



Amnesty International UK



WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR
PEACE & FREEDOM



Syria Response Consultations on the UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

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1. Background

To inform development process of the new UK National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security, Amnesty International UK (AI UK), Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and Women Now for Development have come together to organise consultations with Syrian Woman Human Rights Defenders, gender equality advocates and civil society organisations.

To ensure that diverse voices are heard, and perspectives of both refugees in neighbouring countries and women inside Syria are reflected, consultations consisted of two face to face workshops of approximately 15 people (in Gaziantep, Turkey on 6th and 7th February 2017; and Beirut, Lebanon, 16th and 17th February) and 17 skype interviews with women activists inside Syria (from areas controlled by the regime, opposition, ISIS and other extremist groups including Dara'a, Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, Hassakeh and Qamishli) and the ones based in Turkey.

This report is a product of these consultations and reflects contribution by the phenomenal women's rights activists, who face devastating threats every day, but bravely continue their work and provide a range of services to Syrian woman, from education to health, governance, humanitarian relief, empowerment, community work, awareness raising and international advocacy. It aims to carry their analysis of barriers and challenges with respect to 4 pillars: **participation, violence against women and girls, security and justice, and refugees and forced displacements**, followed by the recommendations to the new UK National Action Plan, based on their first-hand experience, including on engaging with some of the UK supported programmes in Syria and neighbouring countries.

2. Partners

Amnesty International UK (AIUK) is a part of the global movement of seven over million people campaigning for justice wherever it has been denied. We investigate and expose abuses, educate and mobilise the public, and help transform societies to create a safer, more just world. We received the Nobel Peace Prize for our life-saving work.

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) is an international non-governmental organization with national sections covering every continent, an international secretariat based in Geneva, and a New York office focused on the work of the United Nations. Since its creation in 1915, WILPF has brought together women from around the world, united in working for peace, to promote political, economic and social justice for all.

WILPF's approach is always through non-violent means. WILPF uses international legal and political frameworks to achieve fundamental change in the way states conceptualise and address issues of gender, militarism, peace and security. WILPF's strength lies in its ability to link the international and local levels. WILPF was one of the first NGOs to gain consultative status with the UN, and remains the only women's anti-war NGO so recognised.

Women Now for Development "SFD" is a Syrian non-profit organization dedicated to deepening and strengthening women's role in Syrian and host communities by enhancing their political, social, economic and cultural participation. Established in June 2012 and led by Syrian women for Syrian women, Women Now works from the ground up, remaining responsive to the situation of women on the ground.

3. Introduction & Executive Summary

Five years since the conflict began, more than 450,000 Syrians have been killed in the fighting, more than a million injured and over 12 million Syrians - half the country's pre-war population - have been displaced from their homes.¹ As violence continues to escalate, the international community fails to protect Syrian woman and man from mass atrocities, destitution, all kinds of violence, and discrimination, both on exile and inside the country.

AIUK, WILPF and Women Now believe that women's rights are human rights, and that applying human rights perspective into the UK and other countries' National Action Plans on Woman Peace and Security is fundamental to address root causes and disproportionate impact of conflict on woman and girls. However, even the most ambitious National Action Plans will only go that far in a situation of protracted war, increased militarisation and systemic violations of human rights by the Syrian regime. Therefore, international support and engagement in seeking political solution to the conflict, which guarantees peace and accountability, and human rights for all, is paramount.

Regarding women's participation, at the time of worst upheaval, Syrian women have shown incredible resilience and commitment to protect and advance human rights, yet they continue to be marginalised and even prosecuted. Women's participation in regime institutions has been tokenistic and uninfluential, participation in Local Councils in areas under the opposition control has also been minimal. Women Human Rights Defenders continue to face resistance from their male colleagues to participate in public life, while the regime has escalated repressions such as threats, arbitrary arrests, and all other forms of abuse against them. Donors, including the UK, prioritise humanitarian assistance and partnerships with big INGOs, and do not adequately support Syrian civil society. Critical interrogation of the concept of 'women's leadership' in donor approaches is urgently needed and this should include, among other things, targeted and quality investment in Syrian women's rights organising in its own right.

