. Instead, the counterpart viewed their mediation simply as a woman aiming to achieve emo-

tional and humanitarian gains in terms of reuniting other women with their children, family members or acquaintances. Regardless of the negative impact of such gender stereotyping, which the activists themselves were aware of, in many cases, the women's efforts had been fruitful in accomplishing the release of the detainees.

Another important involvement of individual women activists was found in **efforts to prevent potential violence**. One example is revenge-detering mechanisms organized by individual women activists and groups alike, for example, the previously mentioned visits to the families of victims after a violent clash to extend condolences<sup>13</sup>. In many cases, the activists said, their delegations included women from different groups of society, including the group that could be blamed for the death at hand. For example, a man from Sakba, a Damascus suburb, was killed by the Popular Committees<sup>14</sup> in Jaramana, another suburb, and tension grew between the two areas. A woman activist responded by organizing a reconciliation initiative with the participation of other women activists and both cities' elders to extend condolences to the victim's family on behalf of the people of Jaramana. Similar incidents also took place in Kisweh and Zakia, two other suburbs of Damascus.

# Examples of peacebuilding activities

## Idleb

### Combating the proliferation of small arms in the Atmeh IDP camp

Many of the women activists who participated in this initiative did not necessarily see it as peacebuilding (as detailed in Chapter Three). Similarly, the women empowerment centre that organized and launched the campaign also said that peacebuilding was not one of the centre's objectives. However, when confronted with potentially rising violence in their area, the activists found themselves obliged to act.

It started with a personal dispute over the public water tap in the camp, which ignited other hidden tensions. Soon the fighting escalated into a shooting in which a man trying to calm the situation down was killed.

“The spread of personal weapons in the camp on one hand and the absence of a governing law on the other were the main reasons behind these types of repeated incidents. There was at least one piece of weaponry in each tent,” explained Ahlam, a woman activist in the camp.

Ahlam and her peers at the Center for Women's Empowerment decided to organize a campaign targeting the root cause of the shootings – the availability of small arms.

The campaign was launched on International Volunteer Day in 2014. It was accompanied by a volunteer programme called *Together for a Better Life* which included a cleaning initiative carried out by the women activists (as a way to couple the disarmament action with a social one to make it easier to accept). In total, around one hundred women participated.

Over two hundred pamphlets carrying the following messages were distributed among the people in the camp:

- No wasting water or fighting over the waiting line.
- No begging or trespassing on the rights of others.
- No using of weapons inside the camp.

The pamphlets also had a drawing of a pencil emerging from a weapon instead of a bullet.

To ensure that the campaign would be successful, Ahlam explained that she made use of her social status and good relationships with most of the women who frequented her organization's centre. Overall, the camp community's trust in the centre, which provides various services for women, such as awareness, education, crafts and psychological support, was beneficiary for the positive response to the campaign.

In addition, the women activists were helped by the cooperation of the camp administration in controlling the spread of small arms.

Given that there are no precise methods to determine the exact number of small arms present in the camp, it is difficult to assess the impact the campaign had. However, the general feeling of the activists is that there has been a decrease, especially when it comes to the number of incidents involving weapons.

## Aleppo

### Controlling child recruitment

In light of the conflict escalation and appearance of armed forces with extremist ideologies, any potential civil activity in areas like Aleppo has become very difficult. As stated by one women activist, “Amid this illogical atmosphere, many critical changes and serious violations have been disintegrating our society and we have had little room as women to respond or object.”

However, when the activists in the women's group she belongs to started to see children under the age of 18 carrying weapons to join the armed groups, they felt they had to do something to protect the children. Therefore, they decided to intervene using subtle means.

The activists felt that influencing mothers and raising their awareness of the horrible consequences of joining the war would be for their children as their only opportunity to combat child recruitment.



Children playing with homemade weapons of pieces of wood and junk. Bench, countryside of Idleb. Photo: Abd Hakawati



Because the women's group normally works with issues of women's empowerment, the activists were able to organize this project so that it would look like a literacy workshop for women, while covertly conducting an awareness and educational programme on the threats connected to the child soldier phenomenon. They also stressed the women's role as mothers in influencing their children and their families to stop the recruitment.

The project lasted for three months, during which 18 women participated. However, due to several reasons including the lack of funding and a proper space where they could carry out the courses and discussion sessions, the programme was suspended.

Choosing an indirect way of working clearly shows the enormous risk the women activists experienced and the fear they felt because of it. In many cases, they did not declare the explicit objective of the programme to the women wanting to enroll. Open debates were used to direct the discussions towards addressing the recruitment issue. Another challenge would then arise as some of the participants expressed surprise and dissatisfaction with the programme mission, claiming that it was the duty of their sons to defend their people and land.

The women activists stressed that the greatest help in designing the project and identifying its objectives and mechanisms came from previous field training on peacebuilding provided by another Syrian organization in the region. This training contributed to developing the group's ability to create a clear strategy of action.

The activists have now become actively involved in the civil resistance against war and armament, gradually feeling increasingly more equipped to tackle both. Until more funds are secured to resume the literacy courses, they are cooperating with various civil society groups which are similarly combating child recruitment in the area.

## Al-Hasaka

The majority of local projects and initiatives found in Al-Jazira in northern Syria<sup>15</sup> focused on civil peace and coexistence among the region's diverse population<sup>16</sup>. Two examples of collective activism in which women played essential roles are described here.

