

Gender Action on Peace and Security statement on the 4th anniversary of the conflict in Syria

On March 13th 2015, the Syrian conflict enters its fourth year. On March 31st, the international community convenes in Kuwait for a donor conference to review global funding for assistance and protection efforts in the crisis. At this time, Gender Action on Peace and Security (GAPS) releases the following statement to call on the British Government and wider international community, as well as national authorities and parties to the conflict, to do more to protect and empower women and girls affected by the conflict.

The British Government has played a leading role in mobilising funding and political engagement by the international community on the Syrian crisis. The UK National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security identifies Syria as one of its priority country, and commits the UK to support protection from Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG), integrating gender analysis into humanitarian programmes, and providing political and financial support to Syrian women's rights organisations and groups. This paper outlines recommendations based on the analysis of GAPS members active in Syria and the neighbouring countries, as well as consultation with Syrian women's networks.

Key recommendations are as follows:

1. **Support diverse Syrian women's rights organisations and groups to participate in decision-making on the crisis response and conflict resolution efforts at multiple levels.** Too often support to Syrian women's rights organisations and groups has been short-termist, ad-hoc and tied to one-off events, which in turn has a fragmenting and delegitimising effect on the women's movement. Efforts need to start now to enable a diverse range of Syrian women activists to participate in policy-making on the crisis and to prepare for any political process to resolve the conflict, as well as to build their networks amongst civil society groups, the wider crisis-affected population and within and across different factions in the conflict.
2. **Strengthen participation of women and girls in crisis-affected communities in needs assessments, programme design, implementation and monitoring.** Women are best placed to identify and navigate the complexities they face in this conflict. Learning from the establishment of women's committees in Turkey's refugee camps and women's participation in Iraqi urban refugee committees in Jordan, along with similar efforts in other affected countries, a regional approach to participation by, and accountability to, women and girls in the crisis response is needed.
3. **Increase funding for Syrian women's rights organisations and civil society organisations that support women and girls.** UN and NGO funding appeals for Syria have gone repeatedly unmet by the international community. While the UK has been a key donor in the crisis, it has increasingly switched its funds to a smaller number of NGOs and UN agencies to reduce administrative costs. As a result, some groups working at smaller-scale, in harder-to-reach areas and in with gender-sensitivity face funding cuts. Looking forward, the UK and other donors should provide funding to a diverse range of NGOs able to operate across Syria and particularly to Syrian women's rights organisations and civil society. Donors should fund groups working independently. In the words of the charter of the Syrian Women's Network: "*We, a diverse group of Syrian women, gathered to discuss the role of women in Syria's transition to a peaceful democracy bound by the rule of law...[and] will seek to establish an independent and inclusive women's network.*"ⁱ
4. **UK counter-terror policies should be adjusted to enable life-saving aid to reach those in need, including women and girls, in areas under the control of proscribed armed groups.** Since 9/11, donor counter-terror policies have constrained the ability of humanitarian agencies to deliver life-saving assistance to women and girls in areas controlled by proscribed armed groups.ⁱⁱ Going forward, the UK approach should be amended. Emphasis should be placed on strengthening humanitarian programme quality controls (such as accountability for compliance with VAWG response standards and Gender Marking) and mechanisms to demonstrate the accountability of aid to affected populations.

5. **Support the deployment of OCHA GENCAP gender advisors and GBV specialists to all affected countries and hold agencies accountable for gender-sensitive programming.** Deployment of an OCHA GENCAP Gender Advisor in Jordan has greatly enhanced the refugee response. These roles and GBV specialist positions should be resourced and deployed in Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. Enhanced gender sensitivity across all humanitarian sectors, for example through more comprehensive 'gender marking' of programmes across the project cycle and strengthening GBV referral systems, should be part of the approach. Towards this end, the UK should work with other donors involved in the Call to Action on Violence Against Women and Girls in Emergencies to hold agencies accountable for addressing gender equality and VAWG in the response.
6. **Increase funding to the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) with enhanced mainstreaming of gender equality and VAWG prevention.** Particular attention is required to enable longer-term programmes which foster the dignity and agency of women and girls in refugee and host communities. Policies and programmes should be adjusted to enable female refugees' access to education and livelihoods opportunities. These are essential both for them to realise their potential as well as to avoid negative coping strategies, such as working in the informal sector at higher risk of exploitation and abuse.
7. **Support neighbouring states to keep their border open and provide legal documents (including residency) and visas for women's rights activists to enable their work, as well as for Syrian female refugees, who are more likely to lack basic documentation than men.** Changes in visa provisions are making it increasingly hard for women's rights activists to move freely and do their work. In addition, significant numbers of the displaced fall into the 'stateless' category and a disproportionately high number of these are women and girls, who are less likely to have official documents than men. Over time, passports are also expiring. The UK needs to work with multilateral organisations, states and NGOs with expertise in registration and documentation to address these challenges.
8. **Increase resettlement for the most vulnerable Syrian refugees, in particular those identified through UNHCR's vulnerability criteria, including survivors of trauma or torture, and refugees at a heightened risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.** Humanitarian and human rights agencies have calculated that the UK's fair share of resettlement would be approximately 10,000 refugees. While Germany has committed to accepting 30,000, the UK has currently offered to resettle "several hundred." Furthermore, most who reach the UK are young men. Procedures should be amended to enable more Syrian women and girls to reach the UK. Flexible approaches, such as making available work permits and university places, should also be considered.
9. **Strategic communications as well as political, security and justice interventions on women's rights in the Syrian crisis should follow the principle of 'do no harm'.** Women's rights is a sensitive topic and sometimes portrayed by armed groups as an imposition of "Western" norms and values. For this reason, international engagement on women's rights should emphasise their universal nature and empower Syrian women themselves to voice their concerns to avoid generating backlash.

