



THE PARTICIPATION OF SYRIAN WOMEN IN POLITICAL PROCESSES 2012–2016, LITERATURE REVIEW

SYRIAN WOMEN IN POLITICAL PROCESSES

Foreword

“The revolutionary Syrian woman is a reality, not a legend.”¹

It is now five years since the UN began its mediation efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict. The sixth round of peace talks in Geneva recently came to an end.

Throughout this process over the past five years, women have remained largely excluded from participating meaningfully. Considerable efforts have been made to include Syrian women in the peacemaking process – principally those of Syrian women – with the support of the United Nations, and specifically the Special Envoy on Syria and UN Women, international women’s non-governmental organisations and UN Member States.

As members of the international community, we have little insight into the number, role or indeed influence of women participating as negotiators within the Government delegation to the Geneva peace process. We do know, however, that two women have been participating as negotiators within the opposition delegation to the peace talks. We also know from other international experience and recent academic research that inclusive peace processes in which women are able to exercise strong influence on the negotiations are more likely to lead to sustainable peace.

So now – more than 6 years after the brutal conflict in Syria began and more than 5 years since the UN-mediated negotiations to end the conflict got started – the need to ensure women’s meaningful participation and inclusion in peacemaking in Syria is urgent.

The current and former Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Special Envoy to Syria have repeatedly pressed the Syrian negotiating parties to include women in their delegations to the peace talks. Yet, by early 2016, both the Government and opposition sides had continuously failed to include women in their delegations. The Special Envoy, supported by UN Women, then established the Women’s Advisory Board of Syrian women. The Board was tasked to advise the Special Envoy on the process including gender responsive perspectives. The Special Envoy also appointed a gender adviser to his Office. Similarly, in February 2016, the opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC) established a Women’s Advisory Committee to empower and enhance women’s presence in the political process.

¹ Quote from a sign held by a member of the Salamia Coordination Committee, 29 July 2013. Syria Untold: www.syriauntold.com/en/event/messages-in-honor-of-revolutionary-syrian-women/

Yet, more than a year later, Syrian women are still to participate meaningfully at the negotiating table in Geneva. Many Syrian women activists have also expressed concern at the lack of a structured process to bring input from women's experience, perspectives and priorities from inside Syria into the Geneva-based negotiation room. Some Syrian women activists have further asserted that efforts by some international actors have even negatively impacted the Syrian women's movement and its ability to unite its voice and be heard.

By commissioning this literature review, *The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation* sought to identify some of the persistent challenges facing Syrian women's participation in the political and peace processes. But it also makes a number of proposals on how to strengthen women's participation in the peacemaking process in Syria. Principally, *the review proposes that the UN Secretary-General commission an independent review into the UN's support to the participation of Syrian women in the peacemaking process to date.*

The literature review also recommends how the international community, including *The Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation* and UN Member States could strengthen and promote efforts to support the participation of Syrian women in both the Geneva peace process, as well as strengthen the role of women in peacebuilding initiatives at the local level, and the linkages between the two. I believe that these efforts would contribute to ensuring a more comprehensive approach to women's role in peacemaking and to building sustainable peace in Syria.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lena Ag', with a stylized, flowing script.

Lena Ag
Secretary General
The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation
Stockholm, May 31st 2017

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AU	African Union
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
UPR	Universal Periodic Report
HNC	High Negotiations Committee
GONGOs	Government Non Government Organisations
Kvinna Till Kvinna	Kvinna Till Kvinna Foundation
NGOs	Non Government Organisations
QUANGOs	Quasi Non Government Organisations
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
UN	United Nations
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WAB	Women's Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy for Syria
WAC	Women's Advisory Council of the High Negotiations Committee
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Executive Summary

From peaceful protests against autocratic misrule in Dara'a, southern Syria, in spring 2011, the past six years have seen much of Syria engulfed in civil war and internationalized conflict. Aspects of this conflict (including its humanitarian impact and implications for regional and global security) have been extensively documented. Less well reported and understood are the internationally brokered and community-based civilian processes aimed at securing a just and lasting peace. Even less well documented and understood is the role – or lack thereof – of Syrian women's participation in these processes.

This literature review aims to uncover and analyse thinking on Syrian women's participation in the various political processes underway since 2012 until 2016. It seeks to summarize key findings, identify outstanding questions relating to women's participation, and propose recommendations as to how international actors can better support Syrian women to exercise their rights of political participation and contribute to the peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts required to build a new vision for their country. The review has been commissioned by The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (Kvinna till Kvinna), which has provided a range of support to women's political participation in the Syrian peace process.

The main research questions of the literature review relate to the emergence, role, contribution, and impact of women's participation in the various political processes relating to Syria between 2012 and 2016; the challenges facing the participation of Syrian women, including practical, social and cultural pressures on women's participation; and the identification of conditions to be met in order for women to have a greater influence on the peace and transition processes. The methodology of the review comprised desk research of English language academic articles and scholarly writings, surveys conducted on the ground by women's and peacebuilding organisations and think tanks, print media articles by Syrian and international women's activists, social media entries of Syrian activists and organisations, and press releases and advocacy statements of supporting organisations including international non governmental organisations.

The present literature review is divided into four parts. Part 1 sets out introductory and background material. Part 2 summarizes recent relevant international experience of women's participation in political processes as they relate to peace and transition processes. Part 2 also reviews the situation of women, civil society and women's organisations in Syria before the 2011 revolutionary protests. It considers the participation of women in the various political processes since 2011; that is the formal peace process in Geneva, community-based peacebuilding initiatives, including through the work of local councils, and efforts to engender the constitution. It also explores the specific recent experience of Kurdish women in Syria to interrogate what light this experience can shed on women's participation more generally in Syria. Part 2 concludes by highlighting the key challenges to women's participation in political processes and the specific risks attendant to the support of international actors to women's participation in political processes. Part 3

seeks to draw together the findings of the literature review. The final part, Part 4, proposes recommendations addressed to international non-governmental organisations, interested states – with particular focus on Sweden – and the United Nations, to more urgently and effectively support the right to participation of women, their interests and their perspectives in the peace and transition processes in Syria.

The following conclusions emerge from the literature review undertaken in Part 2:

The quality of literature surveyed is uneven and there are significant gaps:

There is considerable, albeit repetitive, written commentary on the absence of women from the formal peace talks, primarily authored by Syrian activists, international non-governmental organisations working with and supportive of specific women activists, and non-Syrian journalists. Yet there is little critique on what has worked well, what has gone wrong, and what should be done in the future to advance women's participation, with only a smattering of English language discussions highlighting what Syrian women actually think about the peace processes. Moreover, there is no analysis that looks at women's holistic participation across the various different processes which, this review posits, make up the spectrum of 'political and peace processes'.

The expectations relating to women's participation by Syrian women and their supporters are more onerous than those on men:

The experience of Syrian women has confirmed the trend emerging from other conflict contexts; that women are subject to more onerous expectations, criticisms and obstacles than male participants. For instance, the Syrian experience illustrates the 'requirement' for women to demonstrate that they can work cross-party/ideology and come up with common positions before they are taken seriously in relation to their participation in formal peace processes. These expectations are not required or expected of potential male participants and result in the creation of unintended – and intended – obstacles to the participation of women. Some of these expectations are held in the mind of some Syrian women as well as their international supporters. They presumably arise from sub-conscious gender biases, understandable frustration at the situation continuously unfolding in Syria, as well as the highly masculinized framework of international relations. Yet without identifying, 'outing' and intentionally addressing these expectations and the obstacles that they place before women, women's participation will continue to be undermined and sidelined, with their transformative potential unfulfilled.

Syrian women's political participation must be seen in the broader context of the nature of the revolution and the society from which it emerged:

There is strong consensus across the literature of the deeply patriarchal nature of Syrian society and its impact on women's ability to participate in the public sphere, both before the revolution and during the conflict. Though the revolutionary protests initially enabled women to perform an active and central role in the street protests and other mobilizations, the subsequent militarization of the conflict forced women away from the streets and away from the cameras. The literature also argues that the revolution was not a revolution for women's rights anyway; it was a revolution

aimed at changing the political status quo and, as such, women's rights did not feature prominently within the views of change that were propagated by the revolution. Nonetheless, a generation of young Syrian feminists has evolved during the revolution. Today, efforts by some Syrian women to participate across the spectrum of political processes are held back by men – not just 'jihadis' – but family members, colleagues, community elders who pull out the cards of 'qualification' and 'security' to prevent women's participation, and more generally lean back into the comfortable cultural armrest of traditional values to constrain women's exercise of their political rights. Yet women's participation, and specifically the challenges facing women's organizing efforts today, should also be seen in light of the historical legacy of an authoritarian regime which occupied public space for more than 40 years and which disrupted the organic development of a strong and independent civil society, and particularly the formation of a 'Syrian women's movement'.

Syrian women are participating across a spectrum of political and peace

processes: The experience of Syrian women since 2012 strongly supports the finding of the 2015 Global Study of implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 – that is, to look at 'politics' and 'peacemaking' differently – not only as a set of actors around a negotiation table, but as a comprehensive process within a society that is inclusive, diverse, and reflective of the interests of the whole society. In the context of Syria, this entails reimagining the participation of women in political and peace processes to include women's participation across the range of processes and mechanisms that address, mediate and resolve local grievances and build understanding, collaboration, trust and resilience. These processes comprise women's political participation in the formal peace process, as well as those activities understood as local peacebuilding activities, including through the mechanism of local councils, and the efforts of women to engender the constitution building process. All these strands of activity sit within a 'spectrum of political and peace processes' ongoing within Syria today.

The structure of participation in the formal peace process excludes women's meaningful participation.

Given the unsuccessful inclusion of Syrian women in the Geneva peace process over the past five years, it is necessary to unpack what 'meaningful participation of women' in the specific Syrian context means. This examination should facilitate the creation of strategies, processes and structures that ensure broad and deep engagement with women in the formal peace process and which respond to women's perspectives across the range of issues under consideration. Such structures should take into account the need for specifically designed platforms or fora that facilitate the participation of women working at the community level in these peace processes, the strengthening of linkages between those women engaging in international mechanisms and processes and other women, and the building of a culture of feedback, accountability, transparency and trust between women operating at different spaces. Such an approach would help to change the focus of negotiations from power-sharing to peacebuilding, through moving away from zero-sum negotiations and by ensuring that specific issues affecting women can be used as negotiating points on which opposing parties can build consensus and trust.

The focus of international support to women's political participation has been overly narrow: The literature suggests an unbalanced focus by international actors on Syrian women's engagement in international processes to the detriment of support for community based activists and their work. This has contributed to the fragmentation of the fragile Syrian women's movement. International support should promote a more comprehensive approach to women's leadership and build upon a community leadership development base, reaching out to a wider range of women that reflect women's everyday experiences and needs. Innovative – even experimental – context-determined approaches are required to see what can work, where and how.

Local councils are an important vehicle to strengthen women's political participation: International support currently provided to local councils appears neither to see the political elements inherent in service delivery nor to view local councils as vehicles to promote women's participation and capacity development. Given the ambitious and expansive vision of local councils to serve as the nucleus of the municipalities of the future transitional government, this is a significant missed opportunity to build the political capacity and influence of women. Equally, taking into account the intrinsically political capacities, constituencies and powerbase that some women are already developing through their work in their communities, increased participation of women in decision making roles within local councils would serve to enhance the relevance, legitimacy and effectiveness of the local councils and establish them as more politically representative and influential structures.

The constitution building process provides a strategic opportunity to transform women's political participation: Syrian women activists have been working since 2011 to develop an inclusive constitution building process, which integrates women's rights and gender equality. It is important that these engendering efforts be located within a broad roadmap towards a new constitution, with clear pathways setting out how the engendering process fits into this broader roadmap. There is urgency, therefore, to develop the vision of a broad consultation process for the new constitution of Syria. The participation of women in the constitution drafting process would strengthen women's capacities through the development of new or enhanced knowledge, skills, experience and confidence, and enhance women's understanding of their own civic role and responsibilities. Internalizing such understandings could be profoundly important to assisting Syrian women's efforts to navigate their role, opportunities and contributions during the transitional period and beyond.

The experience of Kurdish women in Syria is highly relevant: The literature is clear that the lives of some Kurdish women in Syria have been transformed in the public and security sphere since the revolution. Yet, notwithstanding their considerable achievements, a number of commentators have cautioned against treating the experience of Rojava as a 'model' for women's participation in other parts of Syria. This is primarily because of the absence of a comparative unifying ideology that prioritizes women's liberation amongst Syrian groups, and because of the prevailing dominance of the underlying patriarchal values, structures, modes

and thinking of discrimination within Kurdish society. Indeed, Rojava remains a work in progress. Nevertheless, the experience of Kurdish women in Syria should not be disregarded. Certainly it is worth exploring the way in which and the extent to which the Kurdish experience could inform Syrian women's political efforts.

Women should engage men as allies to promote women's political participation:

The literature points to the pivotal role of men in supporting – or not – the participation of women especially at local levels. For a lot of women, support by men within their families, broader community or at the institutional level can make – or break – their opportunities. It is not sufficient to dismiss these concerns. It is essential that those seeking to support Syrian women's' participation work closely with men, and be able to effectively explain why gender equality is relevant and beneficial to the whole of society and not just to women. Noting deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes, it would be wise to build upon the ongoing progressive experience of working with Syrian men and the evolving pioneering regional experience on masculinities and the role of men in advancing gender equality.

Women should engage the media to challenge stereotypes and reshape the narrative:

The literature notes how the mainstream local, regional and international media has chosen to fixate on military developments in Syria, thereby perpetuating a binary discourse in which the conflict is reduced to one between Al-Assad and the so-called Islamic State. Research undertaken in 2016 on emerging Syrian media confirms the low coverage of women-related topics, the passive depiction of women as victims of violence, and the infrequent publishing of women's images. This has served to frame the local and broader public's view of women as helpless and lacking agency. It is imperative that civil society, including women activists and women's organisations, robustly engage local, regional and international media to re-shape the prevailing narrative of the conflict, specifically the narrative relating to women's experience and their role in the conflict, and disseminate women's views on the political and transitional processes and the future Syria. If this does not happen, the narrative becomes the truth.

Responding to these findings will require a **new and invigorated integrated strategy of support by international actors**, building upon experience to date. This report sets out seven broad recommendations to help shape this strategy:

First, all international actors, including the UN, providing support to women's political participation should urgently undertake an **independent review of their support** to identify what is working, what is not working, and what needs to be done differently. This assessment should also incorporate a risk analysis of their own organisation in order to ensure that they do no harm in their efforts to promote women's rights.

Second, given the considerable knowledge gaps that this review highlights, **research and analysis should be undertaken, primarily by INGOs working with women in Syria, the surrounding countries and the diaspora, to plug these gaps.** Additional analysis is required in a number of areas, including women's experience at the community levels in local mediation, conflict resolution and building

confidence, women's experience of working with men as allies to promote gender equality and women's participation, and the role of regional and international media in countering gender stereotypes and promoting women's rights.

Third, a revamped and expanded programme of **technical, organisational and funding support from donor states, UN agencies and INGOs** is required to meet the needs of Syrian grass roots women activists and organisations, through bold, innovative and experimental approaches, and help create a strong feminist women's movement. This programme should include support in at least the following areas, mobilization and movement building; conflict analysis, negotiations and mediation; political engagement and leadership; and strategic planning.

Fourth, communication, trust and accountability must be rebuilt amongst women activists and organisations in order for the Syrian women's movement to play a prominent role in the peace and transitional processes. **International actors – particularly INGOs – can play a facilitating role in strengthening the linkages** between community based women activists and women experienced in operating within international processes.

Fifth, **high level sustained international political engagement** is required by the United Nations – the Secretary-General, the Special Envoy, and the members of the Security Council – and other supporting states to **leverage their influence on the conflict negotiating parties** and ensure the meaningful participation and inclusion of women in the formal peace process.

Sixth, **all international actors should consider all other ongoing political processes as a conduit to mainstream and strengthen women's political participation, capacity and influence**, including through longer-term institutional support to local councils as well as to expanded support to the constitution building process and the related engendering efforts.

Finally, Sweden should continue to operationalize its explicitly feminist foreign policy in ways that lead to real and lasting change for women, including through the exercise of political influence on the conflict negotiating parties, and increased support to women's participation across the spectrum of political and peace processes, particularly at the grass roots level. **Sweden should also consider convening, as soon as practicable, a consortium of international actors in support of Syrian women's political participation** in order to ensure development and implementation of the integrated strategy set out in this review.

1 Introduction

“Syria needs a renewed feminist movement that can bring accountability to those violating women’s rights and restricting their freedoms, both during and after the revolution.”

Razan Ghazzawi, woman activist
[Source: Syria Untold 2014]

1.1 Background and context

From peaceful protests against autocratic misrule in Dara’a, southern Syria, in spring 2011, the past six years have seen much of Syria engulfed in civil war and internationalized conflict (internal conflict in which other states intervene militarily on one or both sides). The human rights abuses, violations of international humanitarian law and commission of international crimes by the conflict parties, the devastating humanitarian consequences inflicted upon the civilian population, the consequences for regional and broader security, and the resulting geo-political hegemonic shifts have all been well researched and documented, the subject of considerable attention, investigation and highly visible deliberation. Less well reported, analyzed and understood are the ongoing formal peace process brokered by the United Nations (UN) – underway on and off for more than five years - the various community-based civilian efforts and initiatives to shore up peace at the local level across Syria, and other processes aimed at building a new Syria out of conflict. Even less understood across Syria, the region and internationally is the role of Syrian women’s participation in these processes. This literature review aims to uncover thinking on Syrian women’s political participation in the various political and peace processes underway.

This literature review has been commissioned by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (Kvinna till Kvinna), Kvinna till Kvinna has for many years supported work for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, including promoting women’s participation in formal and informal peace processes. Over the last few years, Kvinna till Kvinna has built numerous partnerships in the Middle East, including with Syrian women human rights defenders in the frame of the Syria Regional Programme. To this end, Kvinna till Kvinna supported the study ‘Peacebuilding Defines Our Future Now’ in 2015 looking into women’s peacebuilding efforts in Syria which informed the need to commission this literature review.

1.2 Purpose and scope

This literature review focuses on issues relating to the scope and influence of women’s political participation in the various Syrian political and peace processes underway during 2012 to 2016. The review seeks to summarize key findings, identify outstanding questions relating to women’s participation including those relating to both challenges and opportunities for women’s participation, and propose

recommendations to international actors to better support Syrian women to exercise their rights of political participation and contribute to the peace and transition processes in Syria.

The results of the review indicate that ‘women’s participation in political processes in Syria’ should be understood to include the following activities, events and processes:

- Women’s participation in the revolutionary protests that began in April 2011 in Dara’a in southern Syria and which quickly grew to cover most of the country;
- The participation of women in the formal peace negotiations led by the United Nations since June 2012 (‘Geneva I, II, and III’) and other structures set up by the UN Special Envoy, such as the Women’s Advisory Board and the Civil Society Support Room;
- Grassroots, local or community-based peacebuilding activities undertaken by women as individuals or groups, associations, and organisations in both government and non-government controlled territories;
- The role of women in the work of local councils set up in non-government controlled territories;
- The efforts of women to engender the constitution as part of the constitution building process; and
- The specific experience of Kurdish women in the de facto autonomous region of Rojava in northern Syria.