## The Spring Festival

In the Spring Festival project, women activists used art as a gateway to peacebuilding and an interactive tool to enhance the concepts of coexistence and reconciliation among the many different ethnic and religious groups in the Al-Jazira region.

The idea of the festival came from Sawa Youth Coalition. They presented it to other organizations in the region and a small coalition of civil organizations and activists was created to launch the initiative.

During the festival's three years of existence, its activities have generally focused on ways of recognizing other cultures, mainly through music, folklore, exhibitions and films. The aim has been to create an atmosphere of cohesion and interchange among the various cultural and linguistic components of Al-Jazira society. For example, the songs performed are sung in many languages, including Assyrian, Kurdish, Arabic, Turkic and Armenian all on one track, which is received well by the richly diverse audience. The performers have also added to the cultural mix by singing in other tongues than their own.

"The spread of personal weapons in the camp on one hand and the absence of a governing law on the other were the main reasons behind these (...) incidents."

*Ahlam, activist in the Atmeh refugee camp*

On a similar note, the plays performed during the festival have reflected the Syrian reality of ongoing war. A new aspect was the involvement of children in delivering the messages. At the third Spring Festival, more than 25 children were featured in a musical concert, and they also performed a play titled *Graves without Gravestones* which told the

story of an alley under heavy bombardment.

In addition, the festival has been a platform for local talent, for example, through organizing screenings of films by local filmmakers. With this work, the activists have managed to activate the role of art in addressing the past as well as the ongoing conflicts while depending solely on local capacities and resources.

In its first two years (2013 and 2014), depending on the type of activity, three to five hundred people attended the festival. This number rose to 900 in 2015. Such an increase can largely be attributed to the good reputation the festival had gained in the previous years. Since the idea of the festival is that cultural interaction and addressing current and past conflicts gradually will change the pattern of social relations in the region, having an increasingly growing audience is very important.

Some tangible changes because of the festival have already taken place. For example, the relationship between the main political and ethnic groups of the region has improved, especially between the participating Kurdish and Assyrian political parties. An increased awareness of the need to build bridges of communication and mutual trust have been expressed, resulting in repeated visits to each other and participation in one another's national holidays. On Nowruz<sup>17</sup>, for example, Assyrian parties' representatives visited the Kurds carrying their banners and flags to extend their holiday greetings, while the Kurdish parties returned the favour during the Assyrian Akitu festival<sup>18</sup>.

The festival has also improved the relationships between the organizing civil society groups. Working on the festival has led to an increased mutual recognition among the organizations of their different cultural identities. This, in turn, has led to them cooperating more and organizing joint activities even outside of the festival.

One of these initiatives is the Cinema Bus, which started after the first Spring Festival. The Cinema Bus is a mobile cinema which screens films aimed at raising awareness of the implications of war and presented peacebuilding experiences from other countries. The films have been screened in several areas, including Derik, Al-Darbasiyah, Al-Qamishli, Amuda and Al-Hasaka.

However, despite the festival's success, the organizers have run into several hinders during the process of arranging it. The security factor has always been a challenge to the possibility of performing festival activities, especially during 2013 when the Qamishli area witnessed armed clashes<sup>19</sup>.

Political differences have also directly, and sometimes indirectly, affected the festival. To overcome this, the organizers invited female members of the various parties to attend the festival activities, which had a significant impact on changing attitudes and creating a convergence of views, in addition to other benefits discussed earlier.

Still, these and other additional difficulties with logistics and not having enough funding have not prevented the festival organizers from continuing their activities with the resources available. They are now aiming at a fourth year.

## Children of Peace Orchestra

Given the Al-Jazira<sup>19</sup> region's ethnic and sectarian diversity, women activists have had to make extensive peacebuilding efforts to strengthen coexistence and trust among the various groups. This prompted the women's groups Women for Peace Organization and Together for Amuda Center to launch the Children of Peace Orchestra initiative, which falls under one of the most important categories for sustainable peacebuilding: education for peace.

With a base of local children with musical talent, a total of 16 boys and six girls aged between seven and 15 were put together to form the orchestra. The training sessions included playing instruments and singing in Assyrian, Arabic and Kurdish, but also discussions with the children which focused on coexistence and tolerance.

As with the Spring Festival, entertainment was used to approach the region's sensitive conflicts and to reflect the cultural dimensions of the existing mixed population. The children's traditional costumes and their joint appearance on stage thus served the essential purpose – promoting coexistence.

The orchestra received many invitations as well as suggestions by other women activists to involve the children of internally displaced families who had moved to Al-Jazira after the outbreak of violence in their areas. After watching or hearing about the orchestra's performance, many women were encouraged to enroll their children in the

project. As a result, participation and attendance rates skyrocketed.

In addition, one of the founders, Iman, mentioned her own participation as having positive effects. "My appearance on stage as a veiled woman from a conservative family, I believe has inspired other women since it means that any other woman can succeed as well," she explained.

**"My appearance on stage as a veiled woman from a conservative family, I believe has inspired other women ..."**

*Iman, one of the founders of the Children of Peace Orchestra*

However, the Women for Peace Organization also faced many challenges with the project. Some of the Assyrian parents did not always come to the rehearsals and concerts, even though they would still send their children. According to Iman, this could possibly have been avoided if the founders had had more meetings with the children's families, to gain their trust

and explain that the activity was more than just music related. Unfortunately, due to lack of time, this had not been possible.

