



Summary Report: Syrian Women's NGOs and Geneva II

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Integrity Research and Consultancy

Somerset House, Strand

London WC2R 1LA

T +44 (0) 207 759 1119

E syria@integrityresearch.com

W www.integrityresearch.com

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This report has been written by Integrity Research and Consultancy.

For further information please email syria@integrityresearch.com

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SUMMARY

The coming Geneva (II) conference represents a crucial opportunity for gender issues to be integrated into the Syrian peace process. Interviews with key stakeholders indicate that women's groups view the Geneva II conference, which will bring together opposition and regime stakeholders, as well as international and regional representatives, as an important opportunity for meaningful women's participation. They are sceptical however of the likelihood of positive outcomes of the conference, especially given the exclusion of women thus far in the peace process. Despite this, research conducted by Integrity, as well as analyses from other transition processes, suggests that women's involvement in Geneva may be crucial to the sustainability of the peace process.

Women's exclusion from the peace process is representative or symptomatic of wider societal exclusion. Interviewees identified structural barriers to women's public participation that include societal conservatism, traditional power imbalances, unequal opportunities (with men) in important social, legal and political areas, and widespread physical insecurity.

Respondents also highlighted limited capacity among women's organisations and a need to improve links between grassroots and umbrella women's organisations as major obstacles to Syrian women's engagement in the peace process. Importantly, there was less interest in top-down approaches compared to what was considered a critical and unaddressed need for grassroots engagement.

In support of this, interviewees recommended: improving women's representation in the National Coalition, both in the Geneva peace talks and more generally; engaging women's groups as a key part of Syria civil society in a consultative Track II forum alongside the Geneva process; and assisting a Syrian-led capacity building of grassroots women's organisations to promote women's social, political and economic empowerment within their own communities.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS REPORT

This research report provides an overview of the current situation of women's non-governmental organisations throughout Syria. Research focused on groups active in areas where opposition actors hold power, although many women's groups make it clear that they are politically neutral and some operate in regime-controlled areas. The report explores their views on, and identifies opportunities for engagement with, the upcoming

Geneva II conference and the Syrian peace process. Information for the report was collected in November and December 2013 and updated following developments in January 2014. Integrity collected, analysed and interpreted data gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews with 37 research participants. These included representatives from grassroots and umbrella women's organisations, civil society, and human rights organisations inside Syria and around the region.

CONTEXT: GENDER ISSUES IN SYRIA

Women's participation in the Syrian public sphere has long been weak. Before the uprising, women held just 12% of parliamentary seats and 6% of ministerial positions in the Syrian Government. According to UNICEF, female labour force participation in 2009 was just 21%.¹ Whilst the Syrian 1973 Constitution specifically states that men and women are equal before the law and forbids discrimination on the grounds of gender, Syrian women continue to face structural barriers to participation in public life, including societal conservatism, widespread physical insecurity, and unequal opportunities (with men) in important social, legal and political areas. Furthermore, while Syria is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), it retains reservations to several Convention articles, including those regarding freedom of movement, residence and domicile; equality in marriage; child marriage; and equality with regard to nationality.²

Organisations focused on gender issues existed in Syria prior to the uprising, and women's issues were broadly regarded as non-threatening by the Syrian Government. However, women's organisations were tolerated only as long as they confined themselves to non-political issues. The still-operative Associations Law of 1958 restricts the freedom to form an association and continues to constrain the institutional development of many women's groups and other civil society organisations (CSOs). Consequently, whilst CSOs have proliferated since the uprising, it tends to be those more established organisations that have focused on gender issues.

