

Women Building the Future of Syria

A Conversation About Realising a Feminist Peace



Brussels V Conference on Supporting Syria and the Region

On Friday March 26, 2021 the Swedish Foreign Ministry, the Folke Bernadotte Academy and the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa, in collaboration with The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, organized an online panel discussion on **“Women Building the Future of Syria and on Realising a Feminist Peace”** in the margin of the Brussels V conference.

It was hosted by Sweden’s Foreign Minister Ann Linde and moderated by Charlotta Sparre, Swedish diplomat and director of the dialogue institute and member of the Swedish Women’s Mediation Network.

This Q&A addresses **key questions and challenges in implementing the women, peace and security agenda in Syria from the perspective of grassroots peace and women’s rights activists.**

It has been edited for clarity and length.

Oula Ramadan

Founder and Director, Badael

Oula Ramadan is a human rights advocate and the founder and Director of Badael, an independent civil society organisation dedicated to supporting grassroots activism, rights-based campaigning, and active citizenship within the Syrian context through civil society support, oral history, advocacy and research. She co-authored a number of research reports which explored civil society activism in Syria and women’s involvement in peacebuilding and holds an MSc in Politics of Conflict, Rights and Justice from SOAS University of London.

What type of support from the international and donor community should be adopted and/or improved to increase women’s roles and meaningful participation at the local and international level in decision-making process?

The covid-19 pandemic contributed to the drying up of funding for feminist organisations and suspension of our activities.

Despite the emergence of various funds for covid-19 emergency response programming, the pandemic has further complicated fundraising for programmes that are generally not considered as priorities for donors. Previous funding for womens rights- and civil society organisations’ longer-term priorities have been largely cut.

What needs to change today is the way we think about political participation of women. Having women at the table to achieve sustainable peace is critical, but by solely focusing on women’s formal participation, women’s daily struggles to fight back against injustices and the patriarchal system they live in and their actions to respond to the covid-19 pandemic and the socio-political situation of the country are often overlooked.

For this reason, **we need to challenge the concept of women’s participation and increasingly recognise the importance of their political actions and efforts on a daily basis**, ranging from fighting the patriarchal system at home to being at the negotiations table. Political and financial efforts towards a democratic and peaceful Syria of the donor-, and international community should be channelled towards the support of women’s and feminist groups and movements in Syria. **The importance of organic growth and development of grassroots movements should be an absolute priority on the donors’ agenda**, as it is directly linked to an increase in women’s political participation and to the inclusion of women of different classes and backgrounds in the political project. Additionally, the support given to local women’s movements will translate into acknowledging women’s political agency and of the concrete impact of women’s grassroots organising. This would encourage women to come together and discuss their needs and priorities, develop strategies for addressing those, which are not formulated by external actors.

A focus on women’s economic empowerment is crucial today more than ever before in Syria. After the collapse of the Syrian economy, more than 80% of the population is below the poverty line and the Syrian pound continues to fall. *The efforts of the donors and international community should therefore be directed at fostering alternative economic patterns that see women’s participation as a key condition for the country’s economic revival.*

Lastly, the donor and international community should offer their support to the justice and accountability efforts that are taking place inside the country and elsewhere/in-, and outside of Syria. A recent example, showing the importance of such processes, is the trial of Anwar R and Eyad A, at the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany. The trial drew attention to the abuses and violations perpetrated by the Syrian Intelligence Services and allowed many survivors to share their stories with the Court. Just two weeks ago, sexual-, and gender based crimes were indicted as crimes against humanity committed as part of a systematic attack against the civilian population in Syria, this is a big achievement that needs recognition and a continued support from the international community.

Massa El Moselly

Community Facilitator and Trainer, Mobaderoon

Massa El Moselly is an architect and social activist from Syria, born in Damascus and graduated from its university. Based today in the old city of Aleppo in North Syria. Massa followed her passion in urban planning and social development and in 2017 launched her own foundation ASAS, which aims to improve the urban lifestyle and to encourage the communities to become more effective in their cities. She also works with Mobaderoon as a community facilitator, trainer and communication coordinator. As she believes in participation, joint empowerment achievement and humanity, Massa hopes to make a positive change in her country.

