



Report: online conference

**The role of women's civil society organisations in
combatting GBV among Syrian refugee communities
30 March 2021**

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THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S CIVIL SOCIETY

ORGANISATIONS IN COMBATTING GBV

AMONG SYRIAN REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

30 March 2021 19h CET via Zoom



Overview

This online event, organised by NPWJ and the Euro-Syrian Democratic Forum, in collaboration with Equity and Empowerment, highlighted the role of women civil society organisations in combatting GBV and civil society's strategies and needs in promoting more effectively gender equality and women's rights. The aim of the event was to discuss, from a civil society perspective, how to involve affected communities in recognising violence and denial of human rights committed against refugee women and girls and foster their direct participation in promoting a change in the perceptions, policies and practices of development and emergency-response agencies and communities.

Online Conference summary

1.1 The participants

Panellists of the meeting - chaired by **Hon. Nathalie Gilson**, member of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives and **Hussein Sabbagh**, Secretary of the Euro-Syrian Democratic Forum - included **Yasmina Benshi**, Freedom Jasmine; **Walaa Aloush**, Equity and Empowerment; **Hayma Alyousofi**, Syrian Women Journalists Network and **Mona Zain Aldeen**, Women Now for Development. **Zeynep Aydemir Koyuncu**, UN Women's Turkey Country Officer, provided opening remarks and **Niccolò Figà-Talamanca**, Secretary General of No Peace Without Justice, provided closing remarks.

1.2 Opening of the online conference

Mr. **Hussein Sabbagh** and **Hon. Nathalie Gilson** thanked the panellists for their participation and introduced the topic under discussion. In particular, **Hon. Gilson** remarked how ten years ago the citizens of Syria took the streets to claim their rights and women were at the forefront of this movement. Syrian women are increasingly becoming a leading force in their communities and have had to assume new roles, creating a new generation of women human rights defenders in the last ten years.

According to the figures, over 5.5 million Syrians live as refugees abroad and more than 6 million Syrians are displaced within their own country. Turkey hosts more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees, of which about a half are women and girls. A wide number of reports have documented that sexual and gender-based violence continues to take place within Syria and among displaced Syrian communities in bordering countries. Different international actors have mobilised in the past ten years to support the Syrian people and address this humanitarian crisis inside the country and the region. Today it is critical for the international community to strengthen this effort, especially in the field of women's rights, and to listen to the voices of women's civil society organisations to understand what is happening and what is needed in the field. Hon. Gilson underlined how this online event was taking place in parallel with the fifth Brussels Conference on Syria convened by the European Union and the United Nations and stressed how the Brussels Conference was an opportunity for the international community to discuss and adopt strategies to counter gender-based violence among refugee communities and to strengthen existing good practices from women's civil society organisations. Only a real empowerment of refugee women and girls will enable them to be active and meaningful actors for change in their communities and for the future of Syria.

In her opening remarks, **Mrs. Koyuncu** pointed out how gender-based violence has globally become a "shadow pandemic", with emerging data showing that all types of violence against women and girls have intensified over the course of the past year. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic began, one in three women experienced physical or sexual violence. Among the different forms of violence, it is important to acknowledge the increasing risk of child, early and forced marriages, especially among refugee populations. In Turkey, even before the pandemic, 45% of Syrian girls below the age of 18 and 9% of girls below the age of 15 reported being married or living with a partner. Additionally, 39% of Syrian adolescents have had a live birth or are currently pregnant with their first child. Consultations by the UN and the EU in Turkey further validated the increase of gender-based violence. Against all odds, and given the strengthening of remote services, there has also been an increase in access to GBV-related information, according to some civil society organisations. Governments and other duty bearers are certainly accountable for the challenges

around gender-based violence, and it is critical to show concerted international and national action and commitment to end violence against women and girls, which is why the recent withdrawal by Turkey from the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence is deeply concerning. Mrs. Koyuncu underlined how women's organisations and women's groups are instrumental and transformative when addressing GBV in a humanitarian or refugee-response context, which is a fact made evident through local consultations carried out by No Peace Without Justice in Turkey¹. It is thus very important to support women-led and women's rights organisations that prevent and address GBV. Donors and implementing agencies, such as UN Women, need to invest more in the leadership, capacities and functions of women-led organisations. Investing in grassroots women-led organisations, through grant-making, one-on-one coaching and mentorship is a top priority. This will allow women's civil society organisations to be more effective and efficient, fulfil their mandate better, work in cooperation with other organisations and reach the affected populations.