These activities are all understood as ‘political’ or to have ‘political aspects’ because they relate to the process of making decisions and exercising power over a group of people.

1.3 Main research questions and methodology

The main research questions of the review are the emergence, role, contribution, and impact of women’s political participation in the various political and peace processes relating to Syria between 2012 and 2016; the challenges facing the participation of Syrian women, including practical, social and cultural pressures on women’s participation; and identification of the conditions to be met in order for women to have a greater influence on the peace and transition processes.

The methodology of the literature review comprised desk research of English language academic articles and scholarly writings, surveys conducted on the ground by women’s and peacebuilding organisations and think tanks, interviews with and traditional media articles by Syrian and international women’s activists, social media entries of Syrian activists and organisations, and advocacy statements and press releases of supporting organisations, including INGOs.

Although the literature is diverse, analysis is limited. Most of the available literature is comprised of critiques of women’s participation in the formal (i.e. UN-led) peace process. There is limited qualitative research focusing on Syrian women’s participation in local peacebuilding efforts, though the few reports prepared by

Syrian women activists that do exist are of high quality. In the main, non-Syrian reports on local peacebuilding actors do not refer significantly, if at all, to women. UN writing on women's participation is generally limited to UN Women press releases and other such documents detailing UN Women's support to women activists.

To date, only a few scholarly articles on Syrian women's participation in the peace processes are available and are, generally speaking, descriptive rather than analytical. Significantly, there is an impressive, and increasing, supply of academic literature relating to the political awakening of Kurdish women in general and specifically of Kurdish women in Syria. It was not possible to find any written analysis on the constitution drafting process nor the specific constitution engendering process underway beyond press releases and advocacy materials authored by those Syrian and international organisations engaged in the process.

In order to place the experience of Syrian women within the broader context of international experience, the review also considered resources relating to international practice and experience of women's participation in formal and informal peace processes. An expanding rich trove of material exists in this field, including both qualitative case studies and an increasing number of quantitative surveys.

The database of sources comprising the review is annexed to the report.

1.4 Limitations of the review

In addition to the limitations of the available body of literature cited above, it is important, to flag that the review did not include Arabic language sources. It is also assumed that some literature relating to support provided by international actors to women's participation is not available in the public domain. Therefore, the review recognizes that it cannot cover all completed or ongoing initiatives.

As such, the review should be considered as an important first step towards responding to the main questions and be seen as comprising a baseline of the understanding relating to the participation of women across the range of political and peace processes underway in Syria. Analysis of Arabic language resources and interviews with key individuals as a second step would help to detail the specificities of and challenges to women's participation, and further flesh out nuances and exceptions to the conclusions, with a view to crafting more precise recommendations.

2 Review of Relevant Literature

“Do not leave your resolutions in a drawer, they do not deserve only lip service.”

Syrian woman activist to the Security Council, January 2014

[Source: Butler 2014]

This part is divided into nine sections, reflecting discrete stages, activities, and challenges relating to women’s participation in the political and peace processes in Syria.

2.1 Beyond the Syrian experience: International experience of women’s participation in political processes

This section goes beyond Syria to focus more broadly on international experience of women’s participation in political and peace processes, contextualized from various sources, including both qualitative and quantitative research on global trends. For purposes of adding granularity to a necessarily broad-brush picture, literature relating to specific peace processes has also been considered.

This section is included to both frame the efforts of Syrian women in the broader international context – arguably to see where Syrian women are – and to assist the formulation of recommendations that are of direct relevance to Syrian women and their experiences.

2.1.1 Overview of the literature

Since the turn of the present decade, there has been growing attention to the issue of women and formal peace processes, and a resulting sharp increase in research and literature. In 2012, Nilsson undertook the first statistical evaluation of what was happening: examining if and how the involvement of society actors – including women – in peace agreements affects the durability of peace. Nilsson found that the inclusion of civil society actors, such as trade unions, women’s organisations, and religious actors, and political actors in combination in the peace agreement could serve to increase the durability of peace, particularly in non-democratic countries. Nilsson notes the link between the inclusiveness of peace processes (the number and range of non-traditional civil society participants) and the quality and sustainability of peace processes, whereby a clear correlation is established between more open models of negotiation and a higher likelihood that the agreement will hold and prevent lapse into conflict. Nilsson’s research calculates that if civil society actors are included in a peace process and resulting agreement, the risk of the peace agreement failing is reduced by 64%. A key factor associated with the inclusion of civil society actors relates to the increased legitimacy of the process, which may contribute to the durability of peace. Nilsson further notes that

there is nothing that suggests civil society engagement has negative implications for the durability of peace (Nilsson 2012).

In 2015, Stone reviewed 181 peace agreements signed between 1989-2011. This research looked beyond civil society as a whole, focusing on women in peace agreements in a wide range of roles. Stone found that peace processes that included women as witnesses, signatories, mediators and/or negotiators demonstrate a 20% increase in the probability of the resulting peace agreement lasting two years, and a 35% increase in the probability of the peace agreement lasting 15 years (Stone 2015).

Diaz and Tordjman's 2012 sample of 31 major peace processes from 1992-2011 confirmed the very low rates of female participation in such processes notwithstanding the impact of women's inclusion in formal peace processes on sustaining peace. Their research showed that women represented on average 9% of formal negotiating delegations, 4% of peace process signatories, 3.7% of witnesses and 2.4 % of chief negotiators – with no woman having served as the chief negotiator in an UN-led peace process. Strikingly, the authors found that 'the underrepresentation of women at peace talks is much more marked than in other public decision making role, where women are still underrepresented but where the gap has been steadily growing' (Diaz and Tordjman 2012).

Diaz and Tordjman's important work has been supplemented by a comprehensive and widely cited study on the participation of women in formal peace processes undertaken between 2011-2015 by the Geneva Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Paffenholz 2016). The study examined 40 peace processes undertaken from 1992-2013. The focus of this research was to examine the role and impact of all actors and groups – in addition to the main conflict parties – included in peace and political transition processes throughout all phases, including post agreement implementation.

2.1.2 Key findings and insights

A review of the broader literature on women and peace processes supports the following findings and insights.

The impact and value of women in peace processes

The first set of Paffenholz's conclusions relate to the impact of women on peace processes. Women make substantial contributions to peacemaking and do not negatively impact the peace process. The number of women at the negotiating table is not what makes the difference: the direct inclusion of women does not, per se, increase the likelihood that agreements are signed and implemented. Instead, it is the quality of women's quality participation in Track 1 processes² that counts. 'Quality participation' refers to women being in a position to exercise strong

² Track 1 processes refer to official formal government diplomacy involving representatives from the state and possibly international organisation, and are distinguished from unofficial, informal and non-governmental interactions, which may involve conflict resolution specialists, private citizens, NGOs, referred to as track 2 diplomacy.

influence on the negotiations. The conditions for quality participation includes explicit decision making processes, without which women's opportunity to impact can be limited, and well designed selection criteria and procedure directly linked to the representativeness of participants and particularly to the level of women's influence. When women's groups were able to strongly influence negotiations or push for a peace deal an agreement was always reached (Paffenholz 2016).

The process of women's inclusion

Paffenholz's second set of conclusions relate to the process of women's inclusion in peace processes. Paffenholz uses the available data to argue that those pushing for inclusion of women have focused excessively on the negotiating table as the main track of the peace process whilst several modalities for inclusion may be present either separately or in parallel to each other. Rather than viewing the negotiating table as a single entry point for women's participation, the formal negotiating table may be comprised of multiple entry points permitting women's engagement to manifest itself in different ways and which should be self-reinforcing (Paffenholz 2016). For example, in the context of the African Union (AU) mediation of the conflict and political crisis resulting from the disputed 2007 elections in Kenya, researchers have noted how Kenyan women's civil society organisations engaged with a formal mechanism – the AU mediators – to champion their interests during the mediation process (Patty et al. 2015). Colombia expert Bouvier has also highlighted the various ways in which women participated in the Colombian peace process: as negotiators at the table with full negotiating powers, as participants on commissions, sub-commissions and working groups, and as civil society activists lobbying negotiators at the peace table from 2014-2016 (Bouvier 2016).

Paffenholz contends that women's participation in formal peace processes is rarely uncontested. Indeed, women's groups are typically only included after strong lobbying from women's organisations and/or international mediators. She emphasizes that this situation is itself highly gendered: that this is different for other groups where negotiating parties are more open to include, for example, civil society organisations, diaspora groups, refugee representatives, business representatives (Paffenholz 2016). The presence of Graça Machel as one of the three AU mediators of the Kenyan peace process, Machel's openness to women activists, and her advocacy on their behalf with the other two male AU mediators and the mainly male negotiating parties has been credited as facilitating Kenyan women's participation in the peace process, through meetings with the mediators and the negotiators, though not as negotiating parties (Geneva Graduate Institute Kenya 2016).

Strategies and approaches that have promoted effective inclusion of women

Paffenholz highlights the visibility of a unified women's movement in facilitating meaningful contact and communication with mediation teams. She notes that where women have jointly pushed for the commencement of negotiations or signing of agreements, they have had a very high success rate, or indeed where women formed coalitions, mobilized around common issues and appeared at the negotiating stage as a unified group, there was much greater chance of their voice being heard and acknowledged (Paffenholz 2016).

Much of the literature on country case studies affirms this finding, underscoring the assertion for 'broad and united coalitions to ensure that women's views systematically find their way onto the peace table' (Diaz and Tordjman 2012). Bouvier underlines the pivotal nature of the National Summit of Women for Peace in Bogota in October 2013. The Summit brought together more than 450 women activists from all over Colombia, representing different ethnic, regional, cultural and political background, to create 'a platform that brought together a wide range of key women's organisations and networks and helped them to articulate their priorities and leverage their messaging at national and international levels'. One month later, the Colombian President appointed two women to the government negotiating team with full negotiating powers (Bouvier 2016).

However, in response to the considerable emphasis on the need for women to 'unify' in order to be taken seriously, other literature, particularly that authored by practitioners, has drawn attention to the reality that women are not a homogenous group. Location, education, class and opportunity condition how individuals are affected by conflict (Conciliation Resources 2013). Women have multiple identifies, affiliations, interests and expectations that shape their views and responses to conflict (Conciliation Resources 2017).

Barriers to effective inclusion of women: gendered norms and attitudes around conflict

Paffenholz affirms that agreement within and between women's groups themselves is not enough to ensure women's participation. Instead, Paffenholz identifies 'a deeper ideological resistance to women's full participation that requires coalition building across societies' (Paffenholz 2016), which, as other researchers have noted, 'cannot be explained by their [women's] alleged lack of experience in conflict resolution or negotiations' (Diaz and Tordjman 2012; Bouvier 2016). Indeed, in some cases, a higher bar is set for women's participation than for other groups; women are expected to be both prominent leaders with technical experience and activists with large grass roots constituencies (O'Reilly, Ó Súilleabháin and Paffenholz 2015). The 2015 Global Study on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (Global Study) is even more direct, declaring that 'Women often don't lack skills – and yet this is one way of excluding them' (Global Study 2015).

Indeed, the literature appears to confirm that what is needed is training and awareness raising of the overwhelmingly male gatekeepers on the importance of women's engagement. The Global Study suggests that external actors have exaggerated deference for what are perceived to be local mores when it comes to women and do not push for women's participation for fear of appearing culturally unaware or insensitive. Curiously, this same respect for norms is not extended when it comes to the participation of other groups deemed to be crucial for successful political dialogue, such as key power brokers in exile, business leaders, representatives of refugee communities, minorities, religious groups etc. (Global Study 2015). Given that mediators can often determine the extent to which women's voices are heard, leadership and political will are required from the mediator who

'needs to fight against cultural resistance and ensure commitment to universal norms and standards as an important contributor to the legitimacy of peace processes' (Global Study 2015).

Narrow, gendered and context-blind attitudes towards politics and peacemaking

Considerable quantitative literature exists relating to the scope of formal and informal peace processes and their relationship to each other. For example, a 2013 review by Conciliation Resources of 9 case studies of women's engagement in peacebuilding, including Angola, Cambodia, Northern Ireland and Sudan, revealed a very broad range of peacebuilding activities conducted by women at the local level. These included engaging locally with male elders, commanders and warlords to advocate for cessation of hostilities, negotiating between warring parties, persuading family members to put down arms and return home, documenting human rights violations, and encouraging women to get involved in local and national politics (Conciliation Resources 2013).

As part of its review of global implementation of Security Council resolution 1325, the Global Study noted the need to 'look at 'politics' and 'peacemaking' differently – not only as a set of actors around a negotiation table, but as a comprehensive process within a society that is inclusive, diverse, and reflective of the interests of the whole society. The present programmes put forward by the international community tend to be extremely narrow: just to bring a female body to the table with some technical expertise' (Global Study 2015). Support by international actors to peace processes often focuses on the formal negotiations (Conciliation Resources 2013). By focusing only on formal national level processes, the international community literally shapes or constructs what is seen as relevant and decisive in peace processes, without sufficiently recognizing that investment at the local and sub national level or track 2 level where many women are already brokering peace or shoring up the resilience of communities against the spread of conflict is just as important and may be neglected (Global Study 2015). Because of this focus on formal processes – where women are often absent – important contributions by women on the ground tend to go unrecognized (Conciliation Resources 2015).

The literature speaks loudly to the fundamental shift required to balance the asymmetry between the relevance of formal peace negotiations between armed actors and the broader peacebuilding exercise that needs to include society at large (Conciliation Resources 2015). Increasing women's participation in peace processes requires shifting the parameters of what is considered political (Global Study 2015). Democratizing the peace process beyond the often male military and political elite, identifies and acknowledges the range of formal and informal efforts at multiple levels of society that sustain peace (Global Study 2015; Conciliation Resources 2015). Broadening the political calls for expansion of the notion of 'peace processes' to include community and track 2 initiatives encourages a shift from the hierarchy of peace 'tracks' to interconnected, complementary and diverse paths of peace (Conciliation Resources 2015; Global Study 2015). It is essential to find ways to link negotiations and official talks with unofficial talks that may take place primarily at

civil society level and for this informal space to receive more recognition (Conciliation Resources 2013; Conciliation Resources 2015).

Bridging the gap between community and national and international level efforts

Much of the literature, including that relating to peace processes in Colombia, Kenya, Northern Ireland, The Philippines, and Yemen, underscores the importance of efforts to bridge the gap between women working at the community level and women leading peace efforts at the national and international level and to ensure strong linkages between these women, as well as to deepen networking with women across divides (social, class, economic, geographic, ethnic, political, ideological, religious etc.) (Patty et al. 2015; Oxfam and Saferworld Yemen 2017; Bouvier 2016; Conciliation Resources 2013; Conciliation Resources 2015). For example, in the Philippines, women's direct participation in the peace talks, coupled with lobbying efforts of women in civil society organisations and mass action, changed the perceptions of the main parties to the conflict over time. Women at the negotiating table on both the government and opposition side had been selected for their skills and experience – mostly gained whilst working in civil society organisations – and maintained ties with these organisations. Women at the grass roots level cultivated strategic links with key actors and acted as a conduit of information from local communities to negotiation panels. (Patty et al. 2015).

Building platforms for women community activists to participate in formal peace talks

Beyond establishing linkages between formal and informal processes, however, women in the community, playing an active role in promoting everyday peace and solving day-to-day problems, have called for a platform at national and international peace talks. 'This would imbue these peace talks with a dose of reality from the displaced people who are struggling to survive' (Oxfam and Saferworld Yemen 2017).

The Colombian peace process provides an example of various platforms to secure the participation of civil society activists, including women and other victims and survivors, in the peace talks. The Colombian peace process is the first peace process to have set up a gender sub-commission, after lobbying by women's organisations, tasked with reviewing all documents issued as part of the peace process and ensuring the incorporation of gender sensitive language and provisions. Civil society organisations working on gender issues have also briefed the sub-commission on the gender approach in the peace negotiations and agreement. In addition, the Colombian peace process has enabled victims of the armed conflict to speak to the negotiating panel about their experiences and framed the agreement on transitional justice explicitly to respond to the victims' rights to truth, justice, reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence (Herbolzheimer 2016).

Four key strategies for the meaningful participation of women

O'Reilly, Ó Súilleabháin and Paffenholz have identified four key strategies for the meaningful participation of women which build upon and take into account the themes mentioned previously:

- Build coalitions using normative and strategic arguments e.g. to increase legitimacy, secure public buy in or achieve support from other constituencies to see women's participation as a strategic priority to get the deal done
- Establish a credible selection process: the most successful in terms of inclusive outcomes are transparent processes carried out by constituents in conjunction with quotas
- Create the conditions to make women's voices heard: when women do not participate directly in negotiations but consultative fora or other arena, there is a need for transfer strategies and mechanisms, including position papers directly to mediators and negotiating parties, issuing public reports, lobbying international actors, to ensure that their inputs find their way into negotiating table and peace agreement
- Keep power politics – and the public – in mind; when the main negotiating parties are not committed to the process, including women at the table has little chance of success. When resistance is very strong during negotiations, it can be more effective for women's groups to remain outside of official talks as more leverage and pressure can be built from the outside via the media or mass action (O'Reilly, Ó Súilleabháin and Paffenholz 2015).

Timing and patience

Perhaps it is useful to conclude by explicitly mentioning what is not expressly noted in the literature: that women's efforts to build, make, live and sustain peace all take a lot of time and reiteration. For example, in the Philippines, women have been involved in the consultations process on promoting peace in Mindanao since at least 1992. Women were first appointed to the government delegation in 2001. The peace agreement was signed in 2014 – for the first time ever by a woman chief negotiator. In Colombia, there have been multiple rounds of peace, over the six decades of violence. Women have been organizing at various levels through 60 years of violence. In 2013, women were appointed to both negotiating delegations. The peace agreement was signed in 2016.

2.2 The situation of women's political participation, civil society and women's organisations pre-2011 revolution in Syria

This section reviews the available literature as it relates to the participation of women in political processes and civil society institutions, including women's organisations, institutions prior to the 2011 revolution in Syria. This body of literature, sometimes overlooked, holds important lessons to understanding both barriers to and opportunities for women's participation that have emerged over the past six years.

2.2.1 Pre-revolution situation of women's political participation

Before the uprising in Syria that began in March 2011, women held 12.5% of parliamentary seats (IPU 2011) and two ministerial positions, amounting to 6% of the ministerial positions in the Syrian Government (UNICEF 2009).

The 1973 Syrian Constitution, which remained in force until February 2012, states that all citizens are equal before the law in their rights and duties and that the state ensures the principle of equal opportunities for citizens³. Article 45 further provides that the 'state guarantees women all opportunities enabling them to fully and effectively participate in the political, social, cultural, and economic life. The state removes the restrictions that prevent women's development and participation in building the socialist Arab society'⁴.

Yet, the reality was different from the lofty words espoused by the Constitution.