Furthermore, society's reaction to the founders was split: the women were accepting and encouraging, but the men criticized Iman's musical interests which they felt went against her conservative religious roots.

However, the main reason why the orchestra is no longer active is financial. Lack of funding meant that the project was forced to close down.

1. These would be the groups that met the peacebuilding approach adopted by this research and described in the Introduction.
2. In Damascus in particular, the field researchers contacted more groups, but several refused to take part in the research for security reasons.
3. A coalition of Islamists as well as previous Free Syrian Army factions that was formed in late 2013.
4. As stated in Chapter Three, this study does not consider economic empowerment activities, as invaluable as they are to women empowerment in general, to be peacebuilding.
5. As further discussed in Chapter Three.
6. Also further discussed in Chapter Three.
7. A slight change is said to have taken place after the opening of Idlib University in 2000, as many women were encouraged to continue their college education. However, despite the increase of women university graduates, women's involvement in the public domain has remained limited.
8. <https://www.facebook.com/mazaya.kafranbel.mm?fref=ts>
9. The activists mostly referred to the local councils affiliated with the Kurdish local autonomous administration in northern Syria, as opposed to the local councils affiliated with other political bodies like the interim government.
10. This as opposed to Al-Hasaka, where the majority of women's initiatives and activities had organizational features. Civil activism of all parties and groups in Al-Hasaka tends to be institutionalized, particularly among the Syrian Kurds.
11. Video of the *Mothers' Movement*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvUz6LEnBq8&feature=youtu.be&app=desktop>
12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpUyopaBs4c>
13. The same was an institutionalized activity by one of the groups in Damascus as explained in Chapter Three.
14. Paramilitary militias armed by the regime to supposedly protect their neighbourhoods.
15. The Al-Jazira region includes Al-Hasaka, Deir Ezzor and Al Raqqa.
16. A series of historical events has played and continues to play a crucial role in all conflicts rising between the many different ethnic groups in the region: Arabs, Kurds and Assyrians being the three major groups. To better understand the background, a brief introduction on the history of conflict in the Al-Jazira region can be found here: *Modern Genesis of Al-Jazira Region in Syria*, Mohammed Jamal Barout, and *A Study of Al-Jazira Province from the National, Social and Political Aspects*, Mohammed Talab Hilal (former security official in Al-Hasaka province), 1963.
17. A national Kurdish celebration marking the first day of spring.
18. Assyrian New Year.
19. Clashes between the regime and the PYD (Democratic Unity Party), April 2013.



*Red Crescent volunteers providing social support to school children. Photo: Baraa Al Halabi*

## Challenges and resources

- This chapter mainly uses data generated in the individual interviews, but occasionally refers to data from the questionnaires and the focus group discussions.

As shown throughout this report, activists face many challenges when trying to work with peacebuilding in Syria today – especially women. At the same time, there are resources available supporting the activists’ struggle, including the tools and methods that they themselves have developed to overcome the obstacles at hand. The points addressed in this chapter were the ones that the women activists primarily highlighted in the discussions.

### Challenges

#### The ongoing armed conflict

The current security situation and its ramifications in Syria pose crippling challenges to all peacebuilding efforts. Considering all of the following – the lack of safety, the chaos and absence of law enforcement, constant bombardment of civilian areas, indiscriminate killing and detention, the displacement of millions of people, kidnapping and enforced disappearance, economic hardship, and

the many more war adversities – a majority of the activists stated that any peacebuilding talk or actions are likely to be instantly disregarded or placed at the bottom of the list of any Syrian’s concerns.

The militarization of the conflict is not only an obstacle in itself, but also has resulted in a multitude of worrying developments on the ground. These include armament and the spread of weapons as well as the many state and non-state armed groups and militias which, the activists said, all seem to be competing with and fighting against each other. In addition, there is the emergence and increasing power of radical militant groups such as the Al-Nusra Front and IS, the looting by fighters from all the warring parties, the involvement of foreign fighters, and the impossibility of holding any perpetrator accountable.

#### A violent regime & fragmented opposition

Many activists stated that the regime’s violent crackdown on the peaceful demonstrations in 2011 and the way it has been clinging to power using a military approach to the escalating crises ever since has led Syria into a stalemate of violence and counter violence. This has also opened up for regional and international interests prolonging the conflict by aiding and funding the different warring parties.

The activists also saw the current state of the Syrian opposition as a challenge to any peace process. They pointed out that decades of political oppression and marginalization have left it weak and unstructured, and that it now lacks the unified political discourse or vision needed to be a strong actor in any peace work.

According to the activists, none of the warring parties currently have the political will to pursue peace. At the same time, Syria has reached the point where neither the regime, nor the opposition can unilaterally resolve the crisis. In addition, all outside actors fueling and controlling the fighting seem to want it to continue.

### Lack of societal awareness

There are widespread negative or else passive societal attitudes towards peacebuilding in Syria. Aside from the debilitating security situation, activists attribute this skepticism to a general lack of knowledge about conflict resolution and peacebuilding because for many decades, citizens have lived in a culture of political ignorance and overwhelming state dominance in which they have been treated as insignificant.