¹ UNICEF, *Syria: MENA Gender Equality Profile*, 2009, available at <http://www.unicef.org/gender/files/Syria-Gender-Eqaulity-Profile-2011.pdf>, p. 3

² UN Women, *Syrian Arab Republic: Declarations, Reservations and Objections to CEDAW*, available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations-country.htm>

OVERVIEW OF SYRIAN WOMEN'S NGOS

There are a variety of women's NGOs in Syria, ranging from formalised organisations to loose or informal networks, which altogether encompass a wide range of women from different sectors of society. Interviewees identify some divergence of agendas between grassroots and umbrella organisations. Broadly speaking, grassroots entities tend to focus on service issues such as livelihoods, social and medical support, skills, and relief. More formalised umbrella groups tend to focus on media engagement, advocacy, and women's empowerment and rights. Notably, evidence suggests that in the wake of a series of conferences from November 2012 focused on organisational development and advocacy, there has been a slow but discernible trend towards greater formalisation, by some grassroots organisations and individual activists assisted in these efforts by INGOs.

Respondents note that (Syrian) Kurdish women's organisations have been able to participate more in local politics and society, and have historically been involved in the political opposition, due in part to the oppression they faced by the regime. In particular, interviewees highlight the disproportionate effect on Kurdish women of laws that prevent women from passing citizenship on to their children. Respondents highlighted that the main Kurdish parties in Syria, such as the Democratic Union Party – the PYD – and the Yekiti (Unity) Party, have involved women in decision-making, and have mandated a 40% representation quota for women.

They also suggest that Kurdish groups have an increasing presence within Syrian umbrella groups, noting that certain prominent women's groups are currently seeking to improve their collaboration with Kurdish women's groups. There are however tensions between Syrian Kurdish women's groups, who wish to remain politically neutral, and those affiliated to Kurdish political parties. Two umbrella women's groups reported that they had refused membership to certain Syrian Kurdish women's groups on the basis of such political links. Overall, Kurdish women's organisations have so far been able to flourish more than other grassroots women's organisations in Syria.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN POLITICAL TRANSITION AND GENEVA II

Considerable empirical evidence³ demonstrates that the involvement of women helps to create more sustainable outcomes in peace processes. Women can fulfil various roles in transitional and post-conflict development processes, including: relief, social welfare, conflict mediation, peace-building, human and women's rights protection, advocacy, and social and economic reconstruction. Involving women in peace processes can often contribute to consensus-building across deep divisions, inclusiveness, legitimacy, transparency and sustainability of the peace process, opportunities for structural social change towards more gender equality, as well as building peace 'beyond the negotiating table.'

Potential contributions of Syrian women's groups to the Geneva process

Women's groups interviewed by Integrity suggested that there was consensus that a strong focus on women's issues at Geneva can add value in the following ways, many of which concur with international best practice notes on women and peacebuilding.⁴

- a) **Increasing inclusivity for women and minority groups in the peace process.** Increased involvement of women can lead to a moving of the peace process framework beyond traditional powerbrokers, and to improved communications between political elites and grassroots or marginalised sections of society.
- b) **Ensuring that gender issues are central to the Geneva process.** The inclusion of women at Geneva will help not only to ensure that specific issues relating to women are addressed by the multi-party talks but will support an approach to the transition process that is gender sensitive.
- c) **Making cross party connections.** Respondents identified the capacity for women's groups to organise across party lines and suggested that the

³ Judith Gardner and Judy El-Bushra: Expert Analysis From the forefront of peace and reconciliation: testimonies from women building peace in *Accord Insight: an international review of peace initiatives: Women building peace*, Conciliation Resources, 2013, p. 12. Available at: http://www.c-r.org/sites/cr.org/files/AccordInsight_WomenBuildingPeace_1.pdf.

⁴ Antonia Potter, Chapter 3: Including women and gender perspective in peacemaking in *Managing Peace Process: A handbook for AU practitioners*; Volume 3, 2013; AU and HD Centre. Available at http://www.hdcentre.org/uploads/tx_news/AU-Handbook-Volume-III-Making-Processes-Inclusive.pdf

inclusion of women in the peace process is facilitated by an inclination to ‘focus on the end result, rather than which groups ended up with what positions’.

- d) **Changing the focus of negotiations from power-sharing to peace-building.** The inclusion of women in the Geneva process can help move away from zero-sum negotiations and specific issues affecting women can be used as negotiating points on which opposing parties can build consensus and trust.