Information on the situation facing women can be gleaned from the work of the UN human rights treaty bodies, in particular the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee). Syria acceded to CEDAW in 2003, albeit with a number of significant reservations to obligations considered core to the Convention's purpose (UNICEF 2009)⁵. In its 2007 consideration of Syria's report, the CEDAW Committee noted its appreciation of the State party's goal of 30% women in decision-making levels in both the Ninth and Tenth Five-Year Plan, but expressed its concern 'about the lack of measures adopted towards the realization of this goal and the continuing low levels of representation of women in public and political life and in decision-making positions, particularly in municipal, town and village councils'⁶. The Committee encouraged the Syrian state to take 'sustained measures, including temporary special measures... and to establish concrete goals and timetables so as to accelerate the increase in the representation of women, in elected and appointed bodies in all areas of public life, including in municipal, town and village councils'⁷. The Committee further urged the state to undertake awareness raising about the importance of women's participation in decision-making for society as a whole.

So while all manner of educational programmes, public forums and constitutional articles enjoined women to contribute to the development of Syria, women were restrained by the resilience of entrenched attitudes and normative modes that control their behaviour and ways of thinking of themselves (Hill 1997).

2.2.2 Pre-revolution situation of Syrian civil society

2.2.2.1 Overview of the literature

The literature confirms the limited and fragile nature of pre-revolution civil society in Syria. It further shows that the deliberate occupation of public space and the

³ *The Permanent Syrian Constitution of Syria*, 13 March 1973, Article 25 (3) and (4), available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4325185.pdf>

⁴ Id. at Article 45.

⁵ Reservations related to provisions dealing with, among others, freedom of movement, residence and domicile, equality in marriage and family life. See *Declarations, Reservations and Objections to CEDAW*, available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations-country.htm>.

⁶ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: Syrian Arab Republic*, 25, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/SYR/CO/1, 11 June 2007, paragraph 25.

⁷ Id. at paragraph 26.

manipulation of civil society by an authoritarian State curtailed political opportunities and the democratizing effect.

2.2.2.2 Key findings and insights

A review of the literature on Syrian civil society prior to the 2011 revolution supports the following findings and insights.

Restrictions on the setting up and operation of civil society organisations, late 1950s-2000

Spitz writes that the proclamation of the United Arab Republic in 1958 started a process of restricting civil and political liberties. This included the passage of the Law on Associations, also in 1958, which restricted registration of existing organisations and associations, with severe consequences on the development of the civil society movement (Spitz 2014). In early 1960s, state-funded unions for important sectors of the population, such as women, youth, farmers and journalists, were established by presidential decree and brought under the control of the Ba'ath party. The existing unions and leagues were also incorporated by decree into these Ba'ath-party dominated para-governmental unions and leagues. No new organisations of this kind were permitted because the government, dominated by the Ba'ath party, saw no need for parallel organisations serving the same social categories. As a result, most of those associations officially established and registered during the 1960s and 1970s were charitable organisations. During most of the 1980s and 1990s, the government did not allow the registration of new associations (Spitz 2014).

Bashar Al-Assad's image of modernity vs. crackdown on civil society, 2000-2011

Bashar Al-Assad took power after his father's death in 2000, pledging to liberalize Syria's politics and economy. The first six months of his presidency featured the release of political prisoners, the return of exiled dissidents, and open discussion of the country's problems. Kawakibi and Kodmani contend that Bashar Al-Assad sought to build for the regime an 'image of modernity' and in some but limited cases introduced genuine measures of reform in order to reap the benefits of globalization. For example, the introduction of advanced information technology was treated as a priority. Yet the strategy was designed to bring as much technology as possible, 'without meaningfully improving citizens' access to information' (Kawakibi and Kodmani 2013).

In February 2001, the regime began to reverse this so-called Damascus Spring. Civil society fora were shut down, and many political and human rights activists, journalists, writers and intellectuals were arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Freedom of association was non-existent; all activities within society, and in particular of civil society members, were monitored through the deployment of extensive informant networks ensuring a culture of self-censorship and fear. Ordinary Syrians were unwilling to discuss politics under most circumstances and civil society organisations were accused of contributing to a foreign agenda (Freedom House 2011; Kawakibi and Kodmani 2013).

Proliferation of State-dominated charities, GONGOs and QUANGOs

All nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) had to register with the government, which, Freedom House notes was generally denied to reformist or human rights groups. Instead, only state-friendly NGOs working on apolitical issues, such as rural development, social welfare, the environment, and entrepreneurship were able to register with the state (Freedom House 2011). These organisations represented a huge increase in charities, as well as governmental NGOs (GONGOs) or quasi-governmental NGOs (QUANGOs) (Kawakibi and Kodmani 2013).

State manipulation of civil society to strengthen totalitarian control over society

Kawakibi and Kodmani explain the increase in CONGOs and QUANGOs as arising from the regime's understanding that the west was keen to see and promote Syria's civil society and as such 'seizing the opportunity to strengthen its own image through carefully promoting certain kinds of NGOs which ultimately served to strengthen its control over society' (Kawakibi and Kodmani 2013). Kawakibi and Kodmani contend that 'rarely have such modern means been deployed to serve the narrow interests of an authoritarian regime, putting liberal clothing on what essentially remained a totalitarian system' (Kawakibi and Kodmani 2013).

Pre-2011 revolution, Syrian civil society remained weak and fragile

Writing in 2013, Kawakibi and Kodmani summarize the developments affecting civil society since the early 1960s in terms of the regime dealing 'with society as a whole as if it was its worst enemy. It sought to contain it, disempower its (political, social and religious) institutions, and strip available social forces of their vitality. It then sought to restructure society in ways that maintained façade institutions with subservient leaders at the helm' (Kawakibi and Kodmani 2013). As no independent political party was allowed to operate in Syria and the regime prevented any attempt by civil society organisations to advance any form of public advocacy, social forces were reduced to struggling within the very limited space left for non-political NGOs to operate. The government, in fact, owned and occupied the public space of the country and everything that this entailed. In these circumstances, Ghazzawi contends that citizens were cultured into 'not initiating, not thinking, nor even daring to dream about challenging a system that was tightly structured on political, social, military and economic levels' (Ghazzawi 2014). Kawakibi and Sawah argue that though civil society had sprung up, both in terms of number of actors and quality of their work, it remained weak and fragile, thereby countering the expected effects of democratization as civil society continued to be deprived of a direct political dimension (Kawakibi and Sawah 2013).

2.2.3 Pre-revolution situation of women's organisations

2.2.3.1 Overview of the literature

From its earliest beginnings, the 'women's movement' in Syria has had to contend with powerful political and religious opposition as well as internal divisions. Colonial interference, authoritarian rule, religious conservatism, and the persistence of paternalistic and sectarian divisions in Syrian society have variously hampered the

progress of the women's movement (Vinson and Golley 2012). Further, as noted in section 2.2.2.2 above, the manipulation and oppression of broader civil society by the State had a direct influence on the shape and direction of women's organisations and the women's movement prior to 2011.

2.2.3.2 Key findings and insights

Overall challenges to the Syrian women's movement

Above and beyond the pre-revolution challenges facing civil society more generally in Syria set out in the preceding section, the literature identifies a number of larger forces at work that have shaped the women's movement in Syria. These include, first, the suspicion of foreigners and their ideas on the development of the women's movement from the outset (Vinson and Golley 2012). Lingering effects of the link between western domination and women's liberation are still in evidence today, including for example, responses of Syrian conservative males towards Syrian women's efforts to advance their status, in particular to reform personal status laws.

Second, Hill notes that in Syria women experience their rights in terms of their place in the family, and in a co-local, and often confessional, community rather than in terms of their position as citizens of the state. By linking citizenship to a woman's relationship to her husband or father, Syrian and other Arab governments have created a 'gendered notion of citizenship that is also essentially sectarian', as women's rights, many of which are governed under personal status codes, vary according to religious affiliation (Hill 1997).

Third, Vinson and Golley contend that while patriarchal alliances and sectarian divisions perpetuate gender inequality in Syria and much of the Arab world, sectarian and class divisions are themselves often perpetuated by women within their organisations. Vinson and Golley note that the 'result of engaging in the patriarchal bargain is a great deal of inequality, fragmentation, lack of coordination, and often the absence of the democratic process in and among women's organisations' (Vinson and Golley 2012).

In addition to these circumstances, the specific political context further influenced how the Syrian women's movement developed and what it could do.

The subjugation of women's rights within the nationalist struggle

The Syrian women's movement is rooted in the charity work, literary endeavours and nationalism activism of the pre-independence era, where elite women used their socio economic and sociopolitical status, religious affiliations and education to provide social services to the poor and disadvantaged (Vinson and Golley 2012). Although nationalist activism may have initially energized the women's movement, colonial contestation seems, in retrospect, to have militated against women's efforts to change gender roles. This was evidenced when Syrian women eventually lost much of the initial support they had from the male dominated leadership of both the communist and nationalist blocs when nationalists forged alliances with religious conservatives who were opposed to women's activism (Vinson and Golley 2012).

Until the 1980s, the few women's groups that were established following independence largely adopted Marxist, socialist ideologies with respect to women's rights. These ideologies viewed women's issues as one component of social liberation (Yazeji 2013). This experience had a profound effect on later feminist thinking within women's groups in pre-revolution Syria. The methods and mechanisms of handling women's issues were typically shaped by, and subject to, the advancement of political parties, thereby narrowing the scope of operation of women's movements and organisations and sharply reducing the possibility of women's organisations and institutions with an independent agenda to meet growing demands (Yazeji 2013). As a result, women's charitable organisations emerged as the leading and best-organized model of women's groups in pre-revolutionary Syria (Yazeji 2013; Vinson and Golley 2012).

Women's attempts to take advantage of the modernist discourse of Bashar Al-Assad

In the years immediately preceding the revolution, the literature indicates that women sought to take advantage of the modernist discourse of Bashar Al-Assad in order to foster a discussion of gender related issues. However, it soon became clear that there were limits to this discourse. For example, while the government was eager to cultivate an image as a progressive and secular regime, it was unable or unwilling to challenge religious conservative forces resisting a progressive family law that protects women's rights and instead sought to appease religious forces (Kawakibi and Kodmani 2013). Indeed, the impact of women's advocacy on the government was limited. Ghazzawi et al. confirm that while the government tolerated campaigns to eradicate illiteracy amongst rural women and even campaigns to demand equal citizenship rights for Syrian women, the government did very little to change the country's various discriminatory laws (Ghazzawi et al. 2015).

The beginning of a Syrian feminist movement?

But there is some indication that things were beginning to change. Writing in 2013, Yazeji argues that prior to the revolution, a feminist movement with a social-liberation character had developed within Syria. This movement involved nascent women's organisations with a profound awareness and understanding of the most important gender questions (Yazeji 2013). Women activists included lawyers, politicians, writers and journalists. Other scholars have cited a number of women's organisations active on issues related to gender and the rights of women, including the largest of these organisations, the aforementioned General Union of Syrian women responsible for development projects (Kawakibi and Sawah 2013; Moore and Talacio 2015). Other organisations frequently referred to in the literature include the Syrian Women's League and its work in the legal field, and the Social Initiative Society and its work on reforming personal status laws (Kawakibi and Sawah 2013; Vinson and Golley 2012).

Yet commentators have also written that women's organisations were tolerated for only as long as they confined themselves to non-political issues (Integrity 2014). The literature suggests that that none of the afore-mentioned organisations is registered, a situation experienced by most other women's organisations and a

reflection of the earlier point that the government considers Ba'ath- party-related organisations to be representatives of civil society.

It is important not to over-emphasise gender and gendered attitudes as entirely determinative factors behind the Syrian women's movement. Ultimately, as we have seen in section 2.2.2, the broader forces that impacted upon society as a whole shaped this movement as part of Syrian society. As Ghazzawi argues 'the major obstacle towards securing and enhancing women's rights in Syria was simply the absence of democracy' (Ghazzawi 2014).

2.3 Participation of women in revolutionary protests

This section looks at the role of Syrian women in the revolutionary protests that began in spring 2011. There is abundant literature on the active role of women in these protests, especially during the beginning of the revolution in street protests and grassroots mobilization, before the militarization of the conflict that saw women forced off the streets.

2.3.1. Key findings and insights

Women's active and central role in the revolution's street protests, 2011-2012

From the beginning of the revolution in spring 2011, women organized and led campaigns for democracy, freedom, dignity, and peace and against sectarianism in various cities across Syria (Asad and Hassan 2013; Ghazzawi 2014; MADRE and WILPF 2014). Women played an active and 'essential' role in sustaining relief in besieged neighbourhoods in Damascus and in its suburbs (Ghazzawi 2014), filling both leadership roles and the general ranks of the local committees, and organizing demonstrations, such as a sit-in on 16 March 2011 in front of the Interior Ministry in Damascus where they called for the release of prisoners (MADRE and WILPF 2014).

Women defended young people in demonstrations, protecting them by acting as human barriers between security forces and protesters. Ghazzawi notes that some women 'used to good effect the sexist view of them as a 'weaker gender'' to pass regime check points in order to smuggle medicine, food and also first-aid workers into besieged and shelled neighbourhoods (Ghazzawi 2014). Ghazzawi also notes that covered and uncovered female activists from different communities, including those from the upper classes as well as rural and working classes, came together working hand in hand with the male leaders of these working class communities where most of the initial revolts took place (Ghazzawi 2014). Indeed Ghazzawi describes 2012 as 'the peak for women's essential role in the revolution' (Ghazzawi 2014).

A younger generation of Syrian women feminists developed during the early days of the revolution, with Ghazzawi noting that 'The very existence of these women and the work they are doing in these areas poses a direct challenge to the growing male hegemony that was developed during the war' (Ghazzawi 2014).

Militarization of the conflict forced women off the streets and led them to develop different ways of protesting

Asad and Hassan question the sustainability of these afore-noted changes regarding women's participation: specifically whether such changes would lead to a paradigm shift in the way Syrian women participate in politics (Asad and Hassan 2013).

Certainly there is reason to doubt the initial optimism. Ghazzawi contends that the regime's increased brutality in 2013, the sheer amount of massacres and the lack of human capital among revolutionaries capable of responding to the humanitarian crisis meant that many young men, even peaceful revolutionaries, came to believe that the only way to topple the regime was through an increase in arms (Ghazzawi 2014).

This conclusion played a considerable role in strengthening the militarized front of the uprising, which directly impacted women's role in the uprising (Ghazzawi 2014). There is broad consensus in the literature that the militarization of the conflict during 2012-2013 had the effect of forcing women to step back from their active presence in the streets and shrinking the public space open to them (Davis 2016; Swisspeace et al. 2016). Restrictions on their movement and the creation of 'male hegemonic spaces' (Ghazzawi 2014) meant that women had to create alternative ways to continue their activities behind the front lines, for example, by providing medical supplies, fundraising, organising sit ins in houses and actively using social networking sites to speak against oppression and injustice in order to voice the ideas which would otherwise be silenced by the militarization of the conflict (Asad and Hassan 2013).

The revolution was not a revolution for women's rights

Many Syrian women activists have emphasized the limitations of the goal of the 2011 revolution. The revolution failed women – not only because it failed – but also because it was not prepared or founded as a rebellion against entrenched social values. Instead it was a revolution against the political status quo. As such, women's rights did not feature prominently within the views of change that were propagated by the revolution (Syria Untold 2014). Some activists have referred to the need to complete the revolution: '...women suffered from the small dictator residing in the patriarchal logic too. While the Arab Spring came to trigger change, this change will remain incomplete and freedom will remain embarrassed if the revolution does not tackle the patriarchal notions nested in our minds' (Syrian Female Journalists Network 2016).

2.4 Participation of women in the formal peace process

This section looks at the participation of Syrian women in the UN-brokered peace negotiations taking place in Geneva, known as the formal peace process. It is divided into three temporal sub-sections which cover specific events and analysis during 2012-2015; the establishment of the Women's Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy and the Civil Society Support Room in 2016; and the establishment of the Women's Advisory Committee of the High Negotiation Committee also in 2016.

Whilst limited written analysis exists regarding women's participation in the formal peace process, there is considerable narrative text. The analytical literature that does exist emphasizes the absence of women from the Geneva process – notwithstanding the considerable efforts of Syrian women to organise and unite with the support of INGOs, UN Women and donor states. The literature also highlights significant tensions amongst Syrian women activists and organisations following the establishment of the Women's Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy.

2.4.1 Overview of the formal peace process, 2012-2015

The formal peace process to resolve the Syrian conflict began with the efforts of the Joint Special Envoy for the United Nations and the Arab League, Kofi Annan, in March 2012⁸, who quickly prepared a six-point proposal for the Syrian government⁹. On 30 June 2012, the 'Geneva Communiqué'¹⁰ was adopted by the UN, the Arab League and key states, setting out 'guidelines and principles for a political transition to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people'¹¹. The only reference in the Geneva Communiqué to women and/or gender falls under Clear Steps in the Transition, which provides that 'Women must be fully represented in all aspects of the transition'¹². Significantly, the Communiqué makes no reference to the requirement of the participation of women in the (peace) process that would actually lead to the transition.

In January 2014, then Joint Special Representative for the United Nations and the Arab League, Lakhdar Brahimi, announced a round of bilateral meetings with representatives from the Syrian government and the opposition, to take place later in January, known as 'Geneva II'. Prior to Geneva II, UN Women convened a two-day conference in Geneva of approximately 50 Syrian women civil society members and activists. This meeting led to a joint statement setting out the women's priorities regarding ending the violence, demands to the negotiating parties, and demands regarding Syrian women's participation in the peace process¹³. A few days later, three Syrian women civil society leaders briefed the Security Council in New York in a closed 'Arria-formula' meeting¹⁴ and demanded women's meaningful inclusion in

⁸ United Nations, In Presidential Statement, Security Council Gives Full Support to Efforts of Joint Special Envoy of United Nations, Arab League to End Violence in Syria, 21 March 2012, available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10583.doc.htm>

⁹ United Nations, Six-Point Proposal of the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States, 14 April 2012, available at http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/six_point_proposal.pdf

¹⁰ Action Group for Syria, Final Communiqué, 30 June 2016, available at <https://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniquéActionGroupforSyria.pdf>

¹¹ Id. at paragraph 4.

¹² Id. at paragraph 6(II).

¹³ Syrian Women's Joint Statement on Engagement in the Syrian Political Process, 13 January 2014, available at <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/1/statement-by-syrian-women-in-geneva#sthash.xE2EwUT2.dpuf>

¹⁴ 'Arria-formula meetings' refer to the informal, confidential gatherings of the United Nations Security Council where Council members meet with, for instance, civil society representatives or other persons whom the Council believe 'it would be beneficial to hear and/or to whom they may wish to convey a message' in order to have 'a frank and private exchange of views'. Background Note on the "Arria-

the forthcoming Geneva II peace talks and ongoing transitional peace processes. At the Geneva II meetings a few days later, no women negotiators were present at the peace table.

In September 2014, Staffan de Mistura succeeded Brahimi as the UN Special Envoy for Syria. In December 2015 – nearly five years after the beginning of the conflict in Syria and nearly four years after the UN peace process got underway – the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 2254, which for the first time in the limited Security Council deliberations on Syria, encouraged – in its preambular though not operational paragraphs – ‘the meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated political process for Syria’¹⁵.