In the face of the horrifying scale of violence in the country, many people also find concepts like nonviolence and civil resistance alien. This lack of understanding, and also trust, can sometimes lead to resistance against the emergence and increasing relative power of civil society organizations.

Although the situation is starting to change, the women activists emphasized that gradual and long-term efforts are needed to spread political knowledge and encourage all people to participate in state-building.

### Societal divisions and groupism

The women activists considered growing societal divisions and tension as both a current challenge to peacebuilding and a potential future threat to stability and peaceful coexistence. Parts of society even seem to have accepted the war, given its sectarian dimensions, and thus perceive it as necessary for survival. The activists largely attribute these antagonistic attitudes to fear, lack of trust and ignorance.

Furthermore, double standards are applied when approaching crimes and human rights violations, rejecting accountability when it comes to perpetrators who belong to their own social group or political conviction.

### Limited resources

There is a lack of financial and human resources to design and implement peacebuilding activities. As put by one of the women, “Activists can not just continue to volunteer their time and money as they are going to eventually exhaust themselves.” For example, even when economic empowerment projects succeeded in making a difference, financial limitations obstruct expanding or sometimes even simply maintaining them. On top of that, activists reported it is sometimes difficult to find volunteers who believe in and want to do peace work.

## Patriarchy & perceived roles of women

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, women in general and women activists in particular have to overcome the male dominance in decision-making in Syria. Traditional perceptions of women and their role in society tend to undermine women and be dismissive of their efforts. Most activists talked about facing difficulties during their peacebuilding activism due to societal resistance or family pressure and concern. Many activist women are, for example, criticized of being negligent of their domestic duties, including full-time childcare.

Many activists argued that men object to women’s involvement in public affairs for “fear of losing authority over them” or because of society’s “overwhelming masculine thinking” or because men “won’t give up their centuries-old privileges” to women in general and women family members in particular. As a result, the activists pointed out that some women activists can feel less confident regarding themselves and their work, or have to struggle against society’s stereotypes and gender roles as well as the violence in the country.

Similarly, women are systematically excluded from the ranks of both the regime and the opposition. One activist pointed out that one should question why women seem to only be fit to assume positions like the Minister of Culture, which currently is the solitary position held by a woman in the Syrian official government as well as the interim government. Women activists, notably many from Aleppo, also stated that they are not able to hold decision-making positions in their local councils or authorities because they are women. One of them said that she was compelled to leave an organization she co-founded when her male colleagues denied her any senior position, using religion as a pretext and claiming that, according to Islam, women should not assume any high executive roles.

### Persecution and restrictions

Like all civil society and human right activists, women activists face security threats, for example, detention, torture and sexual abuse<sup>1</sup>, and unfair trials imposed by the regime and/or its opponents. In addition, in regions controlled by armed extremist groups, women’s activism has received extra scrutiny. Activists said they had to separate men and women in workshops, abide by what the extremists call a “sharia dress code”, and sometimes stay at home altogether because of women being banned from leaving their houses. Projects have also become suspended or banned. For example, a literacy project run by women activists in Aleppo was suspended despite it having been successful.

## Resources and tools

### Civil society and influential individuals

The women activists highlighted that the emergence and growth of Syrian civil society organizations in the last years have greatly contributed to spreading knowledge and awareness of peacebuilding. These groups and initiatives exist in almost all areas of the country, organizing





*Women running for shelter after a barrel bomb was dropped by a regime helicopter in a civilian neighbourhood in Aleppo.  
Photo: Baraa Al Halabi*

campaigns and offering workshops, training, and discussions on concepts like citizenship, justice and reconciliation, conflict resolution and non-violent resistance, and building a culture of pluralism, trust, solidarity, and cooperation. If built upon, this growing knowledge and culture can not only support peacebuilding efforts, but also contribute and add to them. The women activists argued that once citizens realize that they have agency and can rebuild their country to guarantee equal rights and justice, they will become advocates of peacebuilding.

Many organizations have showed perseverance, staying on and continuing their work, even in areas where the daily realities of war, siege, and bombardment have made their ideas of peacebuilding seem incomprehensible or unacceptable to the local people. The organizations have simply adapted, changing their terminology or the apparent nature of their activities to respond to society's reservations.

However, the activists once again stressed the importance of continuous financial support and technical assistance from international non-governmental organizations for Syrian civil society to be able to maintain and develop its strengths.

Another resource for peacebuilding is with local influential people and activists who have already earned society's respect and trust. These could, for example, be religious or societal figures that can refute radical interpretations and practices executed under the pretext of religion or activists who have earned a good reputation for successful activities they have implemented locally<sup>2</sup>.

## Local solutions

All of the women activists participating in this research emphasized that the many examples of successful local solutions and peacebuilding efforts in Syria are invaluable sources for national peace efforts to learn from. The details and results of these local experiences, some of which are highlighted in this report, can provide guidance for designing a comprehensive national plan that is also tailored to local contexts and can benefit from local expertise and activists.

A number of activists also pointed out that peacebuilding efforts could make use of the areas in Syria where the security situation is relatively stable, for example, where neither the regime, nor armed extremist groups are in control. There, a peace process could be launched that eventually could encompass all of Syria.

## Technology for communication

The activists pointed out that today's advanced technology and social media networks make it possible to promote peace and spread knowledge of peacebuilding and what it entails in Syria on a much larger scale than ever before. Some activists also added that in the absence of international solidarity on the governmental and regional power levels, these new means of communication can be used to reach out directly to people all over the world, asking for their support and solidarity.