Challenges to women’s participation in Geneva

Interviewees noted that Syrian society is largely conservative and that this is reflected by attitudes across the political spectrum. For instance, the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), despite having a relatively high representation of women within its party membership, did not include any women in their original list of delegates to Geneva II. The National Coalition (NC) has yet to announce its delegation to Geneva, and has so far has shown reluctance to include women. Some respondents stated that members of the Islamist bloc within the NC were particularly hostile to increasing women’s representation. While the regime has included women in its Geneva II delegation, analysis broadly suggest that the Syrian state has only won superficial advances on issues of gender equality and women’s rights.

Evidence from respondents also suggests that many women’s organisations (in common with other CSOs) are not engaged effectively by the National Coalition. Respondents also point out that less than ten of the 122 members of the NC are women, and the only female minister in the NC ‘transitional government’ is responsible for the culture and family affairs ministry, which many respondents suggested is indicative of tokenism and of a view that restricts women’s public participation to family affairs.

Most members of grassroots organisations interviewed by Integrity appeared as, or at least perceived themselves to be, disengaged from, and indifferent to, the Geneva peace process. They instead reported being focused on small-scale projects to provide aid and services to their communities and to ‘empower women’ at the local level. According to one respondent, “there is little talk of women’s involvement in politics, this is a luxury. Instead we focus on basic standards of life.”

Although they felt that umbrella groups have the potential to act as a bridge between

grassroots organisations and the international community, respondents from both umbrella groups and grassroots organisations see these linkages currently as weak. Evidence suggests that more work is needed, and that policy and operational assistance could be provided to improve the capacities of both types of organisations and the links between them. As a result, some respondents suggested that women's representation in the peace process predominantly through umbrella groups runs a risk of not reflecting the diverse backgrounds of Syrian women or of sufficiently considering the priorities of grassroots organisations. Without the representation of grassroots organisations, the consolidation of an effective socio-political movement able to achieve substantive change in Syrian society is unlikely to be realised.

Finally, interviewees from umbrella groups and large-scale organisations indicated a general willingness to engage with the international community on the Geneva process but noted more could be done. Many recognised the assistance that they are receiving from INGOs and certain European governments in support of advocacy on women's including in the Geneva process, particularly from Dutch and UK departments. Respondents also identified the UN as playing an active role in support of women's groups with members of prominent groups reporting consultations with the team of the UN envoy to Syria to discuss women's inclusion in Geneva II. Yet interviewees also emphasised their perception that gender issues have been divorced from and subordinated to political settlement issues, and they suggested that the UN could do more to creatively promote or integrate gender issues, particularly through better communications between UN Women and the mediation team. They also recommended that it make better use mechanisms for greater women's participation, such as the use of CEDAW or [UNSC Resolution 2122 and 1325](#).

OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE THE INCLUSION OF WOMEN IN GENEVA II

Despite significant structural barriers, interviewees see the Geneva talks as a way of "setting a cornerstone for the future of Syria and its women." They are aware of the problems they face, and are currently planning how to address these. Respondents identified key issues, including the need for widespread awareness-raising among the Syrian public on issues such as equal citizenship and rights; better links with grassroots organisations; the expansion of organisational bases to better include marginalised

groups; and the need to equitably rebalance traditional power structures.

Women interviewed by Integrity view the Geneva peace process as an opportunity to initiate meaningful women's political participation through strong outside pressure on the NC and others from the international community, particularly donor countries, as well as advocacy and public diplomacy campaigns. Respondents' feedback identified two main options for including women's organisations in the Geneva peace process. Analysis of other peace processes suggests that these options can complement one another:

1. A **direct representative approach**, whereby women are elected to represent their CSOs directly at the negotiation table.
2. A **consultative approach**, whereby CSO representatives participate in a platform that meets in parallel to the official Geneva Track 1 process, and to feed input and recommendations on agenda format and negotiation points among others.

To support Syrian women's engagement in the peace process, interviewees demonstrated less interest in top-down approaches compared to what was considered a critical and unaddressed need for grassroots engagement. In support of this, interviewees recommended three strategies that would improve the inclusion of Syrian women in the peace process.