Violence against woman and girls (VAWG) has been prevalent in both public and private spheres in Syria for decades and was further exacerbated by the conflict. This include early and force marriage as well as trafficking, which continues to be under researched. Detention and forced disappearance are a regime common tactic, bearing great impact on woman, both as detainees and relatives of those who disappeared. Yet international community attention so far has been mostly on sexual violence committed by ISIS. There remains a significant room for improvement to ensure that donors apply comprehensive approach to respond and prevent VAWG, fund specialised programming, and support accountability and access to justice, also for political detainees.

Security, justice and legal frameworks are particularly challenging for woman and girls in Syria due to the general collapse of the rule of law, ongoing conflict, impunity, proliferation of arms and increased militarisation. UK has been engaged in the increased militarisation of the conflict in Syria and the region, which has a significant and disproportionate impact on women and girls. Meanwhile, the international response to terrorism and violent extremism has been predominantly militarised and has sacrificed the safety and wellbeing of civilians. Also, non-militarised response has at times instrumentalised woman's groups and impacted on their access to resources. It is of pivotal importance that UK and other members of the international community take all possible measures to apply diplomatic pressure on the regime and allied groups to allow international independent observers inside Syria, implement Security Council Resolution 2139, and embed woman's rights approach into their countering terrorism and violent extremism policies and programmes. In particular, the UK must deny authorisation of any arms sales or transfers when there is a risk that

¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>

they would be used to facilitate human rights violations and should lead international efforts to control sale of such arms by any member state to warring parties in Syria.

Finally, Syrian refugees suffer from legal insecurity and extremely limited livelihoods opportunities, while internally displaced persons inside Syria, in result of the regime deliberate politics, are often deprived of aid. As number of registered refugees exceed 5 million, and absolute majority reside in just 5 countries, the UK and other western countries' response to the so called 'refugee crisis' has been criticised strong. Donors must push for political solution, which would allow for a safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees to Syria under the international protection. But not less important is that they open borders and welcome refugees in their own countries by scaling up access to safe and legal routes out of Syria and from neighbouring countries.

4. Needs and Barriers of women and girls

4.1. Participation

“Woman have to struggle a lot more; they have to go through the checkpoints, interact with armed fractions (...). Those who were able to participate and remain in place had to go through the daily struggle to go on.” Women’s rights advocate at the workshop in Gaziantep.

At the time of upheaval, Syrian women have shown incredible resilience and commitment to sustaining civilian activism, including the pursuit of gender equality, justice, and human rights. This is despite the fact that there has been no tradition of free civil society engagement in Syria, even before the revolution of 2011.

However, and despite the tremendous efforts since the uprising, women’s participation in public, social, and political life is very limited and remains a contentious issue, further exacerbated by politics of various groups in control of different parts of Syria.

Discriminatory social norms relegating women into private and domestic spheres remain the key challenge. This is in addition to community pressure, policing, security concerns, forced displacements, exile, lack of relevant policies, women’s economic dependency on their families, limited investments in women’s leadership, and repression against women’s rights activists and their organisations.

Within the context of existing and future UK & international support, the following issues were put forward for urgent consideration:

- **Women’s participation in Local Councils and other local governance mechanisms**

“When I put forward my vision on gender equality to be incorporated into the political solution, I was dismissed from both my local committee and my political block.” Women’s rights advocate at the Beirut workshop about her experience in the Local Councils in Syria

Donors, including the UK, have invested significant resources in Local Councils, which emerged in the areas out of regime control to provide services to the communities and good governance. However, and despite pockets of good practice, over all women’s participation in these Councils has not exceeded two percent.² For example, in Idlib, for 180 administrative positions in the educational councils, only 3 are occupied by women. Similarly, in Aleppo, only six out of 143 employees are

² See for example: <http://www.peacefare.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Needs-for-the-Local-Councils-of-Syria-Public-Policy-Report.pdf>

women.³

Number of participants worked closely with Local Councils and shared similar experience of repeatedly being shut down, excluded from the decision-making processes, being shouted at, or even subjected to ‘shame campaigns’ against their families for ‘allowing’ them to attend the meetings. In some cases, women were asked to leave ‘men’s meetings’. Such exclusion has devastating impact on so many levels including the reinforcement of male privilege and patriarchal hierarchies and the absence of women’s needs and concerns from the humanitarian programmes that follow needs assessments conducted by the Local Councils

It has also been highlighted that in many instances, where Local Councils have included women it has been tokenistic and to attract foreign funding. Moreover, as one of the participants put it: *“Women are required to have considerably more potential and experience than that of their male counterparts to participate [in Local Councils and other governance mechanisms]”*.