## War fatigue

Interestingly, a significant number of the women activists saw the ongoing crisis as an opportunity to promote nonviolence and begin creating structures for sustainable peace. They argued that the Syrians' firsthand experience of militarization, violence and counter violence have proven to them that these actions only result in a vicious circle of protracted war and antagonism. People are fed up with war, and most see peace as the only way out of it.

One of the activists similarly highlighted that the current state of chaos could make it possible for people to step in and take control, whether as individuals or as members of civil society organizations, in order to rebuild their country and create lasting peace.

## Support for women activists

### International support

The women activists stated that there are many international non-governmental organizations, activists, and donors who genuinely want to support women's activism for peacebuilding in Syria and are reaching out to Syrian women activists to learn about their needs and discuss potential ways of assistance. Many women activists at both the local and national level have benefitted from technical training and awareness-raising activities, financial support, and invitations to represent their views and demands at international events.

Activist women also have a number of international tools available to support their work. In particular, the women activists highlighted the United Nation Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security<sup>3</sup>. The binding resolution is, the women activists argued, incredibly relevant to the Syrian case and should be utilized by women activists involved in any peacebuilding efforts. For example, the Syrian Women Initiative for Peace and Democracy<sup>4</sup> stated that they extensively used Resolution 1325 in their advocacy leading to the emergence of their initiative.

### Support from civil society

Locally, the growing civil society was considered a strong ally for women activists working in peacebuilding. These civil society organizations have provided many women activists with opportunities to organize, opportunities for capacity building or else provided networks of potential local allies.

As demonstrated in the chart on the relationships between women's groups and local stakeholders in Chapter Four, more than 40 percent of the women's groups covered in this study said their main partners were other civil society organizations. However, women activists in the focus groups discussions deemed this percentage to be even higher, attributing what they saw as a discrepancy between the figure and reality to either a terminology problem where the women's groups might have misunderstood who qualified as an "ally" or a "stakeholder", or because some groups might have chosen to conceal such information for security reasons.

## Support from national political powers

Some of the women activists said that they could benefit from the support of what they called “national democratic” political parties and organizations which believe in peacebuilding and women’s roles in society. While the women activists who pointed this out came from different regions in Syria, only the women activists from Al-Hasaka gave examples of these powers, for example, the Movement for a Democratic Society, which is the Kurdish political party leading the political coalition governing the autonomous parts of northern Syria.

## Building on achievements

The women activists emphasized that women demonstrated a lot of potential and capacities when they took to the streets to demand justice and protest against the regime and that many have remained involved as human rights activists, relief workers, or outspoken advocates of justice and equality in their local communities ever since.

Women activists across Syria have also been involved in successful local mediations and conflict resolution efforts. Nationally, women activists have launched many peacebuilding campaigns, some of which have grown and gained international attention. One example is the Syrian Women Initiative for Peace and Democracy, which started as a mobilization effort by a group of Syrian women activists from different backgrounds and organizations and swiftly received international and UN support. The activists agreed that such outcomes of women’s organizing efforts should be used as stepping stones in the battle for peace and equality in Syria.

This more notable involvement of women in the public domain is one of the main reasons behind the increased recognition of women’s rights and roles by the different Syrian stakeholders. For example, the women activists, primarily those from Damascus, agreed that, unlike three or four years ago, women’s rights have now become part of the discourse of most political and societal parties. Although the parties’ actual commitment to women’s rights are debatable, stakeholders have not been able to continue to systematically exclude discussions of women’s rights as they used to. This gives more room for activists to promote their ideas.

## Social advantages

The women activists said they could benefit from the relative social advantages women enjoy in Syria. They argued that women were “always welcomed in other people’s houses” and could thus approach other women with ease since there are almost no restrictions on women reaching out to other women. This could, for example, be used to reach mothers from conflicting parties and then spread ideas on peacebuilding and gradually mobilize them to promote these values among their family members, combat armament, and promote peace between different groups. In Damascus, for example, activists brought pro-regime women together with women who had lost a family member, were displaced, or had been detained themselves by the regime. In many cases, some of the pro-regime women would have similarly lost a family member to the fighting. These activities were focused on dialogue

and asking the women to trust each other and listen to each other<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, by reaching out to women, activists could learn about their needs and aspirations in order to be better at representing them.

Activist women also make use of this acceptance of women talking to each other to create what they called “safety networks”. This entails women who are friends or work together meeting in a safe space to support each other. The activists saw the networks as indispensable for them to be able to maintain their work and “sanity” in the midst of all the uncertainty and violence of war.

## Making use of stereotypes

Coupled with the fact that most Syrian women have not been involved in the ongoing armed fighting, a significant number of women activists pointed out that women activists, as mentioned in Chapter Four, could take advantage of the generally held view that women are innately peaceful to influence local mediations and make peace.

The women activists pointed out that, compared to men, it was more acceptable for women to get involved in peace efforts, as society at large believe women have no military gains to make out of local peace agreements and are only after safety. However, some women activists warned that one should not neglect the harmful assumption implied in accepting that certain advantages were available to women because they are largely considered harmless by society. This, they would argue, is part of the widely held prejudice that marks women as “less effective” within many other areas besides the battlefield. While a few activists pointed out that it is ironic how beneficial some of the gender stereotypes they fight against could be during times of war, many thought that women should, nonetheless, make use of these attitudes to bring about peace while it gradually builds momentum.