Recommendation 1: Improve the links between the NC and women's NGOs

Respondents perceive the NC as currently having limited capacity for advocacy on gender issues or women's representation, and many groups interviewed by Integrity said that they did not currently engage with it. Respondents recommended that pressure be applied by the international community to encourage the NC to meet the 30% quota for women's representation. Institutional support on gender issues both through such quotas, as well as through the creation a focal for gender issues and advocacy within the NC; improved engagement with women's groups, particularly umbrella organisations; and support for a formal office in the NC dealing with women's issue to facilitate better access for women's groups within the NC, were all recommended by interviewees. Respondents suggested that such approaches would improve relationships between women's groups on the ground and the NC and would help to

drive action and awareness on gender issues within the NC.

Recommendation 2: Engaging civil society in a consultative Track II forum alongside Geneva II

Interviewees identified a clear need to systematically engage civil society, particularly women's organisations, in discussions around political transition inside Syria. Whilst increasing the number of women and women's organisations in the NC is important to improve the representation of women at Geneva II, many Syrian women's groups interviewed by Integrity view themselves as part of the apolitical civil society that could form a third party at Track II negotiations for Geneva; as women's groups generally had neutral and impartial objectives and principles, they appear to have been precluded or excluded from the Geneva II process. They recommended the creation of a consultative Track II forum in parallel to the Geneva process that would broaden women's representation beyond 30% quota of Track I parties and provide a forum to mainstream gender issues into the process in a systematic and meaningful way.

Recommendation 3: Assisting a Syrian-led capacity building of grassroots women's organisations

Evidence suggests that there remains a gap between umbrella groups and grassroots organisations in terms of scope of vision, capacity and areas of work. Greater dialogue, understanding and coordination between the various levels and kinds of women's organisations is essential for establishing a more coherent approach towards advancing gender issues within Syria. Respondents recommended supporting local initiatives that strengthen women's positions within their communities and that empower them to participate in local governance issues. More broadly, grassroots level support would also better enable mobilization of social movements dedicated to positive social change on gender issues inside Syria.

CONCLUSION

This research, which reflects the responses of women interviewed by Integrity and the insights from studies on the role of women in other peace processes, makes clear the role that Syrian women's groups wish to play in the Geneva process and the contribution they would make through their inclusion. The consensus amongst Syrian women's groups is clear and they emphasise that the importance of an effective women's

contribution in Geneva II is threefold. Firstly, as they make up approximately half of Syrian society, women should be politically represented. Secondly, their inclusion will allow for gender issues to be put at the heart not only of Geneva II itself, but crucially throughout the transitional period. Thirdly, and most importantly, women's participation should not be limited to what is sometimes considered the 'narrow' remit of gender issues. Respondents stated that if women's organisations are allowed to effectively contribute, and if facilitators recognise the diversity of groups and issues they speak for, then women's groups can significantly enhance the chances for a sustainable peace process through their ability to build consensus between the opposing parties to the conflict.

As part of ongoing efforts by the international community and Syrian actors in preparation for Geneva II, a number of Syrian women's groups participated in a conference on January 13, 2014, hosted by UN Women and the Dutch Government. At its conclusion, the women's groups present issued a "Statement on Engagement in the Syrian Political Process" which called for: representatives of women's groups and civil society to act as negotiation monitors; the appointment of a gender advisor to the mediation team; and sustained engagement with the mediation team to ensure that parties adopt the document produced at Geneva II. Crucially, it also calls for women's participation beyond the Geneva conference, including political participation for women throughout the peace process in transitional government and constitutional and legal committees. This key point echoes the recommendations of those interviewed by Integrity – that stakeholders supporting the Geneva peace process must think about a comprehensive strategy for women's inclusion that goes beyond the Geneva conference. The value of including women in the peace process is not just about empowering them and addressing relevant rights issues, rather it is about the broader message they bring, which is to create a transitional process that encourages diversity and symbolises an inclusive, pluralistic civil state.



**LISTEN
COMPREHEND
RECOMMEND**