Women’s participation at the local level is crucial. Despite the gravity of challenges, some good practices do exist and should be built on. For instance, in one besieged area, Local Council stood up for its female member when an armed fraction challenged her. In many places around Syria women are leading community centres, self-help groups or public kitchens, often under bombardment and siege. These courageous women must be recognised and they must be supported.

- **Women’s participation at international level**

A prominent share of international and UK support is dedicated to women’s participation in the UN-led peace process and other international conferences. This is very important, providing it is not to the detriment of supporting movement building for women’s rights, including at the grassroots, and overall integrity of women’s mobilisation initiatives.

For example, the creation of the Women’s Advisory Body (WAB) to the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan De-Mistura, in general a welcome idea - has been controversial.⁴ Lack of transparency in the WAB selection process, the mere advisory nature while genuine participation is significantly lacking, and the absence of comprehensive mechanisms to feedback and inform the local communities and women’s rights activists have all resulted in limited trust in the WAB causing many women activists and communities to refrain from engaging with it. More reflection is needed on the side of donors about how to foster genuine, accountable, and meaningful participation at the international level, which connects local to global.

Moreover, while participants recognised that there has been progress in bringing Syrian women to international fora such as the Geneva Peace Talks, or donors’ conferences, for the most part their participation has been too shy, too rushed, and not meaningful enough especially in shaping the agenda and influence over outcomes. In light of the UK’s commitment to ensure that the voices of women affected by conflict are heard, more should be done to allow for systematic, diverse, inclusive and early engagement with women’s rights advocates, including lobbying other governments and agencies to improve the quality of women’s participation.

³ Data provided by participants at Gaziantep consultations’ workshop.

⁴ See for example: <https://syriaaccountability.org/updates/2016/04/07/the-controversy-over-the-syrian-womens-advisory-board/>

- **Support to women's leadership and women's rights organisations**

“Syrian women are capable if they are empowered. These women are survivors (...). We have huge expertise. We can offer much better services to women than foreign organisations.” Women's rights advocate in Beirut workshop

“I know very well that Syrian men aim to control Syrian women. It is my own battle. But what (...) I cannot understand or accept is the control of your organisations (...). They behave as if they had invented feminism themselves and then brought it to us (...). The British Government must work through local partners. Syrian organisations have become strong enough to implement projects themselves.” A male women's rights advocate in the consultation workshop in Gaziantep

The power of the above quotes reflects the passion with which participants approached the issue of women's leadership and support to women's rights organisations. Their message was clear: women have been on the forefront of the struggle for justice and human rights. Yet in addition to all other challenges, women leaders and women's groups continue to fight resistance from their male colleagues, remain largely invisible to international donors and INGOs, and survive on shoestring budgets.

Majority of the participants reported that their male colleagues in humanitarian and human rights sector, both inside and outside Syria, remain sceptical about women's participation, often perceiving it as an irritating demand from donors. Such ideas are usually packaged within a general concern for the “public good” and the need to divert funding to more “pressing issues and needs” such as health or infrastructure. Moreover, men usually have more employment opportunities and tend to occupy positions of power. For example, in Eastern Ghouta, 80 percent of the educational sector staff are women, yet not a single woman is represented in positions of leadership, management or policy making.⁵ Woman participants in leadership positions in organisations operating in different parts of Syria told us: *“No one in the office considered me a manager; they thought I was a secretary”*.

All participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the practice of international donors, including the UK, in working with a limited number of large INGOs with big programmes and budgets, but without a sufficient follow up mechanisms to assess how these INGOs are supporting and partnering with local Syrian women's rights groups. Moreover, the bulk of international funding is directed towards the humanitarian sector and is about delivering services to people in the shortest possible time. Yet what is missing is the much-needed focus on building civil society for the future of Syria, including explicit support to women's rights groups and investment in women's leadership in its own right. In the words of the participant: *“Syrian organisations are strong enough to implement programmes; they are not the terrorists. International community is not bold enough.”*

Notwithstanding the gravity of the challenges faced, women's groups in Syria are working hard and achieving results. One inspiring example comes from the women of Zabadani, who have managed to successfully negotiate a ceasefire between the Free Syrian Army and the regime. Having mobilised a petition of 400 signatures, they have not only stopped the fighting for a full 40 days but they have also managed to obtain the names of women detainees and push the regime to release some of them. In the words of an activist: *“You cannot imagine how nice it is to live without any bombardment, shooting, weapons. These 40 days were beautiful in Zabadani.”*⁶

This example, just like the above-mentioned challenges, call for the critical interrogation of the

⁵ Data collected from respondents in Eastern Ghouta during key informant interviews.

⁶ This and other examples can be found at: <https://leilashami.wordpress.com/2016/12/29/fighting-on-all-fronts-womens-resistance-in-syria/>

concept of women's leadership in donors' approaches and practices. Targeted support to women's groups and amplifying women's voices are key to responding to everyday challenges women and girls face in Syria and in host countries.

- **Repression and violence against women human rights defenders (WHRDs)**

Another challenge to women's meaningful participation is the escalating repression and violence against WHRDs by Syrian security forces and armed opposition groups.⁷

WHRDs are subjected to various forms of abuse, including defamation, direct and indirect threats, travel bans, study/work bans and arbitrary arrests, as well as abduction and torture in security branches and detention centres. The regime has persistently accused women activists of being 'terrorists' or 'imperialist agents' to justify their arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance. Furthermore, some women are harassed at government military checkpoints only because they are relatives of wanted persons or because they reside in regions where opposition factions have a large presence.

The regime has applied psychological abuse, such as indirect threats and harassment, against WHRDs and forced many human rights activists to leave the country. Meanwhile, WHRDs also face stigma and incitement to violence in their own communities. Only activists with 'security permits' authorized by the government, which are notoriously difficult to obtain, may provide assistance. One participant divulged what members of her community inquired about her work: *"why don't you teach women how to sew or do other handicrafts -an appropriate form of work -instead of documenting abuses against women"*.

In areas controlled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), any form of foreign-funded activity not directly managed by the Kurdish Autonomous Administration (KAA) is suspected to be an act to undermine the emerging Kurdish entity. Civil society activists and journalists are thus under surveillance and are being investigated and harassed on a regular basis.

Likewise, in areas under the political and military control of Jaysh al-Islam⁸, women's rights activism has faced a violent backlash. For example, Jaysh al-Islam has been accused of kidnapping Razan Zaitouneh – prominent Syrian lawyer and documenter of human rights abuses - and harassing women activists on a regular basis, whether at checkpoints or by summoning them to random interrogations under the pretext of 'morality and decency' charges. Jaysh al-Islam has also raided women's centres and offices of CSOs to create a sense of dread and terror, especially in Douma. One participant shared her fear: *"Zaitouneh's abduction makes all those who document abuses feel unsafe because the international community did not take serious measures to find her whereabouts and to release her."*

Overall, violence and repression against Syrian WHRDs have a devastating impact on the women's rights movement, forcing many to go underground and/or into exile. Organisations close overnight. A large number of women human rights experts can no longer enter Syria, and in exile, they are often denied protection and legal status to be able to continue their work, particularly in Lebanon and Jordan. Regrettably, skills and resources were lost. Many WHRDs suffer from burnout and exhaustion and are in need of urgent support.

⁷ See for example: <http://whrdmena.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Syria-Eng.pdf>

⁸ Jaish al Islam is an opposition armed group operating in eastern Ghouta.