Background

The impacts of the Syrian war on women and girls have been devastating. As of January 2015, over 210,000 people have died in the conflict, of which 70% were civilians.ⁱⁱⁱ UNOCHA estimates there are 12.2 million people in need inside Syria. Over 212,000 people are still living in besieged locations^{iv} and over 4.8 million reside in areas that aid agencies can reach only sporadically, and in many locations not at all.^v More than four million Syrians have fled the country, mainly taking refuge in surrounding countries. Lebanon and Turkey each host more than one million Syrians, while Jordan, Iraq and Egypt have become home to hundreds of thousands more.

Sexual violence and sexual assault have been cited by women and girls as a primary reason to flee the country.^{vi} Boys and men have also been targeted for sexual torture. Additionally, research has shown women and girls displaced within and outside Syria face multiple forms of VAWG that stem from broader gender inequality, including intimate partner violence, child, early and forced marriage (CEFM)

and sexual exploitation and abuse.^{vii} This has led to increased rates of polygamy and contract marriages as well as girls getting married younger. Due to on-going harassment and abuse in the streets, women and girls' freedom of movement has been significantly curtailed. In turn, this has negatively impacted on their access to basic services, like health and education.^{viii} Inside Syria, armed groups have imposed severe restrictions on women's movement, dress and employment. 5 to 10% of households are headed by women, up to 15% in certain areas. Support for women's economic empowerment is a crucial factor to ensure basic needs for households are met and strengthen resilience within households and communities.

Despite the horrific circumstances they face, Syrian women and girls have shown remarkable resilience, courage and tenacity. Syrian female activists participated actively in the peaceful, popular uprisings which eventually, evolved into the current violent conflict. Syrian women have also put their lives at risk and delivered life-saving aid and protection in the midst of the Syrian warzone. Many of these women have perished or disappeared. While conflict resolution appears a long way off, the UK and other donors should have a plan in place for an eventual political process, and provide the political, financial and other support for Syrian women to prepare for their participation.

Humanitarian assistance and protection play essential roles in protecting and empowering women and girls affected by the conflict. Humanitarian efforts need to empower Syrian women and girls to have a voice in assessments and the design, monitoring and evaluation of programmes. Lessons from initiatives to support women's participation, for example through refugee camp committees in Jordan, should be documented and good practices scaled-up across the affected countries. Without adequate funding, a gender sensitive approach is impossible. At the close of 2014, only 54% of funding was found for the regional refugee response. The brief, but alarming, suspension of World Food Program (WFP) assistance to 1.7 million refugees in December, which was only resumed after an emergency appeal, similarly sparked fears that donor fatigue may have set in. Looking towards the donor pledging conference on 31st March, it is essential that international donors and the UN commit to sustained support and factor a gender-sensitive and gender transformative approach into the emergency response, with a serious commitment to fulfil minimum standards such as the IASC Guidelines on Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings.

Many Syrian women and girls face additional obstacles and vulnerabilities in their efforts to flee the violence. Syria's neighbouring countries have shown incredible generosity over the last three and a half years, but the strain of the crisis is weighing heavily on infrastructure and public services. For example, one in four residents in Lebanon is a refugee from Syria. The most vulnerable refugees, including specific categories of women and girls at particular risk, should be prioritised and assured their full rights in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Given the protracted nature of the crisis, there is a need for programmes to provide longer-term support to the dignity and agency of women and girls in the affected populations – both Syrian refugees and those in host communities in neighbouring countries. For example, the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority of Turkey (AFAD) published an assessment in January focused on the situation of Syrian refugee women.^{ix} It found that only a third of Syrian refugee women are able to access education beyond primary school and 20% are illiterate. Support to the education and livelihoods of displaced women and girls to avoid the conflict creating a 'lost generation.' is necessary^x The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) remains underfunded and as a consequence hosting governments, UN agencies and NGOs struggle to effectively support women and girls.

ⁱ <http://www.newsrecord.co/is-there-hope-for-womens-rights-in-post-assad-syria/>

ⁱⁱ https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/CT_Study_Full_Report.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Violations Documentation Centre (cited in Human Rights Watch report)

^{iv} UN Secretary-General (2015), Report to UN Security Council (22 January 2015), UN, p.6.

^v OCHA (2014), Humanitarian Needs Overview (November 2014), UN, p.15.

^{vi} Mapping of vulnerabilities: unmasking the Syrian Population, Global Child Protection Working Group, HelpAge International (2014)

^{vii} IRC, Are we Listening? Acting on Our Commitments to Women and Girls Affected by the Syrian Conflict, September 2014,

http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/page_wrappers/assets/syria/pdf/IRC_WomenInSyria_Report_WEB.pdf

^{viii} Rapid Gender and Protection Assessment Report Kobane Refugee Population, Suruç, Turkey, CARE International (October 2014), IRC, Are we Listening Report.

^{ix} <file:///C:/Users/care%20turkey/Downloads/SyrianWomeninTurkey.pdf>

^x <http://nolostgeneration.org/>