3. The panel discussion

Ms Yasmina Benshi underscored how since the inception of the war in Syria violence against women, in particular against women detainees, has been used as a weapon of pressure and that it is possible to identify different forms of violence practiced against women detainees since 2011 by the Syrian regime. These forms include physical torture to obtain confessions, harassment, rape and other forms of sexual violence. Another widespread form of violence is psychological pressure, which is used against women usually inside the detention centres. The humanitarian conditions inside these centres are very concerning, as women detainees are deprived from food and have no access to healthcare and the hygiene conditions are extremely poor. For example, there was a woman detainee who had cancer and was deprived from her doses of medicine. The work with survivors and with their families faces major challenges and obstacles. First of all, there is the stigma against detainees, which can be worsened by the role of the media. The stigma against released women has led them to close off or run away from home, as in some cases staying home would cause shame to the entire family. Additionally, many survivors do not find significant support from organisations after being released. One issue that has not been dealt with extensively is that of the fate of detainees' wives. They are subjected to a very serious form of violence, as they are forced to marry the brothers of their husbands when they are missing. For survivors of enforced disappearance, it is a shock to find their former wives now married to their brothers. In Turkey, wives of detainees also have difficulties obtaining documents as these require the approval of their husbands, which is impossible in this context. Ms Benshi suggested that civil society organisations should raise awareness on these stigmas within all sections of the community, and not just among women and reiterated the importance of empowering survivors. Once they are empowered, they can defend themselves and their rights without being subjected to further violence and without having to isolate themselves. Women must be empowered legally and be reintegrated into their communities with the support from organisations, keeping in mind the language and information gaps they may encounter. Ms Benshi also highlighted the importance of documenting all kind of gender-based violence; not only rape. For this documentation, women's CSOs are crucial, as for survivors it is easier to give information to other women.

Ms Walaa Aloush explained her work with women survivors of violence and documenting the violence against them, which led her to ask herself whether it would be possible that there was no woman left that had not been a victim of violence. For example, in 2015 she met a 16-year-old girl who had been married six times. She was subjected to rape in each marriage and had a miscarriage in her third marriage. She became stigmatised in the community because she was divorced and could not have children. Documentation of violence against Syrian women is very important. It is important to document all forms of violence, as in every location of the world they can be different and there are always new forms

¹ See Annex I

emerging. Regarding challenges faced by women's civil society organisations, in Turkey those that work on actively combatting GBV and on raising awareness in communities of all forms of violence against women and girls had a major challenge which is that the work is focused only on women. This narrowed the path towards combatting the problem, as men can also be partners for the work against GBV. Another challenge has been women's access to technology and communication tools. For example, there have been initiatives through applications or activated response lines, but the fact that a good number of women do not know how to use these applications, or social media in general, means that reaching them can be difficult. A further and major challenge faced by women's civil society organisations is the lack of protection mechanisms for human right defenders and especially women human rights defenders in the field. They are subjected to killing and detention and can be rejected by their communities inside or outside of Syria. Ms Aloush recommended that the weight and importance of the family is always kept in mind, as the family is always the first influencer. In this sense, it is important not only to work with survivors but also with their families. She also explained that there are new forms of violence against women and girls emerging both in refugee contexts and within Syria that deserve attention. Furthermore, she highlighted the importance of the participation of women in political processes. Women need to contribute substantially to shaping the future of Syria. They should have international presence, in conferences where women's organisations can participate, and local presence, contributing to the domestic peace and security. Given the important role of women, donors should push CSOs to focus on women and to have a gender-sensitive approach and support initiatives covering survivors of SGBV. Finally, it is important that all people working on this matter receive training to do so and that the research on GBV continues. This research should play a role in shaping future strategies and plans for Syria and should be carried out through comprehensive community consultations.

