



The Tahrir Institute  
for Middle East Policy

in partnership with News Deeply

# SYRIA'S WOMEN: POLICIES & PERSPECTIVES

**WOMEN IN MEDIA** November 20, 2017

## Summary

- Syria remains one of the most [dangerous countries](#) in the world for reporters, with 129 media workers and journalists killed since 2011. Local reporters comprised [90 percent](#) of journalist deaths.
- Despite the dangers, there are at least [196](#) active, non-state media outlets in Syria as of 2016. Of those organizations, 37 percent are pro-regime, 36 percent are pro-opposition, 20 percent are independent, and seven percent are aligned with Kurds.
- A [study](#) of independent media outlets by the Syrian Female Journalists Network found that female representation was relatively high, making up 35 percent of the print media workforce and 54 percent of radio. Women, however, remain underrepresented in leadership positions, making up only four percent of senior journalists.

## Overall Situation

New media sources [have emerged](#) on all sides of the Syrian conflict since 2011. These outlets present a wide range of ideologies and are distributed through print, the internet, and radio waves throughout the country.

Women have been instrumental in establishing independent news sources in independent news sources, founding leading media outlets like [SouriaLi Radio](#), [Syrian Female Journalists Network \(SFJN\)](#), and [Enab Baladi](#). [SouriaLi](#) and [Enab Baladi](#) both have staffs made up of more than 50 percent women, while SFJN currently works with [77](#) male and female member journalists to train them in gender issues.

Journalists and other media activists are [targeted](#) not only by the Syrian government but also by [opposition forces](#), both radical and moderate. Syria now ranks 177 out of 180 countries in press freedom and is currently ranked the deadliest country for journalists. Seven male journalists and one female journalist have been killed [since](#) the beginning of 2017 in Syria.

## Background

After Bashar al-Assad's ascent to power in 2000, there was a brief period of optimism that he would ease the media censorship of his [father's era](#), but additions to the Penal Code like the [2001 Publications Law](#) that bans any content threatening “national unity” and allows censorship of foreign media, dashed these hopes. News outlets were owned and operated by the government exclusively until 2001, when the same Publications Law made private newspapers legal. However, all periodicals require a license issued by the prime minister, which can be denied for almost any reason, so these publications are primarily [aligned with the regime](#). Due to such strict regime controls on media licensing, the majority ([86 percent](#)) of non-state media sources in regime controlled areas operate online, though they are publishing pro-government content.

The head of Syrian National Television and Assad's leading media adviser are both women, [Diana Jabbour](#) and [Bouthaina Shaaban](#) respectively. Despite the presence of women in such high-ranking media roles, some women [view](#) these positions as merely ceremonial.

The Syrian Female Journalists Network conducted a [study](#) of gender equality in emerging Syrian media (ESM) between 2011 and 2015 that found while women's representation is relatively high—they make up 35 percent of the print media workforce and 54 percent of radio—women remain underrepresented in the upper echelons of leadership. Only four percent of senior journalists are women, and those who are were generally founders of their organization. Additionally, coverage of women's issues remains shockingly low: Barely 200 articles were published between 2011 and 2016 by the outlets surveyed. There are, however, [organizations](#) working to change this, seeking to diversify women's narratives beyond merely victims of violence by empowering women as journalists and telling the stories of women who otherwise might not be heard.

The aforementioned security concerns also create a difficult environment for women working in journalists. [Restrictions](#) on freedom of expression and movement prevents female journalists from being able to convene for training sessions on journalism and writing about issues disproportionately affecting women. These issues are amplified by societal [distrust of women](#) in the public sphere. Some male relatives will not allow women work outside the home, fearing for their lives, while other men refuse to be interviewed by a woman.

The Islamic State does not allow women to work in any kind of journalism, but does use women and girls as [recruiters](#) on social media. Additionally, there is a [manifesto](#) published by the all-female morality police, al-Khansaa Brigade, that sharply critiques Western feminism, asserting instead that women should be pleased serving their husbands within the home.

Facing such barriers, many women operate in the citizen-journalism realm. There are [activists](#) who operate in cities occupied by armed opposition groups, like blogger [Lina Shamy](#) who used [Twitter](#) and Facebook to post blogs and short videos reporting on the ongoing conflict in Aleppo. Zaina Erham, another citizen-journalist living in Aleppo, received the 2015 Peter Mackler Award for Courageous and Ethical Journalism for her [work](#) on training close to 100 citizen-journalists, 30 of whom were women. However, these individuals face grave dangers if caught by the government or opposition forces and increasingly have chosen to flee the country.

## Policy Implications and Challenges

The highly publicized nature of the Syrian conflict has given rise to a “propaganda war” between all those involved. Attempts to address this have come from the [United States](#) and the [European Union](#) with programs to promote good journalistic practices and constructive dialogue while countering “[extremist discourse](#)”. The U.S. program, Support for Independent Media in Syria, reportedly reached a total of [\\$31.6 million](#) by 2015 focused primarily on just nine networks, while the EU set aside [€4.2 million](#) for media projects in 2016. These projects, however, were initially conceptualized as short term “seed money” and efforts to grow and sustain these programs remain in progress.

Organizations like SouriaLi and Syrian Female Journalist Network [cited](#) donations from Freedom House and National Endowment for Democracy, but reported that their funding often came tied to short-term projects dictated by Western interests. These pieces center on primarily on violence and perpetuate the image of Syria that these groups specifically aim to disrupt. The short nature of these assignments make it difficult for local women journalists to establish themselves and to create a sustainable living. The employment and empowerment of women in media has the possibility to meaningfully change societal conceptions of women’s potential, but must be prioritized and cultivated in order to do this.



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