

Building Holistic Security

Addressing Security Risks of Women Peacebuilders Through Partnerships

CASE STUDY: SYRIA

Highlighting how unequal partnerships exacerbate risks for women peacebuilders in Syria

This case study is part of the Building Holistic Security: Addressing Security Risks of Women Peacebuilders Through Partnerships report created by the Women PeaceMakers program.

Addressing the risks women peacebuilders face

Women peacebuilders inevitably face risks and insecurity in their daily work. International partners have an important role to play in supporting their safety and protection. Understanding women peacebuilders' roles and the types of risks they face is the first step in ensuring an adequate response. This case study forms part of the *Building Holistic Security: Addressing Security Risks of Women Peacebuilders Through Partnerships* report, focused on how international partners can better partner with women peacebuilders to address the risks and insecurity they face in the different facets of their work.

The report addresses how international partners who wish to work with women peacebuilders and support them in addressing the risks and insecurity they face need to recognize the scope and nature of peacebuilding work, which is often cross-cutting, overlapping with humanitarian response and development work. Understanding the nuances and breadth of women peacebuilders' work is crucial to identifying the risks they face and providing them with effective legal, political and financial protection — and is thereby essential to creating partnerships that mitigate and address these risks.

This report is co-created as part of the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship, led by the voices and perspectives of the 2020-2021 Women PeaceMakers Fellows. This report provides both a global analysis and context-specific case studies.

Since 2002, the Kroc IPJ has hosted the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship program. The Fellowship offers a unique opportunity for women peacebuilders to engage in a cycle of learning, practice, research and participation that strengthens peacebuilding partnerships. The Women PeaceMakers Fellowship facilitates impactful collaborations between women peacebuilders from conflict-affected communities and international partner organizations. The Fellows also co-create research intended to shape the peacebuilding field and highlight good practices for peacebuilding design and implementation. This case study was created as part of this process and is also featured in the full *Building Holistic Security: Addressing Security Risks of Women Peacebuilders Through Partnerships* report.



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Syria Case Study: A focus on women's participation without providing protection

By Slava Shikh Hasan

*Highlighting how unequal partnerships
exacerbate risks for women peacebuilders in Syria*

CASE STUDY

*Note: this research was conducted
prior to the 2023 earthquake that
affected Syria and Turkey.*



Context

The crisis in Syria is still very much ongoing. The situation and needs vary tremendously across the country, and funding to support people's basic needs is scarce. Syrian society is not yet at the point of starting to imagine a peaceful Syria.

Women generally face many risks — and even more so when working in peacebuilding. These risks include violence, harassment, exclusion, economic deprivation, arrest and exile.¹ The *de facto* authorities fear the empowerment of women inside Syria, especially when they are peacebuilding activists. Societal attitudes, customs and traditions constrict women's role to doing housework only. The dominance of armed actors, including Syrian régime forces, the absence of laws protecting women, and the lack of accountability mechanisms all put women at risk. Women are not provided with sufficient job opportunities or funding to focus on peacebuilding.

Clan-based and area-based considerations, as well as the absence of effective governance, limit access to information from international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Women are marginalized throughout society, and interviewees felt that when organizations hire women activists it is often linked to a desire to attract financial support rather than to a genuine desire for women to become decision-makers and leaders.

While some women activists have been able to become more visible thanks to their expertise, their work in their communities, and their connections with the international community, participants felt that most international organizations direct their funding towards those non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with whom they have pre-existing personal relationships.

The support provided by international bodies to local communities in Syria and neighboring countries varies considerably based on geographical location, religious and ethnic affiliations, and the challenges in each area.



Key findings

Peacebuilding itself, as a series of nonviolent activities that oppose injustice and violence, and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security are not necessarily understood or embraced across the country. Women work to resolve and prevent conflicts in many ways, yet much of their work is not referred to as “peacebuilding.”

There are no official structures, whether government institutions or agencies, that ensure the protection of women peacebuilders in Syria. Syrian women peacebuilders residing in neighboring countries also lack protection. Some programs exist to support them, but they are difficult to access. Refugee women are at additional risk, fearing host country rules and laws and terrorist cells’ threats to harm them.

Interviewees reported that international support does not mitigate military or security risks. Women peacebuilders report having discussed the risks they face with international partners with no subsequent interventions for addressing or protecting them. International partners do not seem to have a vision for avoiding such risks: They focus from the project design phase onwards only on the potential risks to their project rather than on the potential risks to women peacebuilders. The focus on Women, Peace and Security has primarily been on women’s participation, while the provision of protection has been neglected. Even for international organizations, protecting women peacebuilders solely amounts to providing for basic needs, rather than supporting holistic protection.

“So far, the biggest focus has been on women’s participation only, while the provision of protection has been poor. Even for international organizations, the concept of protecting women peacebuilders is basic and needs development.” —
Woman peacebuilder, Syria

Women peacebuilders’ voices are being unevenly heard. While women at the political level feel they are heard, others do not, depending on their ethnic and religious affiliation. Most INGOs interact with a very small pool of interlocutors and are politicized, which has an influence on where funding is allocated. When support is provided, it is dedicated to project implementation, not to the mitigation of risks. INGOs offer women some help to attain financial independence through employment, but the biggest beneficiaries are always men, since the presence of women is *pro forma*, and decision-making centers are under men’s control.