Ms Hayma Alyousofi underlined how media has a critical role in eliminating or combatting GBV, raising awareness and providing knowledge to communities and societies. It is very important to have responsible and balanced reporting on cases of SGBV and the media has ethical responsibilities when interviewing survivors. Another important subject is the collaboration between the media and civil society to work on this issue and to not reproduce violence or the stereotypes that lead to it. When talking about refugee communities, it is important to distinguish between those living in Arab-speaking neighbouring countries and those living in Turkey or Europe. In Jordan and Lebanon access to information is easier because there is no language barrier. In contrast, even if in Turkey there are organisations or institutions with their own help lines or shelters, refugees who do not speak the Turkish language have many difficulties accessing information. Connectivity and access are a big challenge in this regard, as not all refugee women have mobile phones or know how to use them. In Europe, the language barrier is also very important, because there is a need for refugee women to understand the laws and legislations that protect them in the host country. There is, however, a lack of civil society initiatives and media outlets that use the Arabic language, which is why Arab-speaking media outlets should be connected to organisations in Europe to collaborate in campaigns with the purpose of providing information to Syrian women refugees. In regard to the media, a challenge to keep in mind in Europe is the reproduction of stigmatisation, for example in relation to Arab Muslim men. This creates a burden on women who are afraid to report incidents because they do not want to contribute to the stigmatisation of their brothers or fathers. Media outlets should be aware of this and be careful not to use dramatic titles or disclose identifying information. Another problem related to the media covering GBV is the victimhood narrative, which is still being used by some organisations working with survivors, by media outlets and in social media. It can be very harmful to portray women as victims or heroes. It is also important for media outlets to talk about other forms of violence other than the physical one, such as cyber violence and economic violence, for example. Additionally, there is a need to train media practitioners, journalists and editorial teams, so that they learn how to use a sensitive language when talking about GBV. For these trainings, it is important that CSOs and media organisations cooperate, as it is CSOs that work in the field and can provide access to and information from the communities. Ms Alyousofi suggested producing content on the discrimination against women in media, a subject covered by a recent

report by the Syrian Women Journalists Network on the challenges and risks faced by women human rights defenders and journalists. She recommended for media practitioners and CSOs and NGOs with media desks to use balanced and sensitive language and to use different sources of information, focusing not only on one case but on the general problem of violence against women and its root causes.

Ms Mona Zain Aldeen focused her intervention on the experiences that women detainees have to endure after their release. A recent research conducted by Women Now for Development called “Surviving Freedom” collected 82 stories of former women detainees showing how these survivors walked into another kind of violence after their release, which is stigma. Stigma can take many forms: it can be social, as these women are rejected by their families and communities, or economic, as they can have difficulties finding a job. The stigmatisation of these women often hinders their ability to reach out for necessary support services. Another initiative in which Women Now for Development participated was the Syrian Road to Justice campaign, which was a collaboration between several feminist and women’s organisations. The idea behind this campaign was that for women to really access justice, it is important that there are initiatives at the societal level to fight stigma and to push against and combat barriers preventing women from accessing justice. The demands of the campaign included strengthened gender-analysis and gender-expertise in the field of criminal justice and increased support to survivors, among others. In this context, the court ruling against Eyad al-Gharib, a former Syrian secret police officer recently convicted in Germany, is of critical importance because it pointed at the extent to which GBV affects communities, going beyond individual suffering. Raising awareness and mobilising the community is of great importance to fight the stigmatisation suffered by survivors after their release, partly because they are associated with rape. It is important to raise awareness of the fact that sexual violence also takes other forms that should not be eclipsed by rape. Ms Aldeen recommended to always look at violence as a continuum and to keep the root causes in mind. Gender-based violence does not start with conflict but, instead, is embedded in the systems of society and continues even when the conflict ends. To address the issue of gender-based violence, it is key to consolidate women’s and feminist organisations working on transformative justice and psycho-social support whose understanding of justice is conceived by women. It is also important to invest in feminist knowledge production. Women can be very different, which is why it is very important to look at women from an intersectional approach that does not attempt to homogenise the gender.

In his conclusions, **Mr Niccolò Figà-Talamanca** underlined how gender-based violence within the context of conflict should be seen as complementary to the reality of the patriarchal systems that camouflage other types of violence as good intentions. Families in many cases become responsible for denying the important right to agency. This can translate into child or early marriages. These situations evidence the tragedy Syrian people were thrown into, which started with the peaceful uprising of ten years ago. Women’s rights are, first and foremost, about agency and sovereignty over themselves. When working in the field of women’s rights, many times it is not about what you do, but how you do it. Doing it properly does not cost more, but it requires shifting the way you think. Now the pending question is where to go from here and how to follow the existing recommendations.

Annex I

“STRENGTHENING FIRST LINE RESPONDERS AND EMPOWERING REFUGEE WOMEN AND GIRLS IN TURKEY TO COMBAT AND OVERCOME SGBV”

Final Recommendations

In light of their long-standing work with Syrian CSOs and of the results of the field work with Syrian refugees living in Turkey, NPWJ and its local partners have jointly formulated a series of recommendations for international organisations, Turkish public institutions and civil society with a view to amplifying the voice of Syrian women and girls and preventing any form of sexual and gender-based violence on this population.