Recommendations to the UK and international community

Strengthen and scale up support to women’s representation: review the support to Local Councils and other local governance mechanisms and develop new methodologies to ensure that women are represented by strengthening accountability for gender equality results and due diligence process in the choice of partners. Ensure that women participate meaningfully in the processes of needs assessments and international response design, including implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Invest in capacity building and ‘incubators’ to develop women’s leadership skills, and resource local women’s groups to advocate and hold Councils and other local governance mechanisms accountable.

Support meaningful participation: adopt a holistic and participatory approach to support Syrian women’s participation in policy making processes, political transition and peace negotiations, from grassroots to international spaces. Practice meaningful dialogue and inclusion of Syrian WHRDs in UK-hosted conferences, and advocate with other governments and international organisations to do the same. Speak out against spaces and/or processes, which exclude them.

Invest in women’s rights organising: focus on supporting civil society in its own right and provide direct funding to Syrian women’s rights groups, which is long term, flexible, and supports core costs. Promote women’s leadership by investing in young women. Hold INGOs accountable for their partnerships with Syrian women’s groups and ask all partners to adapt HR policies that are both gender sensitive and provide a fair, welcoming and enabling space for women.

Recognise, promote and protect Syrian WHRDs: exercise political pressure on the Syrian government to stop repression and violence, and release WHRDs in detention. Fund and bring Syrian WHRDs to international fora to promote and amplify their voices. Develop new ways of supporting WHRDs, including by supporting relief and well-being programmes, and facilitate networks between WHRDs from the priority countries of the UK National Action Plan. Open borders and guarantee protection for WHRDs at risk and apply political pressure on other countries to do the same.

4.2. Violence Against Women and Girls

“Woman are tortured, raped, sexual violence in used as a tactic in Syrian prisons, which makes any women who is growing up (...) want to drop out from the political sphere and from the activism.”
Women’s rights advocate at the workshop in Gaziantep, Turkey.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) has been prevalent in both public and private spheres in Syria for decades and was further exacerbated by the armed conflict. These include domestic violence, so-called “honour” killings, forced and child marriage, sexual violence, trafficking, and many other forms of abuse committed by male partners, relatives, and community members, in addition to air strikes and bombardments by the regime and its allies, starvation and siege, forced displacements, detention, and many other crimes committed by the regime, armed opposition groups, ISIS and other extremists.⁹

Whether in regime or in opposition held areas, or in refugee-hosting neighbouring countries, women – especially those living in poverty in single headed households, refugees and internally displaced

⁹ Change in patterns and types of VAWG since the start of the conflict have also been discussed. These include rise in forced and child marriage, collective and public rape in besieged areas, so called ‘honour killings’ before surrendering to ‘protect’ woman, trafficking, or escalation of domestic violence - all exacerbated in the context of proliferation of armed groups, absence of the rule of law, collapse of security and justice institutions, displacement, and destitution.

persons (IDPs), and adolescent girls - remain unable to seek protection or bring perpetrators to justice. Those who made such attempts often faced further abuse by the court or the police, and intimidation by their families and communities.

Following issues were brought forward to the UK and international community urgent attention:

- **Early and forced marriage**

Number of participants have pointed early and forced marriage as one of the most pervasive forms of violence against girls in Syria.¹⁰ Girls as young as 11 are being married off as an escape from poverty and due to discriminatory gendered norms, especially when access to education is limited, both inside Syria and in refugee camps in the region. Many girls are being forced to marry fighters of ISIS and other extremist groups, soon to be widowed and with children, entering into what is often a cycle of abuse and poverty. This is particularly true in the case of girls married to foreign fighters, whose real names and identities remain unknown even to their wives.

Moreover, widows are also being forced into marriages with relatives of their missing/dead husbands, often coerced by threats that their children would be taken away if they object. In some cases men are also being pressured to marry. This often leads to domestic violence, divorce or abandonment, which in turn exposes women to more vulnerability and marginalisation, especially in the absence of functional social, justice and welfare structures.