2.4.1.1 Key findings and insights

Syrian women organise and unite, supported by INGOs, UN Women and donor states

There is broad coverage in the literature of the organising efforts of Syrian women from 2012 onwards to amplify their voices against violence and to engage in political action in order to play a more central role in resolving the conflict (Syria Untold 2015). These efforts include the creation of organisations and alliances, such as the Syrian Women Coalition for Democracy and the Syrian Women’s Forum for Peace, comprised of women from all walks of political and social life seeking political change, set up as an opportunity to forge a much-needed alliance between women organisations and assemblies (Syria Untold 2015). The literature also refers to the support provided from 2012 onwards by various INGOs to consolidate the disparate Syrian women’s groups and their efforts to participate in the formal peace process (Leimbach 2013a), and in late 2013 to the support of UN Women and other donors (Gambale 2016). These and other organising efforts initiated by Syrian women in Syria, the surrounding countries and the diaspora build upon emerging international practice of developing and flexing a unified women’s movement to lobby for women’s participation in formal peace processes (see section 2.1.2).

Syrian women’s engagement in international processes: CEDAW, UPR

In addition to efforts to participate in the formal peace process, the literature identifies other initiatives launched by women’s groups to support resolution of the armed conflict (WILPF 2015). These include engagement by Syrian women activists with the UN human rights mechanisms, for example, through the drafting of CEDAW and Universal Periodic Review (UPR) shadow reports by a number of Syrian women’s organisations and INGOs, and participation by some Syrian women activists in consultative meetings of the CEDAW Committee in 2015 and the UPR process in 2016 (WILPF 2016).

Formula" Meetings of the Security Council Members, available at <http://www.un.org/en/sc/about/methods/bgarriformula.shtml>

¹⁵ Security Council resolution 2254 (2015), dated 18 December 2015, U.N. Doc. S/RES/2254 (2015)

Notwithstanding Syrian women's organizing and steps to unite, women are excluded from Geneva II

Notwithstanding these considerable organising and substantive efforts by Syrian women, INGOs, UN Women and other partners, Syrian women were neither present at the opening session of the Geneva II talks in Montreux in January 2014, nor at the bilateral negotiating tables in Geneva between Brahimi and representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition. Butler notes that although the opposition was much stronger in engaging women overall in their delegation, neither the opposition nor the government delegation reached the 30% target of women taking part at the actual negotiating table (Butler 2014). The Syrian National Council, representing the opposition, had two women on the negotiating delegation, as well as three women on its supporting technical team. The government had only two women on its delegation. Butler contends that the presence of these women did not ensure strengthened voices for women's rights and peace as these women were there to represent the competing sides and not to represent the voices of the majority of Syrians working nonviolently for peace (Butler 2014).

Butler further describes Geneva II as a 'missed opportunity' as Syrian women had actually mapped out key steps to peace (Butler 2014).

Multiple rationales for women's participation in the formal peace process

The literature proposes multiple rationales for women's participation in the formal peace process. Davis contends that understanding the relevance and significance of Syrian women's participation in peace solutions requires looking back to the pivotal moment in the movement for democratic rights: to the beginning of the 2011 revolution when women played an active role in protests and grassroots mobilization (Davis 2016). Others view women's participation in the formal peace process as a strategic opening to advance women's rights and, specifically, to address widespread gender-based crimes related to the ongoing conflict (MADRE and WILPF 2014). This approach requires that women's participation be viewed 'not merely as an end but as a means to ensure that women's rights are included in all outcomes and agreements, and [that] those outcomes are effective for sustainable peace' (Butler in WILPF 2014a). This approach builds upon the experience of other conflict contexts where women have organized to exercise meaningful roles in transitional justice processes through successfully broadening their society's concept of justice to include recognition of women's rights in law (MADRE and WILPF 2014).

The responses of representatives of grassroots and umbrella women's organisations, civil society, and human rights organisations inside Syria and around the region interviewed by Integrity in late 2013 and early 2014 point to consensus on how the strong focus on women's issues in the formal peace process could add value to the peace process in the following ways:

- Increase inclusivity for women and minority groups in the peace process and move the peace process framework beyond traditional powerbrokers and improve communications between political elites and grassroots sections of society

- Ensure that gender issues are central to the Geneva process and ensure a gender sensitive transition
- Make cross party connections
- Change the focus of negotiations from power-sharing to peacebuilding, through moving away from zero-sum negotiations and by ensuring that specific issues affecting women can be used as negotiating points on which opposing parties can build consensus and trust (Integrity 2014).

The structure of women's participation in the formal peace process is the key issue

Ruane of WILPF contends that the question of how women engage in the formal peace is the crux of the problem of women's participation (Leimbach 2013b). Ruane asserts that it is not enough to have women in the corridors: instead women must be at the table (Leimbach 2013a). Yet, Ruane also argues that it is not enough to 'just add women and stir' or to just add a few women on either side of the militarized sides. Instead, critical to transforming the conversation are the inclusion of women and other peace activists who are working for peace now – 'It is these voices who are critical to moving the conversation beyond the warring status quo' (Leimbach 2013b). In 2013, WILPF et al. set out five critical steps to ensure the participation of women as a critical element in achieving a just and sustainable peace in Syria. These steps include:

- Women in the formal delegation;
- an independent women delegation to represent the voice of diverse and inclusive civil society, not a particular religious or national group;
- gender experts integrated into the mediator's team;
- gendered documentation and position papers for each agenda item; and
- an independent civil society forum with a fair representation of women (WILPF et al. 2013).

As at the end of 2016, the following represents the status on each of these five steps:

- Women have been included with only 20% approximately in the formal delegation of both the government and opposition;
- an independent women delegation has not been set up nor enthusiastically embraced by Syrian women activists;
- gender expertise has been included in the mediator's team through the creation of the Women's Advisory Board as well as the recruitment of a gender adviser within the Special Envoy's team;
- gendered documentation and position papers have been prepared by both the Women's Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy and by the Women's Advisory Committee of the High Negotiations Committee; and
- a Civil Society Support Room has been set up by the UN Special Envoy. However, the literature notes a number of critiques regarding its consultative, monitoring, and alliance building role generally (SCP 2016). The issue with the inclusion of civil society in the negotiating process is that most decision-makers do not believe civil groups can have an impact. Khalaf

argues that civil society is already pressuring the UN system: 'The bigger problem is with the international governance system and global actors and government power players taking the process away from the locals and peaceful actors in Syria' (Tahhan 2017).

Lack of inclusion of community based women activists in the formal peace process

Notwithstanding significant efforts by numerous Syrian women activists and their international supporters to press for women's meaningful inclusion in the formal peace process from 2012-2016, the literature notes the limited access to the Geneva process for many Syrian women working at the community levels. In an early survey from July to September 2013, Inclusive Security and the Centre for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria surveyed 110 women activists living and working inside Syria to document their views on international efforts to broker peace and perceived barriers to women's full and meaningful participation. Of the respondents, only 37/110 women, 33%, said that they had suitable access to information about international level efforts to end the war and transition to a democratic state (including the then forthcoming Geneva II talks) (Williams 2014). The respondents also identified the lack of a feedback loop from the formal to the informal process as the most significant challenge towards their support and ability to influence the formal peace process (Williams 2014). Research a year later in 2014 by Integrity confirmed the perception of most members of the women interviewed that they felt themselves to be disengaged from or indifferent to the Geneva peace process (Integrity 2014). The failure to bridge the gap between Syrian women working at the community level and women leading peace efforts at the national and international level and to ensure strong linkages between these women, stands out in the context of emerging international practice on key strategies to strengthen women's participation in peace processes.

Can prioritizing peacebuilding and the political transition potentially overshadow gender equality?

The literature emphasizes the perception that gender issues have been divorced from and subordinated to political settlement issues (Integrity 2014). This perception highlights the importance of ensuring that the discussion on gender equality is not sidelined by the 'priority' of peacebuilding and political transition. In focus-group discussions and key informant interviews with Syrian women and men conducted in Turkey in November 2015 by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), Huber notes the repeated insistence of women interviewees of their full understanding of the tactic of delaying gender equality until the conflict is over. 'We don't believe this "later on" thing: women cannot wait for a permanent peace to have equality. There is no "maybe later"', insist the women. Instead, Huber argues that the urgent agenda to make peace renders it critical to include women's voices in efforts to find a peaceful solution (Huber 2015).

Women's exclusion from the formal peace process is symptomatic of their wider social exclusion

The literature affirms that women's exclusion from the peace process is representative or symptomatic of wider social exclusion (Integrity 2014). Structural

barriers to women's participation include societal conservatism, traditional power imbalances, unequal opportunities (with men) in social, legal and political areas, and widespread physical insecurity (Integrity 2014) (see section 2.8 on challenges to women's participation for more detail). Indeed, the wider social exclusion facing many Syrian women, as also represented in the aforementioned delaying tactics relating to gender equality, are emblematic of what Paffenholz identified from the broad review of international experience as 'a deeper ideological resistance to women's full participation' (Paffenholz 2016).

Differing approaches of UN mediators to women's participation

Surprisingly – in light of the Paffenholz finding of the critical role that mediators play in facilitating the participation of women in formal peace processes (see section 2.1.2) – there is little reference in the literature to the specific approaches of the three UN mediators to the participation of women in the peace process and specifically how they have or have not supported the participation of women. WILPF describes the 2012 Geneva Communiqué drafted by the first UN mediator, Annan, as a 'gender blind instrument' (WILPF 2013). Ruane of WILPF describes Brahimi as having 'his heels dug in', and therefore requiring that they look for 'other avenues of ensuring women's full and equal participation' (Leimbach 2013a). On the other hand, Osman, founder of women's organisation KARAMA, notes that the advocacy effort must go beyond Brahimi, and that 'Brahimi alone cannot push the government of Syria and/or the Coalition to include women' (Leimbach 2013a). Regarding the third and current UN Special Envoy for Syria, Leimbach writes that De Mistura is reported to have understood the grievances surrounding the lack of women's participation in the Geneva I and Geneva II (Leimbach 2015).

2.4.2 The Syrian Women's Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy, 2016

2.4.2.1 Overview

In February 2016, days after the abandonment of Geneva III, which had lasted two days, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, set up the Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB), comprised of 12 Syrian women activists. The purpose of the WAB is to advise the UN Special Envoy and to specifically raise important matters missing from the agenda, provide options, form consensus positions and make recommendations to assist peace talks, address key points of contention and offer creative solutions, propose gender-responsive perspectives and channel relevant civil society expertise. The Special Envoy will consult the WAB regularly when the peace talks are in session (UNW 2016a).

In their first press statement, the WAB described themselves as '12 independent civil society representatives chosen by Syrian women's organisations through their own consultative process... women from all walks of life that have committed themselves to support the Special Envoy in his efforts' (WAB 2016a). The WAB is supported by UN Women, the Governments of The Netherlands and Norway, and HIVOS (WAB 2016a; UNW 2016a).

On 22 March 2016, four members of the WAB held their first press conference at the United Nations in Geneva. During this conference, the WAB members stated that they had 'proved that despite differences, it is possible to reach consensus around political process to get Syria out of the current crisis and build a safe free and united Syria, built on equal citizenship rights for everyone' (WAB 2016b). The WAB members went on to call for, as a first step 'that all parties release detainees. Release detainees starting with peaceful activists and release all kidnapped hostages and disclose the fate of missing people, and urge the immediate lift of economic sanctions on Syrian people which hinder provision of food, medicine and medical supplies' (WAB 2016b). The WAB has since submitted position papers on common positions and recommendations to the Special Envoy and provided a gendered analysis of items under discussion, engaged in high level advocacy and outreach to Syrian civil society, and met with representatives of Western and Russian special envoys and representatives (UNW 2016c).

The day after the WAB's press conference, social media was buzzing, with the hash tag '#WABdoesNotRepresentMe' representing social media's response to the press briefing. Gambale described the reaction as 'a negative onslaught ranging from outright misogynistic attacks to thoughtful and coherent critiques' (Gambale 2016).

2.4.2.2 Key findings and insights

The perception of WAB as an unrepresentative and failed attempt at inclusivity

Considerable critique exists within the literature regarding the WAB. The literature notes the concerns of critics; some of whom identify the establishment of the WAB as the UN's attempt to be more inclusive, whilst also considering the WAB as an unrepresentative and failed attempt at inclusivity (Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre 2016). Indeed, Al-Abdeh of Women Now argues that the WAB actually promotes an exclusive model of participation: given that the WAB's participation is limited to a certain category of elite women, this results in a deep gap between the arguments made by the WAB and the needs of women on the ground, thereby compromising the negotiations within the WAB itself from the outset (Al-Abdeh 2017).

In response to these perceptions, the literature notes the views of some of those involved either as members of the WAB [Yazeji] or in supporting the WAB [Shaheen, UN Women], who counter that these reactions may have come about because of the skepticism of many towards women's actual involvement in the peace process, underscoring that misogynistic slander happens wherever women dare to engage in public life, especially in such highly polarizing issues (Gambale 2016). Shaheen further notes that a lot of women were not prepared to see a woman affiliated with the government standing next to a woman who is seen more as the opposition (Gambale 2016).

The lack of transparency in the selection process

The literature notes considerable criticism regarding the lack of transparency of the selection process to the WAB (Syrian Justice and Accountability Centre 2016; Haid

2016). Though created as an advisory board to the UN Special Envoy as part of his efforts to promote an inclusive process and incorporate a gender perspective in the issues under discussion, many activists understood from the WAB's first press statement that the WAB was intended to be 'representative' of Syrian women (WAB 2016a). Such a designation was strongly resisted by many activists, including Ramadan of the Badael Foundation, who states that 'This body can't claim the representation of Syrian women because many women and civil society organisations working on the ground rejected it publicly' (Haid 2016). The Syrian Feminist Lobby further notes that the WAB does not represent a large segment of Syrian women and instead expresses only the personal views of its members (SFL 2016).

In response, WAB members confirmed that they are not representative of Syrian women. In this connection, Yazeji states that 'we are representing women civil society organisations. The members of the WAB have their own opinions. And they might be in the opposition or in the regime, but that does not mean they represent the opposition or they would follow any decision that is taken by either of the delegations. They have come together as an independent group, regardless of their political affiliation or opinions' (Gambale 2016).

The questionable degree of influence of the WAB over the peace process

Though recognizing that the Geneva talks with the creation of the WAB includes women to a greater degree than any other comparable peace talks involving civil wars in Arab society, Slim of The Middle East Institute points to the lack of clarity regarding the degree of influence the members of the WAB have on the process as the WAB advises the UN Special Envoy and not the direct participants of the talks (Curry 2016). Slim continues that as long as women are kept in a separate room, their impact is limited. Instead, she argues that women need to be at the heart of the negotiation in order to ensure they are not a rubber stamp to what is agreed by a roomful of men (Alfred and Mohammed 2016). Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, is in agreement: What is required is not just 'a presence in the political process, but impact' (UNW 2016c).

In response, WAB member Yazeji recognizes the concerns of whether and how the WAB will be able to make meaningful contributions to the negotiations process, describing the WAB as a first step to the table. Yazeji continues: 'It's the first time in the history of civil war this happened. So this is not a small thing. But still it's not what we want. We really want to be at the table, women, third party, independent. At the table. That's our demand' (Gambale 2016).

The disconnect between the WAB and Syrian women on the ground

Davis notes that as a mechanism charged with delivering the concerns, solutions and expertise of local women peacemakers to the UN Special Envoy's office, the WAB lacks the capacity to inform or gather critical perspectives from Syrian peacemaker networks working on the ground (Davis 2016). Slim and others call for a structured process to bring input from women's activities on the ground in Syria, in the refugee camps, into the negotiation room (Colleen 2016). Al-Abdeh indicates the need for deep reflection as to how to engage genuinely 'down-to-up' women's

participation and to engage real criteria when consulting women, not just based on their accessibility and acceptability within the international community (Al-Abdeh 2017). Al-Abdeh highlights the absence of follow up or reporting mechanisms to women activists, noting that this absence has altered the credibility of the WAB and transformed it in the eyes of Syrian women 'into merely another demonstration of their [i.e. the women] role as accessories' (Al-Abdeh 2017).

In response, Qasas of UN Women counters that though the WAB members represent 'the mosaic of Syria – backgrounds, political affiliations, geography' [with] different perspectives on the crisis.. of course they are not the only Syrian women leaders. So it is very important to help them reach the broadest possible constituency. They want to bring together the broadest base of voices' (Gambale 2016).

Controversial demands and neutral language of WAB members

The WAB's demands made during the press conference on 22 March 2016 provoked considerable reaction amongst Syrian activists, male and female. The literature suggests that many activists interpreted the demand of WAB members for the 'immediate lift of economic sanctions on the Syrian people which hinder the provision of food, medicine and medical supplies' as indicative of the WAB members attempts to negotiate for 'political aims rather than for principles of women's rights, as the sanctions cannot be scapegoated for the lack of food and aid' in many parts of Syria (Haid 2016).

In response, Yazeji of the WAB argues that that this criticism is due to misunderstanding the intentions of the WAB; Yazeji explains that the Syrian opposition (mis)understood the WAB's demand as calling for the lifting of all sanctions on Syria and not just for humanitarian aid as the WAB had intended (Gambale 2016).

The literature also notes criticisms regarding the 'neutral' language employed by the WAB. This refers, in particular, to the WAB's silence in reflecting the important political role women have been playing and instead marginalizing the contribution of women by portraying them as peacemakers only (Haid 2016). In response to the press statement, and particularly the statement that 'Syrian women can work together and reach agreement to put aside their political difference and interests and work together so that they reach the future Syria we all hope to reach' made by WAB member, Rim Turkmani, the activist Shehwaro counters that 'someone wants to turn us into peace doves to bring all actors to the negotiating table. The actors here are of course all males. We Syrian women became a body with no shape nor contradictions, separate from our country's divisions and right for freedom' (Haid 2016). The Syrian Feminist Lobby further explains that 'The role of women must not be flattened into canned stereotype such as 'peacemakers', without regard for their crucial roles as political and human rights activists in the struggle against all forms of tyranny' (SFL 2016).

The requirement for WAB consensus is counterproductive at best

The literature critiques the UN requirement for the diverse WAB members to reach consensus on every position, suggesting that this requirement caused the WAB to remain silent on crucial issues, such as the government's use of barrel bombs (Seif in NWI 2016). Haid further contends that the WAB's preoccupation with reaching a minimal consensus around the political processes diverted the focus of WAB away from advising on matters discussed by the negotiating parties and ensuring that gender issues are perceived as priorities (Haid 2016).

In response, Shaheen of UN Women highlights that the WAB is the only forum that exists with Syrians from all sides, and notes that the WAB is saying 'we are not trying to win here – and it's urgent that we find common ground' (Gambale 2016).

2.4.3 The Women's Advisory Committee of the High Negotiations Committee

2.4.3.1 Overview

On 1 February 2016, the opposition High Negotiations Committee (HNC) established the Women's Advisory Committee (WAC), comprised of well-known expert women in different domains. In establishing the WAC, the HNC notes the weak representation of women in the negotiating process i.e. pre-Geneva III, and the need to make use of Syrian expertise and national potential to guarantee the success of the political process noting that the actual and active representation of all components of Syrian society is the cornerstone of the political transition in Syria. The HNC press statement establishing the WAC also referred explicitly to empowering and enhancing women's presence in the political process, noting that women's participation in decision making shall have positive results on the negotiating process and the future of Syria (HNC 2016).