What are the barriers or challenges that you are still facing at the grassroots, national, and regional level?

The *lack of funding* to the women-led organizations and grassroots organisations inside Syria who do not have offices or bank accounts outside of Syria is a key barrier.

There is also a lack of *funding mechanisms* that allow organisations to work specifically on strengthening their structures, which makes these organisations unable to grow and sustain themselves. *Access to funding* also poses a key challenge since local organisations inside Syria are struggling with favouritism and long bureaucratic funding processes, as they are only eligible for small funding opportunities.

Individuals and women-led organisations and organisations working on women and girls' issues also started to face challenges in receiving money and support due to the obstacles imposed by the *sanctions*. Add to that the huge differences in exchange rates and high fees imposed on transfers. For some donors, the only possibility to transfer funds is through bank transfers via intermediary parties in neighbouring countries, some of which request high percentages as service fees.

It is important to note that newly established women-led organisations are facing ever more challenges, including registration hurdles, individuals being subjected to verbal and even sexual harassment and abuses, and many would diminish the value of the work of the organisations and their staff. Often, women peacebuilders face risks and require protection from the international community to access international advocacy platforms, UN mechanisms and decision-makers who can provide them with financial support.

There is a need for a more *localised response* from the donors to establish local institutions, mainly women-led, that have values based on accountability and human rights. Those institutions should play a role in bringing changes in the community by introducing human rights and peace building values. The local organisations should be entrusted in finding the solutions to local challenges so they can continue the courageous work they are doing.

There is also a general underestimation of the importance of the role of the working mother and the difficulties associated with labour laws. Working women face social difficulties and do not receive enough support to provide care to their children while at work. In some cases, men underestimate the women's work and dominate their decision by denying them access to work under the pretext of prioritising children's needs.

Interventions targeting women are not being holistic. For example, they focus on Women Economic Empowerment and do not link it with political empowerment. And this often poses a barrier to reaching sustainable change. The differences between institutions that work with local communities and feminist institutions at the political level makes them struggle to see the added value in each other's work and how in fact they can complement each other.

Berivan Hussein

Communication Department Lead and Representative
of WROs, Women's Council of North and East Syria

Berivan Hamid Hussein, born in 1988, had studied at the Technical Observers Institute. She represents women's organisations in the political parties at the Women's Council in North and East Syria. She also leads the communication department at the Women's Council in North and East Syria.

Why is an international support needed now more than ever? Why is it important and critical to engage and keep Syria on the agenda?

The deepening Syrian crisis over the last ten years has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe that has been steadily getting worse and there are no indications of any durable solution. It began with a popular movement and turned into a suffocating crisis and led to foreign interventions. Syria is witnessing a proxy war carried out by radical and obscurantist forces, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS, HTS and other groups, who have committed horrific massacres against the Syrian people and women in particular. The crisis further worsened as well after the Turkish state occupied many of the Syrian regions, especially Afrin, Serekaniye and Tal Abyad. As stated in the special report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on The Syrian Arab Republic, the Turkish operation resulted in demographic changes, displacement of indigenous inhabitants, systematic crimes against civilians, and the targeting of women with murder, rape, kidnapping, and arrest.

To reduce the consequences of the crisis, especially in the light of the Caesar Act and the spread of the covid-19 pandemic, **the VETO imposed by Russia and China on the UN cross-border aid delivery through international crossings points must be overruled.** It is important and crucial to maintain the international support for Syria and keep it on the agenda and *find a political solution to the Syrian crisis to guarantee the rights of all community members.* When it comes to women, this means opening fact-checking centers and documenting violations in the occupied areas.

In addition, NES needs a lot of work as it struggles to **remove the radical legacy left by the Islamic Caliphate State and its cells that are still active in the region**, not to mention the presence of thousands of its citizens and holders of terrorist ideology in Al-Hol camp, which is considered a time bomb. This is threatening the region and the world at large.