

COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS – FROM WORDS TO ACTION
Side-event to Brussels Conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the region 2022

FINAL STATEMENT

Syrian women urge decision-makers to ensure the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Syria

In view of the Brussels VI Conference on “*Supporting the future of Syria and the region*”, EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI) and Syria Gender Advocacy Group (GAG) organised on 5th of May 2022 a side-event on “*Combating Violence against Women and Girls – From Words to Action*”. The panel was built on and amplifies the demands of the Syrian women’s rights activists and alerts the international community on the precarious situation of women and girls as they continue to bear the brunt of the armed conflict.

1. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is systematically practiced in Syria. VAWG has exacerbated since the beginning of the armed conflict and has been used as a weapon of war, adding new forms of violence such as conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and increasing enforced disappearance, detention and torture. The percentage of girls who have been taken out of school forcibly, coerced into early marriage or facing the risk of human trafficking has escalated.
2. In the absence of political solution based on United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254, the United Nations (UN) is lacking behind in fighting the global scourge of VAWG and ensuring the implementation of UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security to enable Syrian women’s direct participation in decision-making related to peace building at all levels.
3. Although women often carry the main burden of wars, only 2% of budgets target women’s empowerment or gender equality.
4. Women’s rights initiatives are essential in challenging gender power structures on national and local level. Yet, the protracted armed conflict, massive displacements, travel restrictions, ban on civil society organising, have all hampered the development of sustainable communication channels among the Syrian feminist movement and with women activists from local communities.
5. The lack of sufficient dedicated funds and support to Syrian women’s organisations and initiatives working towards gender equality and combating comprehensively VAWG further pose challenges in achieving the goals of full and meaningful participation of women in decision-making.
6. Aligned with the outcomes of the Brussels V “*Supporting the future of Syria and the region*”, that underlined the importance of Syrian women’s full participation at all stages of the political process, EFI and Syrian women’s rights defenders organised in 2020-2021 a consultative process with over 250 Syrian activists and gender experts from over 100 feminist and human rights organizations, as well as community leaders from various geographical areas. This process unanimously identified VAWG as a major obstacle for women’s participation in all spheres of life and emphasized the need to adopt a comprehensive approach in combating VAWG. A *Common Agenda for combating VAWG* was developed with concrete recommendations to engender policies in the areas of peace and security, legislation, economic participation, education, justice and recovery, media and changing gender stereotypes.
7. A *Gender Advocacy Group* (GAG) was formed, to raise awareness and mobilise local communities as well as to advocate on local, national, and international level, on the need to combat VAWG as a key to enabling women’s participation at all levels. Members of GAG conducted several advocacy trips to National & International decision-making circles, emphasizing the demands and recommendations stemming from the *Common Agenda*. A Syrian Civil Society Conference on combating VAWG took place on 9-10 December 2021 in Brussels, bringing together more than 100 representatives of Syrian women’s rights and human rights organizations, local initiatives and representatives from international organizations, the EU, and the UN.

Considering this context, the panel encourages the local, national and international parties to consult the *Common Agenda for Combating VAWG* and urges the international community to ensure the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, through the following recommendations:

I. Reinforce the implementation of international commitments to combat VAWG and enable the participation of women at all stages of the political process

- Call upon national and international parties to end the armed conflict and efficiently implement the international commitments related to women's rights and gender equality within the UN political process, while supporting pro-actively women's direct participation in all processes and at all levels, through the implementation of the international resolutions related to Syria, especially UNSCR 2254 and UNSCR 1325 on women, peace, and security.
- Exercise pressure and support the development of a gender-sensitive constitution, a comprehensive legislation to combat VAWG and gender-sensitive transitional justice processes in Syria as per the demands and recommendations of Syria gender and legal experts and activists.
- Support preparing a draft of National Action Plan on UNSCR1325 through furthering the consultations with women's rights organisations and CSOs and fully engaging them at all stages.
- Take necessary steps to prevent forced returns to Syria, in accordance with International Law, in the context of increasing political pressure on returns, which heightens the risks of VAWG. To this goal, adopt an international mechanism to monitor the conditions for safe, voluntary, informed and dignified return in Syria, which fully considers women's needs and rights.

II. Ensure the availability of services for victims of VAWG

- Plan for urgent provision of political and financial dedicated means to enhance the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and affordability of services for victims of VAWG in Syria and host countries, including:
 - Shelter/homes for emergency and longer-term protection to women and girls victims of violence and their children
 - Emergency toll-free numbers available 24/24 and mobile applications for all regions in Syria
 - Psychosocial support, VAWG case management, health and mental health services
 - Free legal aid and counselling
- Support the development of an appropriate referral system and initiatives to spread information on all available services.
- Support capacity-building to service providers and activists working to this aim.
- Provide economic support to income-generating initiatives of victims.
- Improve coordination between international stakeholders and with national actors providing services for victims of VAWG in Syria and host countries.

III. Support women's role in early recovery and women's economic participation

- Make sure that women and women's rights defenders participate as interlocutors in all actions, consultations and projects linked to peace building, early recovery and community development, always asking the question: *Where are the women?*
- Plan and provide targeted funding to women's innovative economic empowerment programmes and vocational trainings as a part of early recovery and local development projects.



- Support the formation of women's economic, productive cooperatives, that enable women to enter safely the labour market, taking into consideration the environment and climate justice.
- Support gender-sensitive educational programmes for children to meet the needs of girls, including targeted actions to facilitate the return of dropouts to school, literacy initiatives and scholarships for higher education, using the *Manual for Gender Equality in Education*.¹
- Support studies and research on the situation and conditions of women in Syria and Syrian women refugees in the asylum countries, to support a better informed and evidence-based projects' design and gender-sensitive decision-making, to raise public awareness on gender equality and to contribute to combating all forms of VAWG and gender-based discrimination.

IV. Strengthen women's rights organisations, networks and platforms

- Call upon the international donors to secure targeted and long-term funding, with no less than 30% of the financial resources granted to the Syrian women's rights organisations and women's initiatives inside and outside Syria and support programmes for the implementation of WPSA, for the prevention, protection and response to VAWG, for the promotion of gender equality and gender-sensitive legislation, for enabling women's access to economic resources and political participation, for gender-sensitive education and awareness-raising and for the capacity-building of Syrian feminist activists and organisations.
- Call upon the UN to work towards ensuring the independence and freedom of civil society and women's rights organisations, their right to participate, and protecting them as autonomous legal entities.
- Encourage structural dialogue and cooperation between stakeholders whilst recognizing and safeguarding the independent role and expertise of the women's rights CSOs.
- Address the negative effects of economic sanctions on the work of the Syrian civil society organizations including women's rights organisations and defenders and design mechanisms enabling their support and protection.

EuroMed Feminist Initiative and the Syria Gender Advocacy Group hold decision-makers accountable to keep the women, peace and security agenda as a priority in the political process and to pursue their financial engagement to address the growing needs faced by women and girls. We ask organisers of the Brussels VI Conference a follow up on pledges and political commitment to these important issues for the future of Syria and peace in the region.

¹ https://efi-ife.org/sites/default/files/EFI_Gender%20Equality%20Education%20manuel_AR.pdf
https://efi-ife.org/sites/default/files/EFI_Gender%20Equality%20Education%20manuel_FR.pdf