Women from the WAC comprised 3 out of the 12 opposition negotiators who met with the UN Special Envoy for the brief talks that took place during Geneva III, in February 2016. The WAC supported the negotiators by advising on legal issues and researching issues under discussions (Sinjar 2016). The HNC's technical team also included 5 women. As part of the WAC's overall support to the HNC's discussions and deliberations, the WAC introduced plans on how existing civilian state infrastructure could be reformed and integrated into a future democratic Syria working alongside Syrian civil society (Kabawat 2016). The governments of Sweden and Canada are supporting the WAC.

During 2016, WAC members met with women from Syrian civil society groups to listen and understand their efforts on the ground to keep their communities running, understand their demands on reaching a political transition, to discuss the role of women in political negotiations and strategize to ensure their inclusion in future rounds of the Geneva talks (Kabawat 2016; HNC 2017). WAC members also undertook high profile lobbying efforts with European and other leaders (Kabawat 2016).

2.4.3.2. Key findings and insights

The inherent challenges within the Syrian opposition and the architecture of the peace talks

Many commentators, political scientists and activists have written of the broad challenges facing the Syrian opposition. Writing in 2016, Sayigh notes that the main weakness facing the opposition is the lack of leadership and structure and argues that overcoming this would require 'building structures allowing meaningful integration with the opposition inside Syria, bringing the latter into leadership positions and establishing understandings and processes for political decision-making ...' (Sayigh 2016). Lund also notes that Syrian opposition politics has long been a 'game operating under its own laws', which have very little to do with military capacity or membership numbers of any participant faction (Lund 2016). Instead, Lund contends that much of the game has been played out in the media for symbolic effect and public consumption rather than on the ground. In the absence of an autonomous, effective and indigenous Syrian rebel leadership able to select its own representatives, foreign states have taken it upon themselves to suggest negotiators to the peace process: 'A variety of governments are jostling to select opposition representatives to the talks, while the Syrian factions themselves court foreign support to assume themselves a seat at the table' (Lund 2016).

It is against this background of lack of leadership, structure, connection between those on the ground in Syria and those seeking to represent Syrians, and the intervention and meddling of regional and international power politics, that women's efforts to participate as part of the opposition in the peace process should be contextualised.

The lack of transparency in the selection process

Similar to concerns regarding the WAB, the literature notes the problem of selecting WAC members. Writing in 2016, Gambale notes that the expanding list of WAC members now comprises 50. Candidates are proposed by existing WAC members who must then be approved by the HNC. Gambale points out that such a process means that it is mostly the men of the HNC who have the final say on membership of the Women's Advisory Committee. Further, there are reports that some of the men only approve women they know of or who are related to them (Gambale 2016), again compromising the transparency and clarity of the selection process.

The questionable degree of influence of the WAC over the peace process

Again similarly to the challenge faced by the WAB, Slim questions the extent to which WAC members can influence the opposition's discussions or even speak in meetings (Slim in Colleen 2016). Though recognizing the presence of women on the opposition as a step forward, UN Special Envoy De Mistura also expresses concern regarding women's participation in the opposition, noting that 'the problem is that they don't talk. They're not allowed to talk, or they are not given an opportunity to intervene. Except when I insist in asking a specific question, which is forcing the process. They don't sit close to the centre, they are on the margins. They're considered experts rather than actual delegates' (Gambale 2016). Bang contends, however, that visible progress, such as the WAC's meeting with European Union

leaders, 'chips away at a cognitive shift toward acceptance of women in negotiating seats and further solidifies their role in the talks moving forward' (Bang 2016).

Indeed, Jalabi of the WAC argues that the presence of women has given more legitimacy and power to the HNC delegation in general and that women's presence is 'making it a given for the Syrian people that women are present at decision-making levels... because if you have a women's consultative group, then even if we are not included in the actual negotiations, they cannot move ahead without coming back to us, looking at the papers from a gender lens' (Shapiro 2016). Swedish Foreign Minister Wallström notes the efforts of the WAC to secure an agreement by the HNC to include a women's 30% quota in the transitional governance structures and beyond (Wallström 2016).

At the same time, however, both De Mistura and Bang underline the importance of not conflating the roles of expert advisors with those of diplomat negotiators at the negotiating table (Gambale 2016; Bang 2016).

The disconnect between the WAC and Syrian women on the ground

Similarly to the WAB, the literature notes that the WAC, many of whom live in the diaspora, need to engage more effectively with women inside Syria to best shape the peace talks. The literature also notes the recognition amongst WAC members of the need to engage more intensely with Syrian civil society activists on the ground. WAC member Kabawat refers to the participation of women and civil society as critical to the success of any political transition, affirming that the job of the WAC is to engage with a wide range of civil society groups, empower these women and represent their voices at the negotiating table. Kabawat explains that the 'WAC has played a crucial role in ensuring that the negotiation process is inclusive and representative ... We the women of the HNC have relentlessly worked to promote an inclusive vision of Syria' (Kabawat 2017). Indeed, Kabawat asserts that this is what has given the HNC the credibility to lead the opposition's efforts during the negotiations and that the HNC is accountable to Syrian civil society groups (Kabawat 2016).

Women's marginalization within the High Negotiations Committee continues the experience of women's low political representation within the opposition

It is important to further situate the experience of the WAC within the broader experience of women's representation and participation in the political opposition since 2011. Writing in 2013, Asad and Hassan note that the new ways open to women to voice their concerns and claim their rights after the revolutionary protests of 2011-2012 have not 'really materialized into real political opposition groups'. With reference to the most important political opposition groups, women's participation is low, with only 24 women out of 200 members of the Syrian National Council in 2013 despite an earlier statement that a 30% quota would be implemented. Indeed, 'women agree that their low political representation does not reflect their new revolutionary roles and sacrifices' (Asad and Hassan 2013).

It is clear from the experience of both the WAB and the WAC that neither structure has been able to facilitate the 'quality participation' of women in the formal peace

process. Reflecting the findings of international practice, Syrian women's continued exclusion is in large part due to the challenges in identifying selection criteria and the selection procedure, together with the lack of clarity – or perhaps perfect clarity – regarding women's decision making power vis-à-vis the UN Special Envoy and the High Negotiations Committee. The lack of linkages and feedback with Syrian women at the grassroots level further impacts the legitimacy, relevance and effectiveness of the WAB and WAC.

2.5 Participation of women in local peacebuilding initiatives, including through local councils

This section covers the efforts of women at the community, grass roots or local level that comprise peacebuilding efforts. This section also includes the presence and participation of women in local councils set up across Syria since the revolution. Whilst two reports stand out for their depth and analysis: Ghazzawi, Mohammad, and Ramadan (Ghazzawi et al. 2015), supported by Kvinna Till Kvinna, and Al-Abdeh of Women Now for Development (Al-Abdeh 2017), literature focusing exclusively on women's local peacebuilding efforts is limited. Ghazzawi et al. reflects the most detailed research on how women engage in their communities as providers of critical services and as actors for nonviolent conflict resolution, and results from interviews and focus groups conducted in 2014-2015 with 47 women's organisations across Syria, including Damascus, Deir Ezzor, Idlib, Al Hasaka and Dara'a, as well as with women outside Syria. The Al-Abdeh article outlines six lessons identified by Women Now for Development on strategies to reinforce women's participation during conflict.

Notwithstanding its limited nature, the literature that does exist portrays a vivid picture of the variety of peacebuilding initiatives that women are engaged in across Syria, the positive impact of such efforts at the local level in serving to build bridges and community resilience, and the deep, pervasive and enduring nature of the challenges to women's participation.

2.5.1 Overview

Recalling the limited activity, influence and scope of civil society generally pre-2011 and more specifically of women's civil society (see section 2.2), the 2011 revolution enabled civil society to grow and diversify in response to the evolving situation on the ground. As outlined in section 2.3, many women were initially very active on the streets of the revolutionary protests. There is consensus in the literature that the increased militarization of the conflict from 2012 onwards, however, greatly diminished the scope of action for many of these newly emerging civil society organisations and activists particularly regarding the visible activism of women in street protests. Faced with the increased marginalization of their activism, women activists started to design and implement interventions to reduce violence, combat armament and promote a culture of non violence (Ghazzawi et al. 2015), focusing on what is known as community, grass roots or local level peacebuilding.

2.5.2 Key findings and insights

Most reviews on peacebuilding in Syria are gender blind

Most reviews conducted by peace organisations and think tanks on the work of local activists and peacebuilders and the local councils in Syria are gender blind. In those cases where there is reference to women's participation, most references are cursory. There are some exceptions to this finding.

Women's participation in peacebuilding is low compared to men but increasing

The limited literature on women's participation suggests that in comparison to men, women's participation in civil society organisations from 2012-2016 is low but increasing (Khalaf et al. 2014; Swisspeace et al. 2016). Khalaf et al. note that out of 94 civil society groups mapped in 2014, 31% have no female participation and in 54% of the groups women represent a minority of the membership (Khalaf et al. 2014).

Women's role in local peace processes is undermined by traditional values

Research conducted by CCSDS and Peaceful Change Initiative in 2014 looking at 'peace resources' in Syria indicate that though there are several examples of women becoming actively involved in negotiations between conflicting parties and lobbying for peace with local councils and other community leaders, the role of women in peace processes is not widely acknowledged or universally supported. This is because women are traditionally seen as the repository of their families' honour whose primary role is in the private sphere rather than in public life (CCSDS et al. 2014) (see section 2.8 for further details on the challenges facing women).

Women activists understand peacebuilding as a long process, defined in terms of justice, equal rights for all and peaceful co-existence

Ghazzawi et al. found that the majority of the activists interviewed 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 citizens. Many interviewees also emphasized the long and accumulative nature of this process. The activists also perceived a direct link between a strong civil society and peacebuilding; they saw civil society as the only true representative of the people – in contrast with political parties and international actors who they believed were only pursuing their own narrow interests (Ghazzawi et al. 2015).

Women carry out wide-ranging peacebuilding activities

The literature on women and peacebuilding in Syria has identified a wide range of peacebuilding activities taking place by women's organisations and individuals, although their relevance and prevalence varies across the country reflecting local contextual specificities, such as the prevailing security situation, historical disputes, and ethnicities. Peacebuilding activities carried out by women include:

- Negotiating humanitarian deliveries with the government or armed groups and distributing humanitarian assistance to those in need

- Mediating violent conflict between individuals or between armed groups
- Negotiating the release of detainees with the government and armed groups
- Promoting peace and peaceful co-existence and non-violent conflict resolution
- Documenting and monitoring human rights abuses and promoting human rights including women's rights
- Combating child recruitment and underage marriage for girls
- Rebuilding the education system for women and children, including through providing training and education courses
- Providing psycho-social, medical and other assistance to survivors of gender based violence, including sexual violence
- Supporting women's inclusion in local councils (CCSDS et al. 2014; Ghazzawi et al. 2015; I Am She 2016; Swisspeace et al. 2016; Al-Abdeh 2017).

Economic empowerment of women is understood as peacebuilding

Those activists interviewed by Ghazzawi et al. unequivocally emphasized economic empowerment as an example of peacebuilding that can lead to change: activists argued that economic independence would enhance women's self-confidence and lead to women with views of their own. This will in turn make women less likely to put up with societal and family discrimination against them or to stand by while their sons join the battlefields (Ghazzawi et al. 2015). Women Now approach the issue from the opposite end. After supporting widows to set up their own income generating projects, it became clear that women's needs went beyond the purely economic; women's protection and participation in the public sphere needed to be addressed as part of a holistic approach (Al-Abdeh 2017).

Women's peacebuilding activities positively impact peace and gender equality

In terms of impact, Ghazzawi et al. 2015 refer to the efforts of many women's peacebuilding campaigns, some of which have grown and gained international attention, such as that of the Syrian Women Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD). Such outcomes of women's organizing efforts should be seen as stepping-stones in the battle for peace and equality in Syria. Indeed, Ghazzawi et al. 2015 contend that although the negotiating parties' commitment to women's rights is debatable, 'stakeholders have not been able to continue to systematically exclude discussions of women's rights as they used to' (Ghazzawi et al. 2015). Swisspeace et al. note that the work of local peace actors, including women, community leaders, youth initiatives, civil society organisations, and local councils, has helped to build 'small islands of temporary stability' (Swisspeace et al. 2016).

Protection efforts must go hand in hand with recognition of women as agents for change and sustainable peace

Ghazzawi et al. contend that the vulnerability of Syrian women, as portrayed in the media and other actions whereby violence against women, especially sexual violence in conflict, has been on the agenda of the UN and the broader international community, has served to narrow the perception of Syrian women in peacebuilding efforts. 'Treating women's rights as solely a question of protection has reduced women to being passive victims of war' (Ghazzawi et al. 2015). Instead protection efforts must go hand in hand with recognition of the role of women as agents for

change and sustainable peace (Ghazzawi et al. 2015); women's protection and participation in the public sphere need to be addressed as part of a holistic approach (Al-Abdeh 2017). On the other hand, Swisspeace et al. counsel against viewing women 'as either passive victims or collective saviours' because their roles and impact varies greatly. Rather, Swisspeace et al. suggest that the roles of women and women initiatives should be critically analysed rather than just assumed, noting that elderly women too are capable of inciting violence and hatred (Swisspeace et al. 2016).

2.5.3 Overview of Local Councils

Local Coordination Councils (LCCs) arose as spontaneous groups of young activists during the revolution in 2011 in neighbourhoods and towns across Syria as the main vehicle for mobilization of civil disobedience (Khoury 2014). Where government forces withdrew, many LCCs transformed themselves into local councils attempting to fill the vacuum of the state (Swisspeace et al. 2017).

The literature notes that local councils initially played an important role in promoting political goals, mediating civil-military tensions and, in some cases, negotiating ceasefires or access routes for service delivery (Swisspeace et al. 2016). The literature notes that local councils provide essential public services, as well as humanitarian relief (IWPR 2014) and fulfill, to a certain degree, other governing functions, such as collecting revenues and running the civilian registry (Swisspeace et al. 2017), with varying levels of independence (vis-à-vis armed groups in particular as well as the Syrian National Council) (IWPR 2014). Khalaf contends that the legitimacy of local councils largely depends on their ability to restore a minimum level of social services in their areas, as well as their local nature and revolutionary history during the uprising (Khalaf 2015). Khalaf et al. suggest that local councils are often considered as part of civil society since they operate without formal authority and are considered to be temporary structures (Khalaf et al. 2014).

2.5.4 Key findings and insights

Limited presence and participation of women in local councils

The literature on local councils either explicitly confirms the limited presence and participation of women in local councils (Ghazzawi 2014; IWPR 2014; Ghazzawi et al. 2015; Swisspeace et al. 2017) or makes no mention of women's presence and role (El Dusuki et al. 2016). Al-Abdeh suggests that women account for approximately 2-4% of local council positions (Al-Abdeh 2017). Al-Shami contends that local councils have selected men not just for their technical and professional expertise, but because they come from prominent families and tribes and, in mixed communities, include men from minority groups so as to include different religions and sects. Hence, local councils recognize the need to be inclusive. Yet, local council structures have not been inclusive to women at all (Al Shami in Moritz-Rabson 2016). Though Swisspeace et al. refer to the openness in some areas to the election of women, 'it almost never materialized', and whilst a few local councils have created specific offices for women, they are not necessarily functional (Swisspeace et al. 2017).

Multiple explanations for the absence of women in the local councils

The 2016 review by Swisspeace and Local Administrative Councils into the functioning of five local councils puts forward a number of 'explanations' for the absence of women on the council in decision-making roles. These include the questioning by some men of whether women have – not the often cited academic experience or work experience necessary for me (though not men) to participate – but the 'necessary level of civilized behaviour and awareness' to participate in the local council. Additional 'explanations' for the absence of women in the local council comprise the restrictive approach to the movement and clothing of women by military factions which work closely with local councils or which exercise de facto control over the councils, as well as the retort that women are indeed present as local council employees, mostly in the education and health field (Swisspeace et al. 2017). Perhaps most significantly, Swisspeace et al. note that the position of coordinating, allocating aid and implementing services is highly contested because it is crucial in terms of power and control over resources, as well as in terms of mobilizing political support and legitimacy (Swisspeace et al. 2017).

Donors do not recognize the political dimension of service delivery

The literature notes that donor priorities, rather than community needs, have often driven the direction of the local councils' work. This approach has jeopardized the transparency of local councils and their ability to adopt sustainable, integrated approaches (Swisspeace et al. 2017). Swisspeace et al. also found that donor support to local councils was too limited, thereby impacting the quality of services delivered, as well as transitory and unreliable. Significantly, the literature suggests that donors do not necessarily recognize the political dimension of service delivery and tend to approach service delivery from a purely technical perspective (Swisspeace et al. 2017).

Local councils wield significant potential as vehicles for political action

There is broad consensus in the literature regarding the potential role of local councils as a vehicle of political action (Khoury 2014; El Dusuki et al. 2016; SOC 2017). Research conducted by El Dusuki et al. in 2016 of 105 local councils indicates that local residents understand and welcome the political activities undertaken by local councils, such as issuing public and political statements, attending political events, organizing protests, conducting community reconciliations, and conducting negotiations with the regime or other groups related to the regime (El Dusuki et al. 2016). The National Coalition describes the role of the local councils as the 'nucleus of future municipalities in a transitional government and ultimately assist[ing] in the formation of an elected government' (SOC 2017). Khoury contends that together with civil society organisations, local councils have 'sought to position themselves as legitimate future leaders by resisting jihadi efforts to impose religious rules and parallel governance structures' (Khoury 2014). El Dusuki et al. write that though mainly fulfilling a service role, 'it is easy for any observer to notice that local councils have a great potential to establish political groups with significant grass roots support exceeding that of any existing political groupings' (El Dusuki et al. 2014).

IWPR recommends the 'involvement of women in local councils' as one way of cementing the councils as the corner stone for a future and democratic Syria (IWPR

2014). Ghazzawi et al. propose the inclusion of women in local councils as not only important to strengthen women's political leadership, but also to secure an effective response to their needs during armed conflict as well as to guarantee means for their protection (Ghazzawi et al. 2015). Given the establishment of donor-funded documentation centres attached to local councils, which have facilitated the registration of civil documents, such as those relating to births, deaths, marriage and divorce (ILAC 2016), ensuring international support to women's presence and participation in the work of local councils and more generally to strengthen the role of local councils will support recognition of women's and children's rights in particular.

2.6 Role of Syrian women in engendering the constitution

A number of Syrian initiatives to develop constitutional proposals are underway, supported by various donors. There is little literature relating to the ongoing efforts to engender the constitution beyond narrative text put out by those Syrian and international organisations supporting the process. The absence of literature indicates the need for analysis regarding the inclusion of women in the constitution building process, advice as to how women's engagement in the process might be broadened, and reflection as to how the constitution building process could be viewed as a tool to transform women's political participation more generally.

2.6.1 Overview

A number of diverse efforts are underway to design options to change the current constitutional framework (Carter Center 2016). The literature notes that in 2011, the Syrian Women League launched a process to engender the constitution building process in Syria. The purpose of these engendering efforts is to raise awareness of the necessity of integrating women's rights and respect for gender equality in the future Syrian constitution and to develop a discourse on democracy from a women's rights perspective (IFE-EFI 2012). The rationale for engendering the constitution lies in lessons learned and good practices from around the world, which show that an inclusive constitution-building process, particularly in conflict and post-conflict contexts, is both a tool and a goal to raise women's rights and gender equality and is central to democracy building (Hassan and Jonsson 2013).