- **Trafficking**

“There are rumours about human trafficking and murders, which we are unable to confirm. We need to speak up.” Women’s rights advocate at the workshop in Gaziantep

Although there are no official statistics to reflect it, human trafficking has increased since the start of the conflict. Women are being trafficked from inside Syria, especially from areas under ISIS control, and from the IDP and refugee camps, especially in Jordan and Lebanon, most often for sex, but also for the illicit trade of organs. Participants told us: *“We frequently hear stories about trafficking women in the camps. We have heard for two years and from different sources that some official authorities are complicit in it. However, we cannot verify this because we are denied access to the camps and also because we are unaware of the legal mechanisms; we cannot know whether the perpetrators are protected or not”*

Documentation is a huge challenge because women’s rights activists don’t have access to the IDP camps inside Syria and legal protection as well as trusted referral systems are missing. In words of participants: *“Women need access to camps and certain areas to check if there are no crimes. If we don’t have access, we will presume that there is harassment both in opposition held areas and in the IDP camps.”*

¹⁰ This view is reflected in research. See for example, UN inter-agency assessment, “Gender-based violence and child protection among Syrian refugees in Jordan, with a focus on early marriage” available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2013/7/report-web%20pdf.pdf> Also, Centre for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria showed that this problem has increased after displacement for numerous reasons, mostly the poor economic conditions and the altered nature of social relations (See: “Field research on the phenomenon of child marriage in displacement camps at the Syrian-Turkish border” available at: <http://goo.gl/UhGva9>). In addition, 60 percent of individuals who had previously refused early marriages expressed their acceptance after the war, especially in refugee camps (See: <http://www.msf.org.uk/article/syria-siege-and-starvation-in-madaya>).

- **Detention and forced disappearance**

“We have been fighting for our rights and our daughters will be fighting for our rights. It’s a difficult and long struggle”. Women’s rights advocate at the workshop in Beirut.

The regime has detained thousands of women since the beginning of the uprising, most of whom have been detained just for being relatives of those wanted by the regime and/or for their activism. The fate of many continue to be unknown.¹¹ In the words of participants: *“Detention centres in Syria are full of women hostages”.*

The major obstacle to the pursuit of justice is the continued denial of access to independent human rights observers inside Syria by the regime.¹² As such, it is difficult to obtain information and collect comprehensive data. One participant told us: *“Secret detention centres are a huge problem. We need access to these prisons. There are violations taking place there (...). It is our responsibility to push to get access to these prisons so that women can be visited. Let ‘s try to gain access to as many prisons as we can”.*

Detention, of course, constitutes a traumatic experience in the lives of women, even after release. Not only are they tortured, but they are also humiliated and dehumanised. The Syrian regime deliberately arrests women, knowing that this will bring shame to the entire family in a patriarchal society that confines honour to the bodies of women. There have been cases of woman being stigmatised for being raped in these prisons, leading to murders and even suicides. Detainees have also been treated as bargaining chips: in a recent case of a prisoner swap between the regime and the Free Syrian Army, 55 women detainees released from a regime prison were required to undergo televised interviews, which put them at further risk of violent retribution.¹³ In this situation many women are pushed to emigrate, but even in exile they struggle to find safe spaces, not least due to the host government's inadequate policies towards refugees and migrants.¹⁴

Finally, while most victims of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance are males, this has a great impact on women, who often lose economic security as a result. Women in this situation are forced to find paid work, in addition to their existing responsibilities for providing unpaid care including childcare and care for the elderly, to support their families and cover the expense of searching for their missing relatives. Also, while searching for their missing relatives they are often humiliated by the police and subjected to sexual exploitation by guards or security officers offering to “help”. In spite of these challenges, women remain determined to discover the destiny of their loved ones. They continue to mobilise and organise and in January 2017 they have formed “Families for Freedom” - a pressure group that works towards combating arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance through advocacy and direct action. During peace talks in Geneva in February 2017,

¹¹ International reports and local statistics show that 76 percent of the female detainees are detained in security branches and other secret detention places, while only 24 percent are in the central prisons, among which 83 percent are detained in Damascus central prison, Adra, regardless of where they are originally from. See for example: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Violations against woman in Syria and disproportionate impact of conflict on them, 2016 available at: <http://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/syria.pdf> and Fact Sheet about women’s detention in Syria, issued on the International Women’s Day 2015: http://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Sheet-Detention-of-Syrian-Women_ENG.pdf.

