



The Tahrir Institute  
for Middle East Policy

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# SYRIA'S WOMEN: POLICIES & PERSPECTIVES



## WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT AND PEACEBUILDING October 17, 2017

### Summary

- Research demonstrates that peace agreements tend to last longer with women's participation in their creation. Yet at the 2014 [Geneva II Conference](#), not a single woman represented the Syrian regime or opposition delegation to the United Nations.
- Within Syria, women are underrepresented both in national government and local councils, as a result of [security concerns](#) and conservative societal beliefs regarding women's participation in public life.
- Efforts to amplify Syrian women's voices in international peace processes, like the U.N.-established Women's Advisory Board, have been met with challenges: a failure to incorporate grass roots actors, societal attitudes toward women in activism, and security threats contribute to a [lack](#) of unified feminist discourse on the international stage.

### Overall Situation

Women's participation in peacebuilding and governance has made some strides in recent years, with key women elected to leadership positions and women breaking ground in local governance in some areas, but remains stunted overall. Women's participation in peacebuilding efforts, whether in government or civil society, can be attributed to a [factors](#) such as patriarchal categorizations of women as unqualified to safety concerns, but results in Syrian women's exclusion.

Local and international actors have affirmed the necessity of women's participation in government and peace processes in Syria, but the inclusion of women in both has remained low.

As part of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) [five-year plan](#), the Syrian government pledged in 2005 to increase women's participation in public life and decision making to 30 percent, but in 2016 failed to reach half of that number. Likewise, the opposition coalition, the [Syrian National Council](#), says it is taking steps to reach the U.N. standard of 30 percent representation of women, but there is only one woman on its [political committee](#). The U.N. has also been outspoken about the value of women in negotiations, but Syrian [peace talks](#) in 2014 did not include a single woman.

## Background

Women in Syria were first given the right to vote and hold office in [1953](#), but have only held small numbers of seats in parliament and other positions of power since that time, with notable exceptions: the election of [Souhair Attasi](#) as vice-president of the National Coalition in 2012. The following year, Attasi went on to become the first woman to head a [session](#) of the Arab League. In 2016, the Syrian parliament elected [Hadiyah al-Abbas](#) as its first female speaker. Notably, women in Manbij pushed their [civilian council](#) to expand representation and now constitute 40 percent of council members. Kurdish women and women in Kurdish-governed areas have experienced a [radical increase](#) in social and political activity and visibility, both in formal political and civil society arenas.

However, these women are the exception, not the rule, and attempts at change have largely fallen flat. [Comments](#) from CEDAW in 2007 expressed concern about “the lack of measures” adopted toward having a 30 percent representation of women at decision-making levels, as well as “the continuing low levels of representation of women in public and political life ... particularly in municipal, town, and village levels.” [Three years later](#), women still held only 10 percent of ministerial positions, 11 percent of diplomatic posts, and 13 percent of judgeships. In 2012, following a [campaign](#) by the Syrian Women’s League, a local civil society organization, an addition was made to the [Syrian Constitution](#) guaranteeing women full and effective participation in political, social, cultural, and economic life. However, no concrete measures followed this declaration. Nationally, women held only [13 percent](#) of seats in parliament in 2016, a proportion lower than both the [global and regional averages](#), and estimates place female participation in local councils between [two and four percent](#).

Kurdish parties have addressed these inequities by prioritizing gender equality in social, legal, and political spheres. Every city in areas controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), for example, has a [joint presidency](#) between men and women, and a woman currently serves as the PYD’s [co-chairperson](#). These direct political gains have been accompanied by [other measures](#) such as the outlawing of polygamy and combating child marriage and violence against women, because women’s political exclusion is often a symptom of women’s [wider societal exclusion](#).

Facing obstacles to formal participation in governance, some women choose to engage in peacebuilding through participation in civil society. Women Now for Development was founded in 2012 with the [general mission](#) of supporting and empowering Syrian women and girls, and since that time has expanded to include [six centers](#) across two countries that provide professional, educational, civic, and psychological support. Another group, [Jana](#), was formed by 10 women in Raqqa in 2013 with the aims of [rebuilding](#) their society and promoting gender equality. Though, as with governance, despite these exceptions, participation in civil society remains low: a recent study by the Badael Project, a local initiative to strengthen civil society in peacebuilding, found that out of 94 civil society groups interviewed, only [15 percent](#) had a majority female membership, while 31 percent had no women at all.

## Policy Implications and Challenges

In response to the lack of female representation in U.N. peace negotiations, U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura established the [Women's Advisory Board](#) (WAB) in 2016, separate from formal delegations, to contribute to negotiations. The WAB consists of 12 Syrian women from different [backgrounds](#) and political affiliations seen as leaders in their communities. The board is not, however, universally celebrated. Many [argue](#) that it was created as mere decoration and lacks real power, while others [believe](#) that the women selected are simply not representative of all Syrian women.

Local actors are further alienated from peace processes by the lack of information made available to them. Only [33 percent](#) of women activists living in Syria reported adequate access to information about peacebuilding efforts on the international level and the [feedback loop](#) from the formal to informal process was identified as the most significant challenge to local women's ability to influence and participate in either. All parties involved must prioritize Syrian women's access to information regarding the wider peace process so they may participate, and through this empowerment and engagement have the ability to better fight social, legal, and political barriers to gender equality in Syria.

Despite rhetoric from the [Syrian government](#), [opposition governments](#), and the [U.N.](#) about increasing the visibility and engagement of women in public life, no meaningful action has encouraged this change. Excluding women from decision making is symptomatic of patriarchy in Syrian society and reinforces it. Without providing women opportunities to act as leaders in their communities, current gender inequalities will only persist.



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