The Euromed Feminist Initiative (IFE-EFI) has worked closely to support Syrian women's organisations, principally the Syrian Women League and Coalition of Syrian Women for Democracy, to reach out to more than 650 Syrian civil society women activists to support them in the constitution drafting process. To this end, a number of activities aimed at empowering women and strengthening their participation in inclusive constitution building have taken place. These include the undertaking of comparative research on the constitutions of Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, and Syria; preparing draft provisions for a future Syrian constitution inclusive of women's rights and gender equality; and convening a meeting in Beirut with over 60

international experts and activists to discuss and engender the constitutional provisions (IFE-EFI 2012; IFE-EFI 2014; IFE-EFI 2016).

Other initiatives to change the constitutional framework have included some reference to women's inclusion in the broad transition process, including the constitution drafting process. For example, in 2016, the Carter Center, in partnership with the Syrian Civil Coalition (*Tamas*), the U.N. Economic and Social Council for West Asia (ESCWA), the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center (NOREF) and Swisspeace, convened a series of workshops in Beirut, Moscow, and Washington with a group of Syrian lawyers and academics. The participants agreed on the inclusion of a gender equality declaration in the draft transitional constitutional document to ensure in the transition process and beyond the involvement of women in all implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements; the adoption of a gender perspective by all those exercising public power; and measures to ensure the human rights of women and girls (Carter Center 2016).

Key findings and insights

There is limited literature analysing women's efforts to engender the constitution

There is limited literature regarding women's efforts to engender the constitution. Most of the literature emanates from IFI-EFI and comprises narrative updates on the various activities that have taken place, together with high-level recommendations, principles, strategic objectives and exhortations of the need to mainstream gender into the constitution drafting process. Other literature relating to the constitution building process more generally notes that women should be involved in the transition, including the constitution building process, and calls for gender equality provisions to be included in the constitutional change. These references do not explicitly mention the extent to which women have been engaged in the specific process under consideration.

As such, there is little literature available identifying the kinds of Syrian women who have been engaged in the constitution building process to date, for example, whether they live in Syria, the surrounding countries or the diaspora; whether they are lawyers, judges, academics and/or grass roots activists; or indeed how the '650' women have been consulted. Nor does the literature flesh out the results of these consultative processes to date in terms of both the process relating to women's inclusion and the content of proposed constitutional provisions.

Significantly also, there is an absence of comparative literature regarding the relationship of women's efforts to engender the constitution vis-à-vis Syrian women's engagement in other political processes, such as the formal peace process or with the UN's human rights mechanisms. This is particularly surprising since efforts to engender the constitution began in 2011 during the revolutionary protests and prior to the commencement of the formal peace process, and have continued to make some progress whilst women's participation in the formal peace process appears to be on hold.

The time to engender the constitution is now

Those working on supporting the constitution building process note that, taking into account the experience of other contexts, the time for action and research to engender the constitution and ensure women's inclusion in the constitution building process is now (Hassan and Jonsson 2013). Indeed, writing in 2013, Hassan and Jonsson call for immediate efforts to raise awareness and sensitize all actors, future decision makers and civil society as well as the international community, to gender mainstreaming of the constitution and to support women's rights activists who are preparing draft constitutions from women's rights perspectives (Hassan and Jonsson 2013). Given the lack of literature available on the subject, however, the urgency of engendering the constitution and locating it within a broader constitutional road map seems to have been missed by international actors.

2.7 The specific experience of Kurdish women in Syria and political processes

There is considerable literature relating to the evolving ideology of the Kurdish liberation movement and the role of women in Kurdish society, noting the differentiated regional experience of Kurdish women. There is increasing literature on the situation of Kurds in northern Syria, including the impact on women of the revolution and the de facto autonomy of the Kurdish region. The literature is clear: some Kurdish women's lives have been transformed in the past few years in the political and military spheres. Yet, Rojava's model of gender progressiveness may have limited application elsewhere.

2.7.1 Overview

There is broad consensus in the literature that the Syrian revolution has presented Kurds in Syria with an opportunity to assert self-determination in a variety of ways. Kurdish political parties have been able to exploit the evolving nature of the crisis, and specifically the withdrawal of the Syrian army from most of their positions in Kurdish territories. The withdrawal has led to the unilateral creation of a largely self-governing area, covering the three cantons of Afrin, Jazira and Kobani, where Kurds comprise a majority of the population, known as Rojava (Attasi 2014). The literature describes Rojava as a 'new experiment in local governance with no less than deep significance for Syrian, Kurdish, Middle Eastern and international geopolitics' (Lowe 2016).

In this experimental context, Kurdish women in Syria are described as having experienced a 'swift, encompassing and unexpected transformation' arising from the circumstances created by the revolution (Bengio 2016). The dominant theme emerging from the literature suggests that Kurdish women have become more visible and active in politics and governance, as well as in security and military affairs since the revolution. In addition, progressive legislation advancing women's rights and role in society has been adopted in the Kurdish territories, though its implementation remains uncertain. There is also some, albeit, limited literature

questioning the extent to which the outward signs of gender 'progressiveness' are being exercised and enjoyed by women, as well as critiques of Kurdish women's involvement in an armed struggle which fall within the general critique of militarized responses. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is, in turn, critique of this critique.

2.7.2. Key findings and insights

Kurdish women are assuming political leadership roles

Beyond leading the revolutionary protests in Rojava, Kurdish women are increasingly assuming political leadership roles. The literature identifies at least the following steps as indicative of the increased and visible engagement of women in Kurdish public affairs and political life:

- Appointment of a woman co-chair of the leading Kurdish Political Party, the PYD or Democratic Union Party;
- Appointment of a woman finance minister in Jazira canton;
- Each city in Rojava has a co-presidency held by a man and a woman, and at least 50% of political offices from the local to the confederation level are held by women;
- From neighbourhood to canton-level, all female parallel institutions have been established (Bengio 2016; Argentieri 2016; Cemgil and Hoffman 2016; Aitikaboud 2016).

At the same time, however, there is limited literature regarding the participation of Kurdish women in the Kurdish National Council and more generally regarding the presence and role of Kurdish women in the Syrian opposition.

Kurdish women fighters are highly visible, fetishized and promoted as role models for emancipated women

There is considerable coverage in the literature, particularly the western media, of Kurdish women fighters, known as the YPJ or the Women's Protection Units, which make up 35-40% of Kurdish forces. These fighters have taken an active part in the fighting against radical Islamic groups, including the liberation of Yazidi families under siege near Sinjar in 2014 from the so-called Islamic Sate (Argentieri 2016; Bengio 2016). The sensationalist coverage of the YPJ fighters has been critiqued, with Dirik noting that 'reporters often pick the most 'attractive' fighters for interviews and eroticize them as 'badass' Amazons' (Dirik 2014)¹⁶. Other academic literature has referred to the YPJ's role in serving 'to emancipate women in an otherwise extremely conservative society where patriarchy is still a strong undercurrent in social life, as the YPJ fighters are seen as having freed themselves from patriarchal bonds and having obtained control over their own lives' (Cemgill and Hoffman 2016).

¹⁶ See, for instance, Maryse Gooden, *Poster Girl Killed Fighting ISIS*, The Sun, 7 September 2016, available at <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1743401/beautiful-female-fighter-dubbed-the-angelina-jolie-of-kurdistan-dies-while-battling-isis-in-syria/>

Rojava's gender progressiveness is also manifest in the adoption of new progressive laws

The literature notes that the 'gender revolution' in Rojava is also evident through the promulgation of new laws in Kurdish areas. These new laws include the outlawing of polygamy, underage marriage (which essentially impact girls) and unilateral divorce; the addressing of violence against women; and the promotion of civil marriage for the first time in Syria (Bengio 2016; Argentieri 2016). The PYD's constitution, in operation in Rojava, is described as 'enshrining gender equality as core principles beyond the cosmetic offerings and assurances' promised both by secular Middle East and western governments (Aitikaboud 2016). The PYD's 2014 Equality Decree comprises 30 clauses seeking to establish gender equality at all social, economic and political levels; Begikhani notes that many Kurdish women view the Equality Decree as a political programme for women's status and role in the public arena (Begikhani 2014). Notwithstanding the adoption of progressive laws and constitution, the literature is largely silent on the status of implementation of the laws, for example, relating to the prevalence of civil marriage.

The long-term struggle of Kurdish women for gender equality

The literature characterizes the Rojava model as unique in that it emphasizes grassroots participation and an egalitarian approach to gender and increases women's participation in all levels of social, political and economic life (Matin in Begikhani 2014). The literature identifies a number of reasons behind the uniqueness of the model. These include the long history and experience of Kurdish women's struggle against patriarchy and masculinist ideology, and practices within the national liberation struggle in which national aims were prioritized (Kisanak et al. 2016).

Dirik is quick to point out that the media is 'preoccupied with attempts to sensationalise the ways in which these [YPJ] women defy preconceived notions of eastern women as oppressed victims [in which] these mainstream characterizations erroneously present Kurdish women fighters as a novel phenomenon'. Instead, Bengio cites historical examples of Kurdish women leaders, noting the existence of 'charismatic Kurdish women' leading their people in the 18th and 19th centuries (Bengio 2016). Dirik also notes that 'my generation grew up recognizing women fighters as a natural element of our identity' (Dirik 2014). Such an approach posits that the ongoing mass mobilization of women as fighters and political activists is the legacy of decades-long resistance of Kurdish women as fighters, prisoners, politicians, leaders of popular uprisings and tireless protesters (Dirik 2014). This approach corresponds to the experience of other national liberation movements in the Middle East region, including Palestine, where Palestinian women fighters have likewise been considered as role models for some time.

Much of the literature associates the recent increased public participation and visibility of Kurdish women in Syria with evolving Kurdish liberation discourse. Cemgill and Hoffman state that Abdullah Öcalan's writing set the liberation of women as the precondition of liberation of society in general and the liberation of Kurds in particular; suggesting that women have the capacity and will not only to participate in and revolutionize the democratic process but also to create their own

institutions to empower themselves (Cemgill and Hoffman 2016). Yet, while the dialectic relationship between Kurdish liberation ideology and Kurdish women's long-standing struggles for gender equality should not be ignored, its exact relationship remains unclear.

In this vein, much of the literature contends that women fighters are meant to be seen as exemplars who show that female leadership is crucial in every sphere in society (Tax 2016). The YPJ's fight is seen as not being limited to confronting the so-called Islamic State. Instead the YPJ is battling against societal norms within their communities that have relegated women within the largely patriarchal societies in which they live. The women of the YPJ fight against domination – be that of the so-called Islamic State, the Syrian regime or within the gender dynamics of the Kurdish community and the wider Middle East (Aitlkaboud 2016). As the YPJ spokesperson explained: 'As the women of the YPJ, we aim not only at liberation from ISIS, but also at liberation of mentality and thoughts. War is not only the liberation of the land. We are also fighting for the liberation of men and women. If not, the patriarchal system will prevail once again' (McKernan 2017).

Critiquing the 'gender revolution' and critiquing the critique

There is some questioning within the literature as to whether militarism is the only response to the situation. Ballantyne of WILPF notes that though resistance is 'a human right... in the long run we should not accept that militarism is the only response. We should seriously begin to build peacemaking mechanisms' (Cockburn 2016). Alodaat of WILPF argues that Kurdish women fighters should 'use the power they have to emphasize non-military means to ensure the freedom and wellbeing of civilians, women and men alike. And to create a space where women can be effective without having to take up arms' (Cockburn 2016).

In turn, the literature includes a response to these and similar concerns. Dirik notes that 'some western feminists [have] questioned [the] legitimacy [of Kurdish female fighters] and dismissed it as militarism or co-optation by political groups. Western media narratives have portrayed this struggle in a de-politicised, exotic way, or by making generalised assumptions about women's 'natural' disinclination to violence. If the media reporting was dominated by a male gaze, it was partly due to feminists' refusal to engage with this relevant topic. One cannot help but think that militant women taking matters into their own hands impairs western feminists' ability to speak on behalf of women in the Middle East, projected as helpless victims, may be one of the reasons for this hostility' (Dirik 2017). Benson-Sokmen further elaborates that given the gendered (masculinist) politics of war and the centrality of violence in the enforcement of patriarchal power, the notion that political violence may intersect with and produce feminist subjectivities other than 'victim' is, for many western feminists, unthinkable (Benson-Sokmen 2017).

Given the breadth of coverage in the media as well as academia of both Kurdish women fighters and the unique experience of Rojava, there is surprisingly little in-depth literature interrogating the extent to which the highly visible presence and participation of women in the public and military spheres is actually impacting gender dynamics in the family, community and at societal levels, including in more

traditional rural Kurdish areas, taking into account the particular gender related phenomena of the region. Specifically, there is a lack of analysis on who is being included – and excluded – from the political and military sphere and the impact of women’s presence and participation on the evolution of gender norms in the Kurdish region of Syria. Discussion of the enduring barriers to women’s participation and enjoyment of their rights – including those relating to men and women who have left Rojava and who often retain frozen understandings of cultural values – could also be deepened.

The layering and juxtapositions of the ideologies of feminism, pacifism, orientalism, terrorism, and national liberation combine to make the subject of Kurdish women in Syria a polarizing, highly contentious and surprisingly under-explored area of study. Further research is required to interrogate the politics of promoting gender progressiveness: who wins, who loses and, specifically, how gender progressiveness contributes to the broader goals of national self-determination, with the inherent exposure of women to instrumentalization by political and other forces that this entails.

2.8 Challenges to Women’s Participation in Political Processes

There is ample reference in the literature to the many challenges and obstacles facing women’s participation in political processes, and specifically in the ongoing various peace processes. These challenges largely emanate from the patriarchic system and encompass cultural and traditional values and expectations, conceptual understandings and practical restrictions. Other challenges include the various deficits encountered by women’s organizing, most particularly after four decades of repression and denial.

2.8.1 Patriarchy

There is broad consensus in the literature that patriarchy in its various manifestations – though it is not necessarily referred to as such – is the principal obstacle to the political participation of women, as well as to other opportunities. The following sets out a number of the recurring elements of the patriarchal experience as experienced by Syrian women today in the conflict context.

2.8.2 Key findings

Traditionally, women’s primary role is in the private sphere

Writing in 1997, Hill notes that ‘Syrian families and communities of all ethnic and confessional backgrounds are acutely patriarchal’ (Hill 1997). A review of ‘peace resources’ in Syria including women, conducted by CCSDS and Peaceful Change Initiative nearly 20 years later in 2014, notes that the role of women in peace processes is not widely acknowledged or universally supported because ‘women are traditionally seen as the repository of their families’ honour whose primary role is in the private sphere, rather than in public life. [In fact,] Women who are active in

public life are often viewed with suspicion by their community members (both male and female)' (CCSDS et al. 2014). These traditional perceptions of Syrian women and their role in society tend to undermine women's efforts in the public sphere. Many activists interviewed by Ghazzawi et al. in 2014-2015 cited difficulties during their peacebuilding activism relating to societal resistance or family pressure and concern; resistance was seen as particularly heightened when it related to women becoming involved in politics and public affairs, as compared to income-generating projects, such as sewing workshops (Ghazzawi et al. 2015).

Increasing conservatism from broader Syrian society

An IFES survey of Syrian men and women in Turkey in late 2015 designed to understand how to foster the development of coalitions of women and men to advocate for more inclusive political processes links the impact of patriarchy and conflict on women (Huber 2015). Huber explains that those issues that traditionally challenge women are compounded by conflict, with increasingly conservative militants dominating liberated areas (Huber 2015). Yet Huber notes that increasing conservatism is not confined to 'jihadis', but is present within broader Syrian society (Huber 2015).

Zero-sum assumption to gender equality

Habel writes that 'in social discourse, politics is constructed as a dangerous and dirty business, which ensures that women are kept from away a political education. Decades of patriarchal dictatorships [in Syria] have resulted in limited civil society. The lack of political culture makes it difficult for different groups to cooperate at a political level, but it is even more difficult for women to find their way in' (Habel 2015). The IFES research findings that Huber cites bring Habel's explanation to life: Huber notes that on a personal and community based level, men agree with the concept of gender equality. However, male perspective on personal or individual gender dynamics and specifically the masculinization of the conflict and a conservative society are very much a foil to the challenges of women's empowerment efforts (Huber 2015). The statement of an IFES male interviewee - 'I have a problem with my wife becoming a leader and controlling all of the people around her. It would change her' - sums up much of the thinking behind the personalized gender politics affecting women's participation. Personal gender dynamics or indeed personal gender politics can lead to men explaining away gender equality with concerns about control and power, 'cloaked in explanations of 'safety' and 'qualifications'' (Huber 2015). The true concern, Huber posits, is the zero-sum assumption that it is 'us' or 'them' in discussions about gender equality (Huber 2015).

The patriarchal system has severely impacted the ability of women to participate meaningfully in the formal peace process

There is consensus in the literature of the severe impact of the patriarchal system on the ability of women to participate meaningfully in the formal peace process. Gambale quotes activist al-Hallak - 'the Coalition and the regime don't really believe in women's participation. They take two women. But not feminists. And it's women who talk about politics, not about women's rights' - to highlight Syrian opposition reservations to women's real participation (Gambale 2014). Likewise, the literature

notes the specific concerns of members of the Islamist bloc within the National Coalition, who are considered particularly hostile to increasing women's representation (Integrity 2014). The literature also frequently describes women's presence at the negotiating table as amounting to 'the tablecloth' (Al Jazeera 2014; Huber 2015), rather than as being strategically necessary to the cause of peace and transition.

2.8.3 Other challenges to women's participation in political processes

The meta challenge of patriarchy infuses a number of second order challenges impacting women's participation in political processes. In its examination of women peacebuilders in Syria, Ghazzawi et al. identify a number of challenges to women's participation, which can be grouped under the following thematic issues:

- The lack of trust within communities and broader Syrian society
- Conceptual, intellectual and ideological fragmentation
- Practical restrictions and
- Resource deficits.

2.8.4 Key findings and insights

The historical lack of trust within communities and broader Syrian society impinges upon the ability of women activists and organisations to work together

A lack of trust arising from conspiracy theories and the divisive mindset sown and perpetuated by the Al-Assad regimes over the course of the past 40 years combined with social divisions and 'groupisms' have fueled challenges to women's organizing and advancing participation in political processes. These social divisions and groupisms pose a 'potential future threat to stability and peaceful coexistence' (Ghazzawi et al. 2015). The Ghazzawi et al. research notes the concerns of many groups working either in government-controlled areas or in other regions with intense fighting, who consider peacebuilding as an 'act of betrayal against all those who had been killed, detained, displaced or in other ways victimized by the war' (Ghazzawi et al. 2015). The Ghazzawi et al. research identifies the lack of alliances and networks amongst women's organisations and individuals, noting that working closely with other women activists seems to be difficult for women's groups.