Another example mentioned on ways of turning oppression into tools for activism, was how the Niqab<sup>6</sup>, imposed by extremist groups, could be used by women activists to conceal their identities. Similarly, when forbidden to go outside, they could use the confinement of their homes to plan or implement activities.

Many women activists argued that most Syrian women know that all women in the country, regardless of religion, ethnicity, social class, or political affiliation are discriminated against in customs and traditions as well as the state laws<sup>7</sup>. This shared experience was seen as an opportunity to mobilize women and build networks that transcend all divisions and advocate for equality and peacebuilding in Syria.

1. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/24/syria-detention-and-abuse-female-activists>

2. One example of this is the campaign against the proliferation of arms in the Atmeh IDP camp described in Chapter Four.

3. <http://www.un.org/press/en/2000/20001031.sc6942.doc.html>

4. <http://www.swipad.org>

5. Many of these activities have stopped due to fear of repercussion by the regime, even on the part of the pro-regime participants.

6. A cloth that covers the face except for the eyes.

7. Like the personal status laws and laws on honour crimes.

# Crucial actors for change

**D**espite the suffocating security situation, escalating violence and what the women activists presented as systematic marginalization of civil society activists by the political powers in Syria, Syrian women's activism has continued and even grown during the years since the 2011 uprising. This study shows how women are actively engaged in their communities – as providers of crucial services and support to other women (and men) and as actors for nonviolent conflict resolution. It presents how grave obstacles on the ground have been circumvented through the women activists' tailored projects and activities, and how they are using creative solutions and tactics to remain active and influential. Even when giving it other names, the activists' evolving focus on peacebuilding and women's comprehensive empowerment shows that they deem these components as crucial for achieving real sustainable peace in Syria.

Peacebuilding activities by Syrian women activists include spreading awareness on peaceful coexistence and non-violent conflict resolution, combating child recruitment, education for peace and promoting equal human rights and spreading legal awareness. In every one of these types of activism, the activists have responded to the needs they identified in their local communities. Some of the case studies presented demonstrate that the accumulative effect of women's activism has already born fruit in many contexts, allowing the activists even more room to influence their communities and promote human rights and nonviolent conflict resolution. The women activists in Syria have not been passive victims of violence and marginalization. If anything, they are capable of identifying

and challenging the root causes behind this marginalization and have predominantly provided human rights based solutions to the escalating violence.

The women activists in Syria have been non-participants in the ongoing fighting in the country and stand at equal distance from all the perpetrators. They have also already demonstrated a commitment to justice and peacebuilding and an extensive ability to overcome challenges and survive drastic changes. For peace to materialize in Syria, women are evidently needed.

At the same time, this study shows that there is a lot of room for development amongst the women's groups and activists at the organizational level and in terms of networking. To save time and efforts, the activists should seek to collaborate and coordinate their work whenever applicable. Better results and outreach would thus be achieved. There is also a lot of potential out there for them given the growing international recognition of the need for local solutions and their growing experiences in negotiation and meditation efforts and other peacebuilding activities.

This bedrock of highly motivated and influential women activists provides an opportunity for the international community to support the birth of a stable locally pioneered future for a pluralistic equitable Syria.

However, for all this to be possible, many other actors than the activists themselves need to step up and take responsibility within their areas of influence. The most important actions to be taken are listed under the three headlines below.

## 1. Enable women's meaningful participation in the peace processes

Inclusion of women in the negotiations and their participation throughout the political process of reconciliation and state-building is crucial to reach sustainable peace in Syria. The international community has a commitment and an obligation, as stated in the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, to make sure that women take part in all stages of the peace process. One way of guaranteeing a significant role for women in future peace processes for Syria is to impose a gender quota for the parties in the negotiations. An additional way is to support the establishment of a consultative body consisting of civil society, including women's groups, to influence and monitor ceasefire arrangements, peace-

building and post-conflict transitional processes (including a gender-sensitive constitutional process).

In order to increase women's meaningful influence and power, long-term support is necessary, such as providing women with political leadership and negotiation skills as a way to open up opportunities for more women to be politically active. This is a shared responsibility. Syrian oppositional political bodies must improve their work on including women in a meaningful way – not as tokens to please international actors, but as influential decision-makers on equal footing with the men. International bodies such as the UN and the EU as well as international civil society

organizations need to step up their support to women's organization and training programmes for women who are active in civil society or politics.

Strict visa regulations prohibiting Syrian women activists from traveling is a severe obstacle in the way of these women's participation in regional and international peace-building efforts and consultation processes. An inclusive approach requires the mobility of Syrian women activists.

Women are to a large extent absent from holding decision-making positions within local councils in Syria. The inclusion of women in the local councils is not only important to strengthen their political leadership, but also to secure an effective response plan to their needs during armed conflict as well as to guarantee means for their protection.

### Recommendations to the Syrian oppositions' political bodies

- Include women in your political bodies/committees/working groups etcetera and promote women for positions in decision-making bodies, such as local councils.
- Make sure structures are in place within different opposition parties for women to be able to organize and mobilize on the local, regional, and international levels.
- Promote local peace initiatives and highlight the role of women in success stories.

