

Enabling Women Peacemakers in Syria



The Syrian conflict has provided an important opportunity to experiment with approaches and mechanisms for delivering Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325) on Women, Peace, and Security, setting important global precedents in women's participation. However, SCR 1325 has only helped so much. Women's participation can be symbolic, with limited leverage over, or meaningful involvement in, political decision-making, despite the impact that women have in promoting peace and human rights locally.

At the *political* level, there has been a substantial increase in women's participation since the outset of the Syrian conflict. With support from the U.N. and some U.N. member states, Syrian activists used SCR 1325 to lobby for greater women's participation. As a result, women comprise about 30% of the country's Constitutional Committee, which brings together the Syrian government, the opposition delegation, and civil society to negotiate a new constitution. SCR 1325 also provided the impetus for the formation of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board (WAB) of the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Syria, providing advice on the Geneva Peace Process, the constitution, and detainees, among other topics. Finally, SCR 1325 helped establish the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), where representatives of civil society organizations engage with the Office of the Special Envoy, the international community, and wider Syrian society. Women make up about 50% of the participants in CSSR.

The use of SCR 1325 as a tool to guarantee better women's participation in the Constitutional Committee, and through the WAB and CSSR, was pioneering, demonstrating foresight and ambition by the U.N. Special Envoy, parts of the diplomatic community, and most importantly Syrian women. However, while their participation has as a result increased, women still struggle to be involved as meaningful decision-makers in the political process. This is most evident in the WAB, which has an 'advisory' status, instead of a full membership status in the peace process. Syrian women have consequently had to accept less influence in order to guarantee their participation.

At the *local* level, Syrian women have been at the forefront of attempts to address human rights violations, including the use of chemical weapons, the targeting of civilian areas, detentions, and

torture, winning some important victories on behalf of Syrians caught up in the armed violence. For example, thousands of Syrian women from across the country came together to successfully lobby the U.N. Security Council for a ceasefire in Northwest Syria. Similarly, local mediators have worked diligently for the release of political prisoners nationally. Women have demonstrated an ability to promote peace and human rights locally beyond that of men. However, this work has not been enabled directly by SCR 1325's protection and prevention provisions, which are still very limited. Women's impact in transforming conflict dynamics on the ground should be seen to provide the legitimacy for more meaningful participation at the political level.

The experience of Syria provides three important lessons for how women can be better enabled to promote peace and human rights. Firstly, it is essential to ensure that men and women are treated equally in all types of humanitarian discussions and peace processes. The criteria for women participants should never be any different than those applied to male participants. However, all too often women are required to jump through additional hoops to demonstrate their legitimacy. Secondly, women's impact in local peace efforts should not be undervalued, but rather treated as of equal importance as political processes. The U.N. could assist through establishing separate mechanisms for channeling support and legitimacy to local women peacemakers. Thirdly, the more women that are included in humanitarian and peace processes, the more such processes are responsive to women's needs. 30% should represent a minimum target, not the ceiling for women's participation.



Rajaa Altali is the co-founder of the Center for Civil Society and Democracy, a Syrian-founded NGO. She serves as one of the 16 Syrian women appointed by the UN Office of the Special Envoy to the Women's Advisory Board.