Conceptual, intellectual and ideological fragmentation has at best slowed down the impact of civil society organisations on women's rights

Ghazzawi et al. contend that the perception by some activists of peacebuilding as an act of betrayal can be seen as evidence of the lack of societal awareness of peacebuilding and its value, resulting from living in a culture of political ignorance and overwhelming state dominance, combined with the ongoing scale of violence in the country (Ghazzawi et al. 2015). Though the uprising initially provided space for people to communicate, socialize and be exposed to different ideological views, the ensuing militarized conflict and its ramifications have led to intellectual and ideological fragmentation among some civil society members and groups. These disagreements, sometimes based upon differing philosophical views, have in some cases led to the collapse of organisations or defection of group members (Khalaf et

al. 2014). Khalaf et al. note that the ideology of most civil society groups is difficult to grasp, with often prevalent confusion regarding their own identity. Many groups share an endorsement of fundamental issues, such as democracy, freedom, diversity, secularism, women's rights and gender equality. Yet they differ in how they understand and define these notions, with often ambivalent and sometimes contradictory responses and statements (Khalaf et al. 2014).

Practical restrictions have limited the participation of women in public affairs and political life

Practical restrictions refer to the wide and encroaching challenges that impact women's ability to participate in particular in public affairs and political life. Some of these restrictions relate directly to women's gendered role, such as cultural restrictions on women's mobility, which have become further entrenched in the context of armed conflict. Other restrictions impact civil society organisations more generally, including registration requirements for Syrian organisations in neighbouring countries, travel restrictions of Syrians to neighbouring and other countries, and the targeting of activists, including the heightened scrutiny facing women's activists (Ghazzawi et al. 2015).

Resource deficits have stunted the growth and development of women activists, women's organisations and women's organizing

Syrian women activists face enormous resource deficits. These include a lack of financial, organisational, and technical support, combined with a lack of human experience and confidence (Williams 2014). A major impediment facing women's groups are the difficulties in accessing funding, often because the funding is short term rather than strategic and because of increased burdensome financial reporting requirements. Additionally, most donors fund specific projects, which may not cover core funding to cover staff costs and allow organisations to maintain themselves as institutions. Given that most activists of recently emerged civil society organisations had no prior involvement in civil society before the conflict, they lack experience and skills in institution building and management (Khalaf et al. 2014). At the same time, many of the actors previously associated with early peacebuilding efforts have gone abroad (Swisspeace et al. 2016). Depression and trauma are widespread for women, who remain the lingering anchors in communities with no outlets for them to cope (Huber 2015) and strain their already overwhelmed capacities.

2.9 Risks associated with the support by international actors to women's participation in political processes

The literature emphasizes a number of specific challenges women activists face relating to the support provided to them by international actors. These include the instrumentalization of women's rights by both Al-Assad and western supporters, the fragmenting impact of international support on the Syrian women's movement, and the adoption of a narrow conceptual understanding of the political nature of Syrian women's organizing.

2.9.1 Key insights and findings

The Al-Assad regime instrumentalized women's rights to legitimize its dictatorship

Al-Abdeh notes the media's attention on the 'western' and apparently 'emancipated' personality of Asma Al-Assad and other women associated with the regime, as well as the women fighters of the Kurdish forces. Al-Abdeh contends that much of the [western] media coverage of these women plays into longer-term romanticized and orientalist tropes through which the Assad regime has long instrumentalized women's rights to legitimize its dictatorship (Al-Abdeh 2017).

International actors instrumentalize women's rights as part of their efforts to counter violent extremism

Al-Abdeh notes that Syrian women have played a significant role in challenging violent and extremist agendas. For Syrian women, all violence committed in the war is ideological and terroristic in nature, being constructed on the logic of the extermination of 'the other'. Based on this understanding, women activists have led protests against all kinds of dictatorship and terrorism; from the Assad regime to the so-called Islamic State. Yet the approach by the international community to countering violence extremism focuses entirely on the so-called Islamic State. In focusing entirely on the so-called Islamic state, international actors have wittingly or unwittingly contributed to the polarization of women's rights in Syria, as women have been delegitimized through international efforts which instrumentalize women's empowerment as a vehicle to counter violent extremism. Al-Abdeh also highlights the importance of understanding the role of religion on resilience and community identity, especially in time of conflict. For some Syrian women at this time, religious identity and spirituality is not a sign of religious radicalism but a way to build resilience (Al-Abdeh 2017).

The focus of international support on international processes has neglected grass roots work

Al-Abdeh notes that the majority of international effort invested in supporting Syrian women's empowerment has focused on engaging women on an ad hoc basis in the formal peace track and in discussions on eventual post-conflict governance. This focus has resulted in an imbalance of support and indeed neglect of grass roots level work which 'reflects external political agendas more than the immediate needs' of many Syrian women at this time (Al-Abdeh 2017). Al-Abdeh asserts that the privileging of those who are perceived as urban, well educated women 'with an engagement in feminist discourse who are seen as 'champions of women's leadership for peace' means that those others perceived as rural, less-educated women have been excluded from support – notwithstanding that many of these women fight every day to preserve women's place in the public sphere under siege and bombs' (Al-Abdeh 2017). Al-Abdeh acknowledges that 'this exclusion is not necessarily intentional, but rather the result of prejudice concerning the skills and capacities of the rural, less well educated' women. It is also a result of international actors' preference of designing projects which focus on the numbers of female beneficiaries, as opposed to 'real participation projects that would require long-term investigation and investment' (Al-Abdeh 2017).

International actors have created tensions and even splits within the Syrian women's movement

The literature notes that efforts by some international actors, including UN Women, have negatively impacted the Syrian women's movement. Syrian activist Asad argues that UN Women has excluded Syrian women and stereotyped the role of others. Specifically, Asad writes in connection with a conference of 150 'Syrian women peacemakers' held in Beirut in May 2016, that 'UN Women has taken part, intentionally or unintentionally, in the creation of disagreements, animosities and even splits within the women's movement, as well as the creation of a new classification: with peace according to the United Nations style or against such peace' (Asad 2016). Al-Abdeh also notes the overconcentration of international attention on women engaged in international processes and the 'risk that the glorification of individual women leaders contributes to fragmentation and division both within the women's movement and between women in wider society' (Al-Abdeh 2017).

More generally, Asad refers to the 'rotteness' of the 'ready-made recipes that the international organisations are trying to offer to the Syrian community today because they are far from what the people want, far from strategic planning for the building of local institutions, and for trust building among the Syrian people's components. They are rotten because they are based on classification, bias, and preference. Worst of all, they are based on stereotypical profiling that deals with us on the assumption that we need the professionalism of a western "other" to fathom our own reality' (Asad 2016).

UN Women state that Syrian women asked for their support to help them organize and rally the diverse women's networks, coalitions and activists around a common agenda (UNW 2016b). UN Women have also described the 'key ingredients for success their engagement with the Syrian women's movement' as comprising:

- Support to women's agency and unify women's voices' to bring them together around a common agenda. Leverage the women's rights agenda as the minimum common denominator to transcend sectarian, ethnic and political divisions and then expand the perimeters of consensus as the group builds trust
- Provide a neutral convening space to build capacity and forge a unified vision. Never take sides in the process
- Engage in strong advocacy with Member States and forge a strong partnership with the political side of the UN house
- Have committed donors who are flexible and more interested in the end result than immediately visibility (UNW 2016b).

Syrian civil society has been marginalized in international deliberations and replaced by a binary discourse

The literature identifies other concerns relating to the approach of international actors to the Syrian context, which directly impact the role, space and place of Syrian civil society. Syrian civil society has been marginalized in international deliberations over the conflict, and replaced by a binary discourse in which the conflict is reduced to one between Al-Assad and the so-called Islamic State (Planet Syria in Mourtada

2015). As such, Planet Syria calls for media outlets to 'hear our experiences before western experts decide how best to proceed', emphasizing the need for meaningful discourse with Syria's nonviolent community, the support of the international community, and 'an accompanying narrative which privileges civil activism over the militarized binary of ISIS and Assad' (Mourtada 2015).

International community's pattern of prioritizing those with guns at peace talks

Davis, in her review of the role of Syrian women in the peace process, notes that barriers impeding women's participation in conflict resolution mainly stem from the prevalent perception among heads of states that the role of local women's groups is limited to being the caretakers of those left vulnerable by crisis. Some have gone as far to dismiss women as too 'emotional'. As a result, these officials frequently fail to recognize the critical work of women's right groups at community-level peace building. Consequently, and very often at critical policy moments, women's voices representing civil society's concerns are assigned a 'second-tier' status on the notion that other 'hard' security issues are a 'prerequisite' for human rights and hence take precedence. In other words, the international community has a pattern of practice for prioritizing those with guns to be at peace talks (Davis 2016).

Wrong analysis of international actors leads to the wrong approach

Rees of WILPF writes in 2014 of a meeting that took place between Syrian women activists and the US delegation to the United Nations in Geneva the day after the two-day UN Women-convened meeting of 50 Syrian women (see section 2.4.1). In this meeting, Rees notes that the US delegation asked Syrian women activists 'How can you convince us you are inclusive and representative? Can you prove that you have all confessions in your ranks?' Rees contends that 'You ask the wrong questions because you have the wrong analysis and hence the wrong approach. The war was not about sectarianism, but by repeating over and over the mantra of sectarianism, and with states fueling it with arms and support, sectarianism is being created, and unless that narrative changes it will destroy the 'deep peace' that women and civil society are trying to explain is needed (Rees 2014).

International actors have a narrow view of the 'political'

Rees also contends that the UN's demands for women to have a 'political agenda' and to be 'legitimate representatives' in order for them to be at the peace table is to misunderstand both elements. Rees emphasizes that civil society and women have an agenda; their issue is about the distribution of power, which is political. What they seek is progressive steps towards goals based on human rights, which if effected properly will ensure inclusion and legitimacy, but over time. 'Women need to be in these talks not necessarily as negotiators for a particular political settlement, but to ensure that what is said is based on the principled demands of civil society, that gender dimensions are taken into account, and that women's rights are in no way compromised'. That is politics (Rees 2014).

3 Conclusions

“This is not simply a Middle Eastern problem, an Arab problem, a Muslim problem. I want to be clear that I am talking about the Syria situation within the context of the patriarchal system that we all live in, universally.”

Mariam Jalabi, 2016,
Member of Women’s Advisory Committee
[Source: Bang 2016]

3.1 The quality of literature surveyed is uneven and there are significant gaps

This literature review has confirmed the existence of limited available English language literature critiquing Syrian women’s participation in the various political and peace processes, let alone the role of international actors in supporting – or indeed hindering – them. There is considerable, albeit repetitive, written commentary on the absence of women from the formal peace talks, primarily authored by Syrian activists, INGOs working with and supportive of specific women activists, and non-Syrian journalists. Yet there is little critique on what has worked well, what has gone wrong, and what should be done in the future to advance women’s participation, with only a smattering of English language discussions highlighting what Syrian women actually think about the political and peace processes. Moreover, there is no analysis that looks at women’s holistic participation across the various different processes which, this review posits, make up the spectrum of ‘political and peace processes’ (see conclusion 3.5 below). Conversely, the focus of international think tanks’ and peace organisations’ work on local, community and grassroots peacebuilding is largely gender-blind, focusing, in the main, on the views of Syrians living in countries surrounding Syria.

Overall, the literature conveys widespread agreement on the need for women to participate in political and peace processes but does not set out in detail specific critiques of progress and support to date. The absence of in-depth written analysis available in English regarding the participation of Syrian women in political and peace processes and their related challenges and opportunities is surprising. This is particularly so given, first, the considerable international public advocacy to support women’s meaningful inclusion in the formal peace process. Second, the findings of the 2015 UN Global Study on the status of implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 relating to women’s participation in peacemaking. And, third, recent burgeoning academic research relating to women’s inclusion in peace processes, which has received widespread dissemination within the United Nations, its Member States, and amongst Syrian women activists and their international INGO supporters. Nonetheless, the gap in the literature indicates the pressing requirement for in-depth, thoughtful analysis and critique on how Syrian women are participating in making, building, living and sustaining peace.

Such analysis should build upon the direct experience of Syrian women living in Syria, as well as in surrounding countries and the diaspora, by going to the women in Syria and hearing directly from them of their experience. Such interaction should serve to generate a deeper understanding of Syrian women's multiple roles and diverse experiences of living through conflict, their views on the challenges they face and how to respond to these challenges, and their perspectives on how they should more effectively participate in the various strands of the political and peace processes. This analysis should enable the crafting by Syrian women and their international supporters of coherent resourced transformational strategies to advance women's meaningful participation and inclusion across the spectrum of political and peace processes.

3.2 The meta-challenge of patriarchy within Syria and the international system severely shapes and impacts the participation of Syrian women

The review identified many manifestations of patriarchy at work in Syria and within Syrian communities living in the surrounding countries and the diaspora, which directly impact the conditions, circumstances and opportunities for women's participation in the political and peace processes as well as participation more broadly. The literature spoke of men who support gender equality 'in principle' - but not when it means that their own wives 'will change'. Other men express agreement with gender quotas but simultaneously question whether there are enough 'qualified' women to fill the quotas, whilst other men welcome women's independence but say that 'it's too dangerous for women to be involved in politics so better stay at home'. The literature also spoke of reflected the concerns of those who demand that not only must women represent broad swathes of the community in order to be invited to sit at the peace table, they must have in-depth expertise across the issues at the peace table too. Finally, the literature highlighted the increasing practice of 'jihadists' who seek to restrict and put an end to women's rights and agency. Yet the literature is clear: it is not just 'uncivil actors' - 'jihadists' - who are pushing back gender equality: resistance is coming from other segments of Syrian society too. Syrian women confront, on a daily basis, the blunt, harsh and crushing impact of the patriarchic system on the shaping of minds, aspirations, and opportunities of women - and of men - and its effects on families, communities, societies and nations.

And yet beyond the specific Syrian context and its impact upon Syrian women, it would be wise to be clear-eyed about the highly gendered character of the international institutions and processes, in which women's participation still has to be justified and explained and demanded and where men and masculinized ways of working and thinking dominate the echelons of power within both the United Nations - the mediator of the Syrian peace process - and the upper ranks (and junior too) of those states with most political influence over the Syrian conflicting parties. Thus, attempts to support Syrian women's participation in the various political and peace processes cannot be divorced from the reality that the international institutions and processes in which Syrian women seek to participate

are inherently spaces in which women's presence and participation in general continues today to be contested, with similar questioning of women's 'qualifications' that women working at the community levels in Syria experience.

Ensuring that Syrian women now and other women in the future are genuinely able to exercise their rights and participate in such international institutions and processes requires transformation of those very institutions and processes so that they are themselves inclusive, gendered spaces. Until that happens, how can these institutions and processes be expected to facilitate the strong influence of women?

3.3 The legacy of the authoritarian regime directly influences women's participation

Literature consulted for this review confirms that Syrian women activists and organisations encounter considerable challenges in organizing and working together. This conclusion is borne out not just by the profusion of Syrian women's organisations and peace related networks and related women's plans/agendas/charters. The strong reactions of women activists to the creation and activities of the Women's Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy and more generally towards 'elite' women 'in international cities' speaks to, in part, the underlying lack of trust, legitimacy and accountability that some Syrian women feel towards 'elite' women – be they members of the Women's Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy, the High Negotiation Committee's Women's Advisory Committee or other women perceived as 'elites'. Even if those women are non-elite women, the structure is perceived to be elitist due to the selection process and perceived lack of understanding of political constituency and inclusive participation.

The specific experience of Syrian women in the conflict, the intersectionality of their identities, and their multiple and often fluid roles vividly illustrate the heterogeneity of 'Syrian women'. Yet expression, space and support for inclusion of the diversity of views, perspectives and positions of women is often limited. The call by some international actors for Syrian women to 'come together, make peace and reconcile' belies the complex varied and differing positions that women, as men, hold in conflict, as in peace. It also glosses over the dilemmas some women activists feel regarding how they see themselves, particularly whether they consider themselves as 'civil society' and therefore independent or part of the political opposition and therefore partial. The tensions inherent in these positions has been underexplored in the literature.

Yet the historical legacy of living under an authoritarian regime for more than 40 years and its impact on key elements of public life, such as the nature and practice of politics, the meaning of public space, and the relationship between the state, civil society and citizens, may not have been entirely understood by those seeking to support Syrian women. For how could it be assumed that women should be able to so effortlessly come together in circumstances where there has been little - if any - engagement in the craft of politics and, at best, a limited shared history of

organizing and working together and instead, for some or indeed many, a shared history of distrust and suspicion?

3.4 Syrian women are participating across a spectrum of political and peace processes

The literature suggests that the focus of international support to date has been on securing the participation of Syrian women in international mechanisms and processes, including the UN-led formal peace talks, consultations with the Security Council, and the CEDAW review. The creation of the Women's Advisory Board and the Women's Advisory Committee enables claims of progress in women's participation to be made by both members and their supporters. It is clear, however, that notwithstanding the considerable efforts of both Syrian women activists and their international supporters to bring about both advisory bodies, their members have not yet been able to exercise the 'strong influence' Paffenholz indicated necessary in order for women to make a substantial contribution to peacemaking, (Paffenholz 2016) with reservations expressed by WAB and WCC members alike regarding the effectiveness of their advisory roles in the formal peace process.

At the local level, however, women activists are contributing to peacebuilding through their civilian activism and through other more consciously termed 'peacebuilding' initiatives. Yet the literature suggests that peacebuilding efforts by women at grassroots community levels have not received commensurate levels of political support, funding and visibility that appropriately reflect and build upon their actual peacebuilding impact on the ground.

The experience of Syrian women since 2012 strongly supports the finding of the 2015 UN Global Study: of the need to look at 'politics' and 'peacemaking' differently – not only as a set of actors around a negotiation table, but as a comprehensive process within a society that is inclusive, diverse, and reflective of the interests of the whole society (Global Study 2015). In the context of Syria, this entails reimagining the participation of women in political and peace processes to include women's participation across the range of processes and mechanisms that address, mediate and resolve local grievances and build understanding, collaboration, trust and resilience. These processes comprise women's participation in the formal peace process, as well as those activities understood as local peacebuilding activities, including as part of local councils, and the efforts of women to engender the constitution building process. All these strands of activity sit within a 'spectrum of political and peace processes' ongoing within Syria today. Political and practical support should be provided to this spectrum of activities in order to reinforce the overall approach and their common goal: to develop and implement a shared vision of the future Syria based on inclusion, collaboration, understanding, and tolerance.

3.5 The structure of participation in the formal peace process excludes women

The literature is clear: women are excluded from meaningful participation in the formal peace process. Genuinely seeking to ensure women's meaningful participation requires understanding the specific contextual structural and cultural impacts of the patriarchic system on Syrian women and men. This requires understanding, for example, that even if the Civil Society Support Room is comprised of 50% women activists, many of the women present still do not feel comfortable or confident to speak up and contribute decisively in discussions. It requires understanding why and how, for example, WAC members must navigate their way through a male dominated political scene. It requires looking beyond actions that keep supporters 'happy', but which may not – in actuality – have much impact. Having really understood some of the specific contextual challenges and how they play out visibly and invisibly, concretely and discretely, it then requires building pragmatic responses that consciously promote Syrian women's meaningful participation and inclusion in the political and peace processes. These responses could include context-specific appropriations of steps identified from other international experience, such as ensuring explicit decision making power for women, appropriate selection criteria and transparent selection procedures.