### Recommendations to the international community

- Always invite women to the negotiation table.
- Impose a quota of minimum 30 percent representation of women in all negotiation parties delegations.
- Support the establishment of a consultative body to the peace process consisting of civil society actors including women.
- Provide training opportunities for women in political leadership and negotiation skills, in advance of negotiations.
- Seek to include more women activists who live and work inside Syria when supporting or organizing events and activities abroad, and exert pressure on the Syrian regime to guarantee their safety upon returning.
- Promote more practical visa procedures to enable civil society to participate in processes related to Syria.
- Ensure that gender equality experts are included in the mediation teams.

### Recommendations to Syrian women's groups

- Support politically active women and encourage women to engage in politics.
- Communicate your demands and those of the women you work with, to politically active women.

## 2. Strengthen Syrian women's rights groups and support their peace work

Many of the women's groups in Syria have emerged during the last few years in the exceptional circumstances of violent conflict. They lack basic organizational skills, work under constant security threats, and battle financial limitations. The international community's financial support is crucial to strengthen women's organizations in Syria and pave the way for their sustainable and effective role in the future. Training and technical support are necessary, as well as facilitating meetings with women's organizations with experience from other armed conflicts, to share knowledge, expertise and lessons learned.

A major impediment today is the difficulties for women's groups to access funding, for example EU funds. Funding is also often short-termed, which means that many women's groups have to spend a lot of time chasing financial support and writing reports rather than working with strategic planning and implementation. Most donors also fund specific projects or activities, which makes it difficult for women's groups to obtain core funding to cover staff costs and maintain themselves as institutions. The sustainability of the organizations must become a priority among donors. In addition, the funding actors must begin to consider the limitations for Syrian organizations to register, especially in neighbouring countries. Donor restrictions on registration need to meet the circumstances under which Syrian civil society is working and enable its access to funding.

Another problem is that neighbouring countries obstruct cross-border activities organized by Syrian civil society organizations, which require participants to travel in and

### Recommendations to the international community

- Provide technical and financial support, including long-term core support, to Syrian women's groups.
- Modify funding procedures, like those of the EU, to make it easier for emerging local groups to access financial support.
- In political dialogue, push for an enabling legal environment to allow Syrian civil society inside Syria and the neighbouring countries to register and work freely.
- Encourage neighbouring countries, where much capacity-building training and many exchange meetings are taking place, to facilitate the activists' trips through, for example, creating safe passages for them to cross borders and acknowledging letters of invitation to events as reasons for travel/entrance.
- Increase support for income-generating activities and education for women and girls to build their agency, skills, dignity and long-term resilience.
- Focus on education for refugee children in neighbouring countries by encouraging and supporting host countries to enrol more children in their schools and supporting informal educational initiatives by civil society activists.
- Facilitate exchanges of lessons learned between women's groups in conflict settings.
- Increase support, including core funding to local initiatives, to enable the presence of alternative media which promotes non-violent attitudes and practices as well as gender equality.

out of Syria. Not ensuring the safety for activists crossing borders, means putting the lives of many of these women at risk.

Advancing cooperation and networking between Syrian women's groups is also essential to strengthen their work, build mutual trust and identify common unifying values. In addition, to strengthen women's rights in Syria, it is important to improve women's possibilities to support themselves and/or their families. An economically independent woman has more control over her life and a stronger voice in society.

Similarly, there is an urgent need to respond to the educational crises, making more funds available to support existing as well as additional educational programmes and initiatives for Syrian children inside Syria as well as in neighbouring countries. Increased efforts to invest in education and economic empowerment will also counteract the influence and potential recruitment by armed groups.

### 3. Put an end to violence and to impunity

On top of every priority list of Syrian citizens, male or female, stands putting an end to the violence. For this to come true, governments involved in the armament of the warring parties must immediately stop supporting the militarization with weapons and funding. It could not be stressed enough that this includes funds and arms made available to the Syrian regime, as it currently stands as the biggest and most equipped perpetrator of violence in Syria.

Equally important is to put an end to impunity. International courts, most notably the International Criminal Court, are urged to actively investigate and prosecute all war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria during the last four years, regardless of who the perpetrators were. Perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) should all be held accountable. Due to the culturally sensitive dimension of these crimes, trials could be held in special national courts working closely with international legal bodies, or in independent international courts. Additional care should be given to help the survivors heal and reintegrate in society.

To guarantee a sustainable peace in Syria, it is mandatory to amend the constitution and laws to comply with the international conventions on women's human rights, as well as to ensure accountability for crimes committed against women. Such legal reforms need to be accompanied by extensive awareness raising campaigns to challenge male dominance in decision-making and society's discriminatory attitudes towards women. In addition, dominant gender stereotypes, which often double the victimhood of women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, must be challenged and eliminated.

#### Recommendations to Syrian women's groups

- Reinforce and support emerging networking opportunities for women's groups for better coordination and implement joint projects to build trust.
- Invest in organisational development in order to enhance the design and implementation of projects as well as improving fundraising skills.
- Respond to what you identify as the needs on the ground and not what the donors policies/agendas require.
- Seek exchange possibilities with women's rights activists around the world on best practices and lessons learned to build on when mobilizing.

#### Recommendations to Syrian civil society

- Support women's activism to raise societal awareness on women's rights and campaign to change discriminatory laws.
- Work in partnerships with women's groups to design and implement activities to improve the wellbeing of women.
- Include and capacitate more women within your own bodies/committees/working groups.