The following stems from the results of an extensive field research in five Turkish districts and sub-districts (Istanbul, Gaziantep, Nizip, Antakya, and Kilis), which involved more than 200 Syrian women, men, adolescents, and elders. The recommendations aim at summarising and voicing their needs and remarks as a basis for advocacy and policy making, implementing a participatory approach to eradicate GBV against women and girls in the context under analysis.

Recommendations for International Organisations

- Treat and engage with migrant and refugee women and girls in need of protection as right holders with agency rather than passive service receivers;
- Consolidate an approach to protection which is community-based, continuing to build survivor-centred responses;
- Make sure that every segment of the humanitarian response by all involved stakeholders is gender-responsive (e.g. considers and acts upon the indirect repercussions that said response may have in terms of GBV and gender equality in general);
- Make sure that every segment of the humanitarian response at all levels (national, regional and multilateral) is based on the active and meaningful involvement of affected communities in the elaboration, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of inclusive policies and practices;
- Base GBV response on an intersectional approach, cooperating with organisations working on supporting women with disabilities in order to enable societal participation of girls and women with disabilities;
- Fight stigma around GBV survivors and ensure their reintegration into their communities;
- Encourage views of cultural and religious discourse that respect and promote women's and girls' rights and do not perpetuate GBV through television, radio, or any other means;
- Develop long-term, sustainable psychological support programs to help survivors overcome trauma – if necessary refraining from using clinical language to avoid perceived stigma around psychotherapy;
- Organise awareness-raising sessions with women and girls, men and boys, on GBV for a perspective shift that encourages survivors to speak up and perpetrators to frame their acts as rights violations (e.g. marital rape, child marriage);
- Implement effective legal, judicial and reporting mechanisms to ensure accountability for GBV perpetrators;
- Elaborate and implement plans to foster intergenerational work (awareness-raising, discussion) with groups of both men and women to eradicate negative coping mechanisms which perpetuate GBV within families and communities;
- Strengthen interinstitutional collaborations among national and international agencies and civil society actors in order to improve data collection and optimise existing mechanisms of response against GBV;
- Manage cases of sex trafficking within the camps ensuring that individuals fundamental rights are not hampered or stymied due to mere association to the perpetrators (e.g. expelling individuals who are involved in sex trade may have negative repercussions on other people who are not directly involved);

Recommendations for Turkish public institutions

- Create safe spaces for women and girls to engage with each other, build solidarity and support with other women and girls, exchange information, rebuild community networks and empower female population, especially in the context of the COVID crisis which has seen an increase of IPV and other forms of GBV especially in the family context ;
- Provide clear follow-up mechanisms for women and girls survivors of GBV, including medical and psychological care, with the objective of preventing societal stigmatisation, further violence and negative coping mechanisms and reintegrating them into society;
- Ensure the presence of an adequate number of legal centres for legal advice, as well as websites and helplines in Arabic that provide legal assistance;
- Provide female translators in Turkish protection centres and public institutions that Syrian population may need to resort to and improve Turkish language training for Syrian refugees;
- Prepare an in-depth study on Syrian girls and women who are sexually exploited through human trafficking and sex trade to conduct a more in-depth analysis of violence occurring against women and girls across different sectors and gather reliable, disaggregated data on the conditions of Syrian girls and women in Turkey;
- Carry out awareness campaign on the illegality of child marriage (marriage under 18 years of age) in Turkey;
- Ensure that the level of coverage of social and health insurance costs for refugee women allows for increased autonomy and economic independence;
- Secure job opportunities for Syrian refugee women in accordance with their experiences and education, to achieve and improve economic independence and thus tackle this important root cause of violence towards them;
- Provide direct economic support to women with a view to provide a sense of security and dignity and preventing violence stemming from economic disempowerment within the family;
- Provide women with IT devices and with workshops on how to use them in order to enable them to network amongst them and reach out for help outside the home or community if needed;

Recommendations for Civil Society

- Raise awareness amongst Syrian refugees, particularly women and girls, on their rights under Turkish law and under international human rights law;
- Advocate for Turkish authorities to enact anti-discrimination campaigns on Syrian population and fight hate crime on-line;
- Establish protection and special care centers for refugee women and girls to provide an inclusive and safe entry points for services, information, as well as to build resilience and begin rebuilding community networks;
- Raise awareness amongst refugees, especially women and girls, on the existence and functioning of available care centres and helplines, as well as possibilities of seeking redress when experiencing any form of violence.