The literature suggests that some of the tensions between women activists and organisations, particularly those relating towards 'elite' women, arise from the support provided by international actors to support women's participation in the formal peace process. In order to ensure that the formal peace process is as inclusive as possible and, as evidenced by the scholarship (Nilsson 2012), contributes to the legitimacy and sustainability of the peace agreement, efforts should be made to integrate the voices, experiences, and perspectives of women working at the grass roots levels into international mechanisms and processes, and most significantly the formal peace process. Such efforts may also go some way to mitigating the tensions amongst some activists.

To this end, the question of the structure of participation of women in the formal peace process should be revisited to ensure as broad and deep engagement with women as possible to create a mechanism and process that can more effectively respond to women's perspectives across the range of issues under consideration. Such structures should take into account, first, the need for specifically designed platforms or fora to ensure the participation of women working at the community level in these processes, particularly the formal peace process. This approach would help to bring in the voices of those with actual power on the ground and broaden participation at the peace table to beyond male political elites or 'those with guns'. Second, linkages should also be strengthened between those engaging in other international mechanisms and processes, such as the UN human rights machinery and the Security Council, and those women working at the grass roots. Third, the building of a culture and mechanisms to promote feedback, accountability, transparency and trust between women operating at different levels and within different spaces are essential elements of a more relevant structure for women's participation. Such an approach would help to change the focus of negotiations

from power-sharing to peacebuilding, through moving away from zero-sum negotiations and by ensuring that specific issues affecting women can be used as negotiating points on which opposing parties can build consensus and trust

3.6 The focus of international support to women's political participation has been overly narrow

The literature evidences an over focus by international actors on women engaged in international processes and mechanisms to the detriment of support to community based activists which has, in turn, actually contributed to the fragmentation of the fragile Syrian women's movement. The literature points to the urgent need for international actors to assess their past and ongoing support to women in Syria to identify how they could together ensure balanced coherent support to women's political participation across the spectrum of political and peace processes.

It may be useful, as Al-Abdeh has suggested, for international actors to promote a more comprehensive approach to women's leadership and build on a community leadership development base, reaching out to a wider range of women, especially to women working in other local spaces, such as local councils, and on local issues, such as governance, delivery of public services etc. (Al-Abdeh 2017). International actors should develop policy and programmatic interventions with Syrian women. This requires going to Syria and locations of displacement and working directly with Syrian women to design, implement, monitor and evaluate interventions. It means ensuring that Syrian women determine the parameters, objectives and priorities of these interventions. It means changing the way a number of international actors do business. Innovative – even experimental - context-determined approaches are required to see what can work, where and how.

Given the other risks relating to international support identified by the literature, particularly relating to the potential for instrumentalization of women's rights in a way that delegitimizes and endangers women, international actors should conduct and act upon a conflict sensitive assessment prior to the initiation of policy and programmatic interventions to ensure that these interventions do not cause harm to the people they are intended to support.

3.7 Local councils are an important vehicle to strengthen women's political participation

The literature is conclusive that many local councils across Syria carry out important functions that give them significant legitimacy with the communities they serve. These include service-oriented roles, as well as increasingly politically relevant roles. Given the understanding of local communities towards the work and role of local councils and the ambitious and expansive vision of the local councils to serve as the future nucleus of the municipalities of the transitional government, it is important that the Syrians and the international actors continue to strengthen the capacity of the local councils through longer-term, needs-based support.

Current support by international actors to local councils appears neither to see the political elements inherent in service delivery nor to view local councils as vehicles to promote women's participation and capacity development – possibly because there are no TV cameras following local councils thereby entailing that their work remains largely invisible to western and other audiences. This is a significant missed opportunity to build the political capacity and influence of women. It is imperative that local councils, the Syrian opposition and its international supporters and women themselves view local councils as a vehicle to capacity develop women and promote their political participation. Equally, given the intrinsically political capacities, constituencies and powerbase that women are already developing through their work in their communities, increased participation of women in decision making roles within local councils would serve to enhance the relevance, legitimacy and effectiveness of local councils and establish them as more politically representative and influential structures.

Given the lack of qualitative research regarding women's presence and participation in local councils and the specific obstacles and opportunities to their more effective participation, further research is required to better consider how local councils could be used as a vehicle to strengthen women's political participation.

3.8 The constitution building process provides a strategic opportunity to transform women's political participation

Syrian women activists have been working since 2011 to develop an inclusive constitution building process, which integrates women's rights and gender equality. Their work on this important transitional component commenced prior to the first round of meetings in Geneva in 2012 and has continued through the stops and starts of the peace talks held in 2014 and 2016 in Geneva. Surprisingly, there appears to be an absence of comparative literature that contextualizes women's efforts to engender the constitution in relation to women's efforts to participate in the formal peace process. The connection between the two processes and their reinforcing and potentially transformative synergies have not been explored in the literature.

Nonetheless, the constitution building process should be seen as a strategic opportunity to transform women's participation in the current political and peace processes and future transition. As such, it is important that engendering efforts be located within a broad roadmap towards a new constitution, with clear pathways setting out how the engendering process fits into this broader roadmap. There is an urgency, therefore, to develop the vision of a broad consultation process for the new constitution of Syria.

The engendering process should be expanded beyond the approximately 650 Syrian women already involved and engage women across Syria and the surrounding countries, especially those active in their communities, as well as in the diaspora, in order to expand and deepen Syrian ownership of the process. Such a process

would strengthen women's capacities, including through the development of new or enhanced knowledge, skills, experience and confidence, all useful across women's political (and other) efforts. Women's inclusion in the constitution building process would also serve to enhance women's understanding of their own civic role and responsibilities – a discussion largely absent in Syrian society for the past four decades. Internalizing such understandings could be profoundly important to assisting Syrian women's efforts to navigate their role, opportunities and contributions during the transitional period and beyond.

Increasing efforts to expand women's participation in the constitution building process could also help to displace and, in time, reduce some of the attention, focus and frustration currently associated with women's participation in the formal peace process. This may be particularly so as the constitution building process does not require an international convener, mechanism or process in order to advance. It can and should be Syrian-led. Furthermore, organisational (particularly collaborative), process and substantive achievements in the constitution building process could be directly transferrable to women's participation in the formal peace process.

3.9 The experience of Kurdish women in Syria is highly relevant

The literature is clear: the lives of some Kurdish women in Syria have been transformed in the public and security sphere since the revolution. The transformation results in particular from two inter-connecting sources: the long-standing Kurdish women's struggle for gender equality and the PKK's ideological repositioning which promotes individual, societal and women's liberation at the heart of the social contract. Notwithstanding the considerable achievements for women in Rojava in recent years, a number of commentators have, however, cautioned against treating Rojava as a 'model' for women's participation, necessarily capable of being replicated elsewhere.

Specifically, within the rest of Syria, there is no unifying ideology – no comparative nationalist or other struggle – that prioritizes women's liberation and brings together the varied Syrian groups that is comparable to the Kurdish liberation philosophy that has grounded and inspired thinking amongst Kurdish leaders, men and women, as well as at the grassroots level and which is in some ways, shaped, inspired and re-enforcing of the longer term struggle for gender equality by Kurdish women. The Syrian revolution – initially a political revolution – has now morphed into many struggles and battles without a common thread. Second, however tempting it may be to romanticize the achievements of the Kurdish project in Rojava, such romanticizing fails to capture the reality of Kurdish women's struggle and conceals the underlying patriarchal values, structures, modes and thinking of discrimination that remain, and indeed, prevail. The promotion of Rojava as democratic, popular, secular, gender-equal and organized is very much a self-created narrative (Lowe 2016) and a work in progress.

These reflections tend to suggest that the process of interrogating the relevance of the experience of Kurdish women in Syria to Syrian women as a whole should be approached with caution. Nevertheless, it is worth considering with care to what extent and how the Kurdish experience could be useful to more generally informing Syrian women's political efforts. The issue of learning from Kurdish women's military experience may prove more of a conundrum to some Syrian feminists, however, as they may regard women's participation in the military as another step towards militarization of the conflict and indeed a further example of women's co-optation of men's priorities.

3.10 The importance of engaging men as allies

The literature points to the pivotal role of men in supporting – or not – the participation of women especially at local levels. For a lot of women, the support by men within their families, broader community or at the institutional level can make – or break – their opportunities. In interviews with women and men in Syria and Gaziantep, Turkey, in 2015 as part of the IFES (International Foundation for Electoral System) programme to develop Male Allies for Leadership Equality, many of the professional male respondents insisted that women can be a part of the political transition in Syria. Nonetheless, they also identified two major obstacles. First, women need the skills and confidence to participate as leaders in Syria's transition – the double standard on women's qualifications often applied in response to proposals for a women's quota. And, second, the security dilemma, whereby they considered the security situation to severely hinder women's ability to participate safely in politics, especially in leadership positions. The research concluded that the true concern behind these and other conditions, explanations or provisos put forward by men regarding women's participation in fact relates to the zero-sum assumptions that it is 'us' or 'them' in discussions about gender equality (Williams 2015). It is not sufficient to dismiss these concerns. Instead, women have to work with men so that they can understand and, over time, promote women's role and contributions in the public and political sphere.

Before seeking to work with men as allies to support women's participation, it is important to be able to articulate and communicate why gender equality is relevant and beneficial to the whole of society and not just to women. This requires going back not just to the overall benefits that accrue to society with the release of women's potential. Instead, reference should be made to the specific Paffenholz research findings, which emphasize the legitimizing and sustaining aspects of broader inclusion, including that of women, on peacemaking processes (Paffenholz 2016).

Yet given the deep rootedness of patriarchy and the focus on militarized responses, it would be prudent not to underestimate the many challenges to working with men and building trust in pursuance of both peacemaking and the gender equality project. Indeed, it would be wise to build upon the ongoing progressive experience of working with Syrian male family members, colleagues, community members and government officials to support women's participation and evolving pioneering

regional experience on masculinities and the role of men in advancing gender equality.

3.11 Engaging the media to challenge stereotypes and reshape the narrative

The literature refers to the way mainstream local, regional and international media has chosen to fixate on military developments in Syria and perpetuate a binary discourse in which the conflict is reduced to one between Al-Assad and so-called Islamic State. Alternatively, western media sources are fixated on refugee stories. This binary approach pushes out what activist Asad calls 'hero stories' – the work of Syrians who are actively trying to better their lives and their communities (Wilson 2016). 'Though civil activists struggling for justice and democracy have experienced every conceivable tragedy first-hand. Their scattered accounts are, however, buried in social media posts long forgotten' (Mourtada 2015).

Research undertaken by the Syrian Female Journalist Network in 2016 identifies a number of findings relating to the portrayal of women in emerging Syrian print and radio media. Some of these findings originate in the monopolization and ownership of the media sector by an authoritarian state dedicated to serving one-party Baathist rule, which resulted in the treatment of women's issues as a background topic. These findings include the low coverage of women-related topics; the passive depiction of women to as victims of violence, including rape, torture, death, human trafficking – 'the collateral damage of men' (Wilson 2016); and infrequent publishing of women's images but where they were used they were of generally overrepresented conservative Sunni women from one socio-economic demographic. The ongoing representation of women as victims and the exclusion of their views can serve to frame the public's view of women as helpless and lacking agency. Explanations for these trends include the dominance of men through the media production cycle. Yet the research also noted that the two ideological stances of the emerging Syrian media which affect women - the liberal/secular ideology and the religious ideology – often incorporate nationalist and patriarchal discourses which lead to the display of similar assumptions on women (Syrian Female Journalist Network 2016).

It is imperative that civil society, including women activists and women's organisations, re-shape the prevailing narrative of the conflict and specifically question the narrative relating to women's experience and role in the conflict, and their views on the political and transitional processes and the future Syria. If they do not, the narrative becomes the truth. Challenging and redefining the prevailing narrative requires regular sustained efforts by local, regional and international media outlets to deal with both women's issues and broader issues. These efforts should consciously tackle stereotypes, including through the portrayal of women's various roles in society and the conflict, and the inclusion of women in the entire media cycle from subject, to producer to disseminator. Effective use of the media offers an opportunity to create a discourse capable of challenging structural injustices and hidden relations of power (Syrian Female Journalists Network 2016);

international actors have a key role to play in supporting efforts to encourage women's participation and coverage of women in locally meaningful ways.

4 Recommendations

“We don’t believe this later on thing. Women cannot wait for a permanent peace to have equality. There is no ‘maybe later’.”

Anonymous Syrian woman activist

[Source: Huber 2015]

The following section contains recommendations addressed to international non-governmental organisations, states and donors that have been supporting Syrian women’s political participation through political, financial and technical support, and the relevant entities of the United Nations, including UN Women, the Department of Political Affairs, the Secretary-General and the Security Council.

There are two fundamental starting points for any recommendation aimed at improving the current situation. First, the various strands of political participation set out in this review – local peacebuilding initiatives, the local councils, the constitution building process and the formal peace process – fall within a spectrum of political and peace processes and as such require a programme of coherent integrated strategic and operational support across that spectrum to ensure the optimization and reinforcement of the various entry points for women’s political participation. Second, wide and deep inclusion and participation of Syrian women is required across all activities designed to implement these recommendations. Without the active determining participation of Syrian women, there is little chance for meaningful progress.

INGOs

1. Working with Syrian women’s organisations, conduct research and analysis on women’s experience at the community levels in local mediation, conflict resolution and building confidence with women in Syria, the surrounding countries and the diaspora, to identify the range of activities underway; trends in what is working; obstacles to women’s participation; agents of change at the local levels; conditions required to strengthen women’s participation; and mapping of Syrian and international organisations supporting local efforts to help develop policy and programmatic support and advocacy around women’s participation
2. Work with mainstream peace and mediation organisations, think tanks and analysis groups working in and on Syria to integrate a gender lens into their policy, programmatic and advocacy work
3. Support the strengthening of linkages between and across Syrian women activists and organisations in order to bolster the Syrian women’s movement, including through facilitating meetings with Syrian women working currently working at community levels and those working in international processes in order to design and strengthen linkages and build feedback, trust and

accountability within the movement and help to make it a more effective and stronger movement

4. Facilitate the regular exchange of experience between Syrian women and women experienced in other formal peace processes and in women's organizing for informal or community led conflict resolution and prevention, through convening of meetings, preparation of thematic papers, ongoing provision of technical advice
5. Working with Syrian women's organisations, carry out research and analysis on the experience of Kurdish women in Syria and its relevance to Syrian women's political participation more generally, and support the sharing of Kurdish experience with other Syrian women in a conflict sensitive manner
6. Working with Syrian women's organisations, conduct research and analysis of men's role – and the challenges thereto – in promoting gender equality and women's participation in political and peace processes at the local level and build upon emerging regional civil society experience of working with men as allies to promote gender equality and women's participation
7. Working with Syrian women's organisations, conduct research and analysis of regional and international media coverage of women in the Syrian conflict, to help develop policy and programmatic support and advocacy around engaging the media to promote gender equality and women's participation
8. Expand programme of capacity development of Syrian grass roots women activists and organisations through bold, innovative and experimental approaches that include support in, at least, mobilization and movement building; community leadership; conflict analysis, negotiations and mediation; political engagement; and strategic planning, project development, human resources and organisational management

United Nations

9. Secretary-General to commission an independent review of the UN's experience in supporting Syrian women's participation in the formal peace process, including the role and contribution of UN Women, the Department of Political Affairs, and the Office of the Special Envoy, to identify what is working, what is not working and how support can be provided more effectively in the future.
10. Special Envoy to appoint a senior gender adviser at the D1 level to his/her office to ensure the integration of gender and the promotion of women's rights, including the right to political participation, across the work of the Special Envoy and his/her office, in line with the recommendation of the 2015 UN Global Study on the implementation of Security Council 1325 and the 2015 UN High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations

11. Special Envoy to work with women activists and organisations, including those working at the community level, to develop appropriate structures to facilitate the participation of women in the formal peace process
12. Special Envoy to develop an influencing strategy to encourage the Syrian negotiating parties and their political backers to ensure the meaningful participation of women in the formal peace process
13. Special Envoy to consider the potential scope and focus of UN engagement in support of the participation of women through the principal opportunities identified in this review, such as the work of local community structures including local councils, the constitution building process, the media and men
14. Security Council to invite Syrian women, including those working at the community level, to participate in regular meetings with Security Council members and to more robustly follow up on women's political participation in Syria, including through consideration of Syria by the Informal Expert Group on Women Peace and Security ('the 2242 group')

INGOs, States and the United Nations

15. Commission an independent review of support provided to date to women's participation in international mechanisms and processes, including the UN human rights mechanisms and the formal peace process, as well as to support local peacebuilding, to identify what is working, what is not working and how support can be provided more effectively in the future, including a risk analysis undertaken by each organisation as part of its conflict sensitive assessment
16. Set up an international consortium of support (process) to develop and coordinate a coherent strategy of prioritized support to women's participation across the spectrum of political and peace processes which strengthens the Syrian women's movement as a whole
17. Working with Syrian women's organisations, commission research and analysis of the experience of local councils and its potential role to promote gender equality and women's political participation, develop policy and programmatic support and provide political commitment to the role of local councils
18. Working with Syrian women's organisations, commission research and analysis on the constitution drafting process and in particular the engendering process, develop policy and programmatic support and provide political commitment to the constitution drafting process

Sweden

Taking into account the approach of Sweden's explicitly feminist foreign policy, which requires that the activities of the Foreign Service incorporate a gender equality perspective that incorporates a focus on rights, representation and resources and whose actions are based on reality checks and analysis, noting also that Sweden is currently a non-permanent member of the Security Council (2017-2018), and building upon Sweden's support to Syrian women's participation to date, the following recommendations are addressed specifically to Sweden:

19. The Swedish Foreign Ministry should exercise its political influence to support the participation of Syrian women in the peace processes through both visible and discrete support to women's engagement in local peacebuilding process, local councils, the constitution building process and the formal peace process, including through:
 - Convening regular meetings of European Union or Nordic Foreign Ministers with Syrian women
 - Convening as soon as practicable, a conference with other international actors and Syrian women activists to set up an international consortium of support to women's participation in the spectrum of political and peace processes
 - Advocating for an urgent independent review of the UN's experience in supporting Syrian women's participation in the formal peace process
 - Advocating with the UN Secretary-General for the appointment of a UN mediator(s) with experience of inclusive peace processes and promoting women's rights
 - As a member of the Security Council, ensuring regular follow up by the Security Council on issues relating to Syrian women's participation, including in consultations with the Secretary-General and Special Envoy, as well as in meetings with Syrian women activists, and through the work of the Informal Expert Group on Women, Peace and Security ('the 2242 group')
 - Advocating with the Syrian negotiating parties and their political backers the meaningful participation of women in the formal peace process
 - Leading by example through ensuring gender balance within Swedish delegations to peace processes

20. The Swedish Foreign Ministry should provide organisational, technical and funding support to the capacity development of Syrian women and organisations, including through:
 - Supporting funding of women activists and organisations working at grass roots levels, using participatory approaches to programme design
 - Supporting the funding of local councils and their efforts to include women
 - Supporting increased attention to the constitution building process and specifically the engendering of the constitution across Syria and in displaced communities in the surrounding countries and diaspora
 - Supporting the capacity development of local and national level women mediators with assistance provided by the Nordic Women Mediators initiative

- Sharing lessons and good practice from Nordic support to women in peace processes with Syrian women
21. The Swedish Foreign Ministry should commission 'think pieces' to explore how an avowedly feminist foreign policy could be operationalized to support the political participation of women in conflict countries.

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