#### Recommendations to the international community

- Immediately stop arming the warring parties: Impose an arms embargo on the Syrian regime as well as the non-state actors.
- Hold perpetrators accountable: The UN should initiate proper investigations on human rights violations and hold the Syrian government as well as non-state actors accountable for the atrocities committed in Syria by referring them to the International Criminal Court.
- Make sure trials against perpetrators of SGBV have priority and are conducted with respect to the survivors and in close cooperation with local civil society and women's groups.
- Prioritize legal reforms to protect women and awareness-raising campaigns to challenge male dominance in decision-making in society.
- Advocate for the immediate release of political detainees. Ensure human and gender-sensitive detention conditions during trials and organize medical and psychosocial support to support them after their release.
- In the transitional justice period, establish special gender-sensitive committees working with women's rights and inclusion in all the transitional processes.
- Support and reinforce women's groups' capacity to run shelters and organize rehabilitation activities for survivors.

#### Recommendations to Syrian women's groups

- Make sure to always expose the perpetrators of SGBV through documentation of violations and make such documentation available for the prosecutors.
- Work closely with each other and the international community to respond to SGBV crimes and provide the international community with guidance and feedback.
- Make clear demands to the international community for support to your activities to protect and reintegrate women survivors of SGBV crimes.
- Work to change societal negative attitudes towards women survivors of SGBV.

# List of acronyms

CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GWU	General Women's Union
IC	International Community
IDP	Internally Displaced People
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
IS	Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

## References and further reading

**Galtung, Johan** (1996) *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization*. Oslo: International Peace Research Institute

**Heller, Peter B.** (1974) *The Permanent Syrian Constitution of March 13, 1973*. Middle East Journal

**Human Rights Watch** (2015) *Syria: Spate of Barrel Bombs Attack*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/24/syria-new-spate-barrel-bomb-attacks> (Accessed 25 August 2015)

**Human Rights Watch** (2012) *Syria: Free Peaceful Activists, Journalists, Aid Workers in Amnesty*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/10/25/syria-free-peaceful-activists-journalists-aid-workers-amnesty> (Accessed 25 August 2015)

**Khalaf, R., Ramadan, O. & Stollies, F.** (2014) *Activism in Difficult Times: Civil Society Groups in Syria (2011-2014)*. Beirut: Badael and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

**Michelle I. Gawerc** (2006) *Peace-building: Theoretical and Concrete Perspectives*, in *PEACE & CHANGE*. Vol. 31, No. 4: Peace and Justice Studies Association

**Mohammed Jamal Barout** (2014) *Modern Genesis of Al-Jazira Region in Syria*. Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Public Studies

**Mohammed Talab Hilal** (2003) *A Study of Al-Jazira Province from the National, Social and Political Aspects*. Amouda Publishing House for Kurdish Culture

**Rosa Yasseen Hasan** (2008) *Negative*. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies

**Syrian Central Bureau for Statistics** (2011) *Central Bureau for Statistics – The Statistics Group, frp, “Estimates of Population Actually living in Syria by Governorate and Sex on 1/1/2011”*. <http://www.cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2011/Data-Chapter2/TAB-2-2-2011.htm> (Accessed 13 August 2015)

**Yazaji, Nawal** (2013) *Civil Society and the Gender Issue*, in: *Syrian Voices From Pre-Revolution Syria: Civil Society Against all Odds*, ed. **Kawakibi, Salam**. The Hague: Hivos – Knowledge Programme Civil society in West Asia

**UN Security Council, Security Council resolution 1325** (2000) [on women, peace and security], 31 October 2000, S/RES/1325 (2000) <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f4672e.html> (Accessed 1 September 2015)

**UN Women** (1995) *Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace. Platform for Action. Beijing, China, September 1995*. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/> (Accessed 3 July 2015)

**Yawmiyat wa Thikrayat Saqbania** [Saqba: Detainees' mothers block roads and give Islam Army hours of notice to release their sons and send them to court]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvUz6LEnBq8&feature=youtu.be&app=desktop> (Accessed 18 July 2015)



Kvinna till Kvinna



### THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

A Swedish organization that strengthens women in war-zones and conflict-affected areas. It cooperates with organizations that work to advance women's human rights and promote non-military conflict resolution. Currently, Kvinna till Kvinna provides support to 130 women's organizations based in the Middle East, South Caucasus, Africa and the Balkans. Visit: [www.kvinnatillkvinna.se/en](http://www.kvinnatillkvinna.se/en)

### THE FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG (FES)

A private, non-profit German political foundation committed to the values of Social Democracy. FES works towards the realization of these values by offering political education, promoting and deepening democracy, defending freedom and human rights, facilitating development and social justice, promoting security and gender equality and contributing to international dialogue both in Germany and internationally. Visit: [www.fes.de](http://www.fes.de)



Badael means “alternatives” in Arabic. The Badael Foundation is a Syrian non-governmental organization (NGO) committed to strengthening civil society groups and NGOs in Syria. The foundation works with groups that are active or want to become active in the promotion and/or implementation of activities to reduce violence, break its cycle, respond to the conflict, and prepare for a future equitable pluralistic Syria. Visit: [badael.org/en/homepage](http://badael.org/en/homepage)