

Ensuring the Effective Participation and Rights of Women in the Syrian Peace and Mediation Process

A Five-Step Approach

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Working Paper prepared by
DemocraShe, Human Rights Watch, ICAN, Kvinna til Kvinna, Oxfam, and WILPF
based on consultations with Syrian civil society partners

Summary: *The effective participation of women and attention to women's rights issues is a critical element in achieving a just and sustainable peace in Syria. This paper offers five critical steps to ensuring this outcome in the ongoing international efforts related to the mediation process. These steps also ensure that the foundations are laid for the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000), 1889 (2008) and 2122 (2013).*

Context: Since the outbreak of violence and conflict in Syria, local civil society organizations – many of them led by women – have taken on the heavy responsibilities of relief and recovery, community peace making and reconciliation, as well as documentation and support to victims of violence. Yet these groups have been largely absent from the international forums and processes discussing the future of Syria. These groups are active on the ground in Syria and in refugee camps working hard to re-stitch the fabric of society and build foundations for their country's future. Their perspectives and contributions are essential to any effort to end the violence and promote a sustainable resolution and just and democratic peace.

Women's rights organizations are particularly important because of their collective actions for their communities and the connection between democracy, justice and gender equality. Syrian women are already engaged in peace-making within their communities, building networks on the ground to prevent violence, reconcile political and social differences and deepening social cohesion and tolerance.

Rationale for Inclusivity: It is increasingly acknowledged by governments, multilateral institutions and development actors that a peace process in search of sustainability should be inclusive. Between 2000 and 2011, one in five peace agreements failed within the first five years; more flailed or failed within the first decade. The World Bank (World Development Report 2011) notes that over 90 percent of civil wars in the last decade took place in countries with a history of conflict. The Bank recommends processes that are 'inclusive enough' – meaning that the substance, the process, and the stakeholders should include the voices and concerns of the communities most affected. These findings affirm numerous case studies that demonstrate the qualitative contributions of civil society to peacemaking. Quantitative research on peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2004 found that the involvement of civil society reduced the risk of peace agreements failing by 64 percent (Nielson 2012).

Broader representation can, among other things, lead parties to consider important issues not already on the table, move forward a stalled process, advocate humanitarian rather than military incentives for a political settlement, increase public support for a negotiated settlement, and strengthen the accountability of belligerent parties to their own societies and

each other.

Policy Imperative: In October 2013 with the UK's leadership, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2122 that reaffirmed the importance of including women civil society actors in peace making. This resolution, along with the previous six relating to the women, peace and security agenda dating back to 2000 and the adoption of UNSCR 1325 (2000), are signs of some progress. However, they are also indications of the persistent exclusion of women from peace negotiations and the need to act immediately to ensure that women can participate fully.

The notion of inclusive peace making and gender sensitivity is also a key principle in the *UN Guidance on Mediation* (2012). It forms an integral element of the *UN General Assembly Resolution on Peaceful Resolution of Disputes* (2011) that Turkey and Finland co-sponsored and was widely supported by other UN member states. These issues are also addressed in the *CEDAW General Recommendations 13* on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post conflict situations (October 2013). They are further articulated in the Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans of many governments (over 40 UN member states) and multilateral institutions including the EU, as well as the UN's own *Seven Point Action Plan* (2010).

To implement the words and spirit of these resolutions, the following five approaches are needed.

1. Women in the Formal Delegations

- Women – preferably women sensitive to gender issues and committed to equality – should form a critical mass in the delegations of the Syrian government and opposition coalition.
- Ideally delegates should remain in close contact and regularly consult existing women's rights and other civil society organizations, so that they can amplify the voices and concerns of women in their communities and better understand the different needs of women and men and the differential impact of policy outcomes on their constituencies.
- All delegation members) should be able to discuss the gender dimensions of the agenda items with their delegations and mediating teams. They should have regular access to gender, peace, and security experts to provide input and technical assistance, including experts of their own choice.

2. An Independent Women's Delegation

To be most effective, the mediation process should expand to include a third party, comprising an all-women independent delegation, with equal rights and responsibilities to participate, negotiate, and determine the agreements and pathway to the future. The rationale is to represent the voice of diverse and inclusive civil society, not a particular religious or national group.

- *Selection process:* Ideally the delegation should be elected by a cross section of Syrian women's and women-led civil society organizations committed to equality, women's rights, and plurality.

If convening and voting processes are not feasible, the women's movement can identify set criteria against which they could nominate and select delegates.

3. Gender Experts and Expertise

Senior and empowered gender experts should be fully integrated into the team of the Joint Special Representative of the United Nations and the League of Arab States, Lakhdar Brahimi. Such experts should ensure the full integration of gender issues in all aspects of the mediation process. In particular the experts should:

- Provide technical input on agenda items (e.g. gender dimensions of ceasefire, humanitarian assistance, governance issues, etc.).
- Have access to official delegations and a formal mandate to provide support (technical, facilitation, informational, etc.).
- Have a role in the negotiations processes and drafting of documentation (when the mediation team's advice is sought) to provide real-time advice/guidance to all parties.
- Have access to and a mandate to engage civil society groups outside the process to ensure their voices/concerns are included.
- Have access to and a mandate to review draft documents to ensure effective inclusion of gender perspectives/issues.