While international and local organizations do sometimes seek feedback and input about the support they provide to women peacebuilders, participants report that they do not seem to share it with donors. Furthermore, recommendations and results are periodically shared via project reports, but no feedback is received from donors, which leads to communication gaps. No real mechanisms are in place to measure projects’ impacts on target groups, nor do accountability mechanisms exist between local and international organizations.

International and national organizations do involve local communities in some dialogue sessions at the local level, provide capacity-strengthening for women, hold public meetings amongst decision-makers and international representatives, and conduct programs to reduce gender-based violence (GBV) and harassment. However, participants felt that these trainings are heavy on theoretical information and light on the practical side. Women are only represented in a *pro forma* fashion and are not present in decision-making positions. Additionally, the focus is on the humanitarian sector, relief, protection, food and health rather than peacebuilding with a longer-term lens. One of the biggest challenges is that many organizations and their staff are not convinced of the importance of women's participation, nor are they convinced of the necessity of civil society's participation either in the political process or in peacebuilding. Technical resources and expertise, which are essential to supporting any agenda, are still scarce, especially when it comes to Women, Peace and Security.

The impact of some partnerships has been positive, including some political empowerment projects and training to strengthen skills and knowledge. However, research reveals that half the respondents felt that the support given did not delve into issues deeply; it was administrative and did not empower women to work for their political and/or human rights. NGOs work in a competitive rather than a cooperative way, with little sharing of information and cooperation, which makes national-level work and peacebuilding delicate.

“There is a lack of faith in the cause by many humanitarian workers, whether from INGOs or mediators. They consider the partnership merely a work-related task. For us, it's a survival cause, both on the humanitarian and international levels, for peacebuilding.” — Woman peacebuilder, Syria

Most of the key informant interviews reveal that the relationship between the organizations for which they work and international donors/partners seems equal and fair but that most local organizations lack the competencies and organizational structures to be sustainable and specialized or to plan strategically. They depend to a great extent on donor-imposed activities, at the expense of local communities' needs. Many respondents noted that most support does not consider the sensitivity of local needs. Peacebuilding requires great awareness of local culture, of connections and of those who can have an impact on the conflicting parties.

Some activities do reach grassroots, local and/or individual women peacebuilders, depending on geographic location. For example, Syrian women in Turkey have a better chance of being included than women in Syria. Throughout Syria and the region, grassroots women peacebuilders remain isolated, and new mechanisms to reach them are needed. Opportunities for women to engage in the international peacebuilding field are limited to a very small number of people whose circumstances allow them to participate in international forums and who have access to the required travel documents. Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting to online platforms provided more women with increased opportunities to enhance their local and international presence.

Many Syrians feel that they cannot influence the situation in Syria because of the negative competition between organizations; the difficulty and cost of transferring funds inside Syria; the imbalance between locations that receive a lot of support compared to those that receive little; and the discrepancy in international actors' agendas between working on women's issues but ignoring women's basic needs for stability, security and safety. Language barriers, difficulties in communicating and convincing organizations about local women's needs, not fully understanding the Syrian context, and the administrative burdens linked to partnerships also pose challenges.



Conclusion and recommendations

While women's participation in peacebuilding has been emphasized in Syria, women's protection has been ignored. In light of this case study's findings, international partners should:

- Take a community-driven approach to problem-solving. Implementation challenges do not mean that support should be discontinued.
- Form women-led community committees so that women can become change-makers and peacebuilders.
- Ensure that peacebuilding projects are designed and implemented in such a way as to encourage networking and partnerships between community groups.
- Support programs that build the national identity of all conflict parties and promote tolerance without exclusion or discrimination.
- Assist women peacebuilders at risk rather than seeking temporary solutions. Create a clear and specific rescue strategy and have a dedicated office or email for emergency communication.
- Provide protection — including security, financial and/or legal support — for women peacebuilders under threat and help them develop safety plans.
- Provide operational grants (not solely project grants) for women-led peacebuilding projects with direct technical assistance, support loans, co-financing and other forms of financial assistance.
- Simplify procedures for funding applications for women peacebuilders; find ways to address language and cultural barriers.
- Collaborate with a greater number and variety of women peacebuilding actors, including small or grassroots women-led organizations and individual women peacebuilders.
- Conduct and publish research and disseminate reports on peacebuilding and protection mechanisms.
- Support women's work that targets people of all genders and ages, rather than solely women as the target group.
- Select Syrian and international project staff who are well-versed in the Women, Peace and Security and protection agendas.
- Provide group psychotherapy workshops related to the trauma women activists face, bringing people together around common ground rather than based on their religion, race, language or place of residence.

Endnotes

- 1 United Nations Population Fund, "Situation for Women and Girls in Syria Worse than Ever Before as Conflict Grinds On," UNFPA Press Release, May 9, 2022, <https://www.unfpa.org/press/situation-women-and-girls-syria-worse-ever-conflict-grinds>.



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