4. Gendered Documentation and Position Papers

The gendered dimensions and implications of each agenda item (per Geneva 1, the London Communiqué) including in relation to international humanitarian assistance should be articulated in position papers and briefs to guide both the mediation team and the delegations.

Where existing materials lack a gendered lens, the Friends of Syria group, the Special Representative's team, the negotiating parties and the UN system should commission papers immediately and ensure that they inform all discussions.

Priority topics include but are not limited to:

- Gendered ceasefire/cessation of hostilities/security arrangements;
- Gender/humanitarian issues;
- Gender dimensions of prisons, both formal and informal, and situation of detainees;
- Transitional governance structures and gender issues;
- Constitution making and drafting processes and gender issues.

5. Independent Civil Society Forum with a Fair Representation of Women

Proposed Mandate/Terms of Reference of the Independent Syrian Civil Society Forum (ISCSF)

The ISCSF should be fully integrated into the UN's mediation strategy and interactions with Friends of Syria group and other governments and members of the international community (e.g. League of Arab States). There should be agreed terms of reference (see below for suggestions) for the ISCSF outlining its responsibilities and rights and giving it a formal role in the negotiations process.

Goal of the ISCSF: To ensure the effective and full participation of independent Syrian NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) committed to peace, human rights, gender equality, good governance, and security in all the international mediation, peacemaking, relief, and recovery processes related to the present and future of Syria.

Nature of Representation (Organizations and Networks): Non-aligned and independent Syrian civil society organizations (particularly women-led groups) committed to working towards a political solution for a sustainable and just peace. Members should be committed to peaceful means of resolving and transforming the conflict, peaceful coexistence, supporting and promoting human rights including women's rights and equality, plurality and human security inside and outside Syria. Members should be involved in relevant areas of work including but not limited to the following:

- Humanitarian issues:
 - Relief and early recovery work
 - Psycho-social relief
- Peacemaking and coexistence
 - Community reconciliation, peacebuilding, and social cohesion
 - Community security
- Human rights
 - Promoting plurality, human rights and equality
 - Addressing and eliminating gender based discrimination and strengthening equality,
 - Ending violence against women
 - Freedom of speech, including freedom of the press
 - Addressing social and economic rights
- Democratic and good governance
 - Women's political and economic empowerment
 - Democratic governance
 - Justice and legal reform
- Social and Economic Development
 - Economic empowerment
 - Education
- Other Sectors tbc

Physical Presence: ISCSF members will be based in Syria and in countries where Syrian refugees are present. There should be sufficient support for them to convene as regularly as they need.

The ISCSF will also have a permanent secretariat in Geneva (or where the negotiations are taking place) with systematic engagement and access to the UN/Arab States Special Envoy team, the Syrian government and opposition delegations, other UN entities, and international partners and states. The secretariat will have representation from the different sectoral CSOs. These representatives will be elected by the broader membership of the ISCSF.

The ISCSF should have the ability to follow the same timetable as the negotiations and meet at the same time and place.

Resources and Technical Support: The ISCSF should be adequately funded by donor governments, including those committed to the women, peace, and security agenda. Funding

should be provided to ensure necessary staffing of the secretariat, travel for members and delegates, and related other expenses.

ISCSF should also have access to international independent and UN technical experts and the resources to enable effective communication, networking, grassroots consultations, and feedback loops with its members and affiliates.

Number of Representatives: ISCSF should always have formal representatives in Syria related processes. Where other delegations are present, the ISCSF representation should at a minimum be equal to than those of other delegations.

In the Geneva II conference, the ISCSF should have 15 representatives.

Access and Role in Peace/Mediation Processes:

Access in Geneva II and all related processes (including conferences on humanitarian issues)

The 15 member representatives of ISCSF will be present in all the negotiations and meetings. They will:

- Have the right to attend all discussions and to provide regular interventions and recommendations;
- Have timely access to position papers pertaining to the negotiations with the ability to provide input and be consulted on positions being developed;
- Have regular briefings from the mediation team and the right to debrief the mediation team about the process and relevant developments (provided by the mediation team);
- Have access to the senior leadership and entire mediation team including technical experts and chairs of each session;
- Have access to all members of the negotiation teams (government and opposition);
- Have the responsibility and right to propose issues to be discussed;
- Have speaking rights at the negotiations including at the opening and closing sessions;
- Be included as potential implementing partners in the implementation of the political agreement;
- Be potentially tasked by the mediators and/or negotiators to help find options, solutions and pathways through difficulties;
- Be guaranteed by the UN and supporting governments that their position papers vis-à-vis key agenda items will be circulated widely to all relevant parties;
- Have the right to negotiate text;
- Have the right to express their support/reservation for negotiated texts;
- Have the right to be signatories to the agreement.

To secure the viability of a process which has thus far been unable to achieve any of its stated goals, it is recommended that an additional Special Envoy or Joint Mediator be appointed with the specific task of ensuring the dialogue with civil society and women is an integral part of the process.