¹² The Syrian government continues to prevent the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (and other international human rights organisations) from entering its territory, as stated in several reports of the Committee. For example: A/HRC/30/48 and A/HRC/28/69 and A/HRC/27/60. The only international UN expert allowed into Syria was the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict to Syria in March 2015 (see the relevant section in the report).

¹³ http://orient-news.net/en/news_show/131825/0/Rasha-Sherbaji-Syrian-female-children-detainees-%E2%80%8Ereleased-from-Assad-detention-centres

¹⁴ See also: report by the Euro-Mediterranean Network for Human Rights (June 2015), which documents women suffering in detention facilities and economic, social and psychological impact of prolonged detention on the lives of women, available at <http://goo.gl/IPzLRD> and thematic paper by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic” (January 2016) available at <http://cutt.us/3N4Bo>

these brave women stood outside the UN building holding photographs of their relatives to remind the negotiators what was at stake.¹⁵

- **Sexual violence and challenges in international support**

“There is no peace without justice – it is not only about ISIS, it is about all parties [to the conflict]”
Women’s rights advocate at the workshop in Gaziantep

Sexual violence is prolific in Syria, mostly in the areas controlled by the regime but also those under the control of ISIS and other extremist groups.^{16,17} While it has received a lot of attention from the donors, participants pointed that ‘singling out’ rape from the whole spectrum of abuse (i.e. domestic violence, harassment, sextortion, and others) creates ‘hierarchies’ of violence and obscures the realities women and girls face.

Moreover, politicising sexual violence has also been discussed, especially by donors and with respect to the UN’s focus on crimes committed by ISIS over the ones committed by the regime and allied groups. *“Focus is on ISIS and radicalism”* one of the participants told us. *“Radicalism is there, it is true, but in any conflict we have a state which is supposed to maintain the security. The state is the main criminal and it is the one which signed all the treaties.”*

A clear example of such politicisation was evident during the visit of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict to Syria in March 2015. Despite the fact that many women, who the Special Representative had met suffered horrific sexual violence at the hands of the regime and its allies, public statements made by the SRSG during and after her visit focused entirely on the abuses perpetrated by ISIS.¹⁸ Four hundred women’s rights activists and human rights organisations responded with an open letter expressing their concern over this unbalanced approach.¹⁹ In the words of the participants: *“We need to find a way to address sexual violence without it being exploited for expedient ends (...) We do not want the issue to be neglected, but at the same time we do not want these women to be exploited (...) Many woman no longer talk about what they have been through due to politicization.”*

Participants also brought up the issue of the inconsistent approach including support of donors’ and international organisations to documentation: *“Since the beginning (...) we have received so many people, who came to document the violations. So far, we do not know the results or the destination of these reports.”* Regrettably, many women no longer want to share their experiences because they feel helpless.

There are also cases which have been brought to the media, such as the case of a young woman who was kidnapped from Syria and forced into prostitution in Lebanon.²⁰ Yet it was later dropped and

¹⁵ See for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/23/geneva-peace-talks-syrian-women-make-plea-find-missing-loved-ones>

¹⁶ Several international and national reports confirm the increased levels of sexual violence against women and girls. See for example: International Rescue Committee (IRC), Syria: A Regional Crisis, January 2013: <http://goo.gl/a8AoD5> ; FIDH, Violence against women in Syria: Out of Silence” (2013): <https://goo.gl/5HRIU> ; Human Rights Watch, Syria: Sexual Assault in Detention: Security Forces Also Attacked Women and Girls in Raids on Homes”: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/06/15/syria-sexual-assault-detention>.

¹⁷ With regard to the documentation of sexual abuse, the only documentation we have is of 7,500 women abused by the Syrian regime forces. We don’t have reliable data about abuse by other parties, but observation suggests the same pattern seen for killing and arrests, with a very high majority attributed to the Syrian regime. Source: Erosion of Jasmine, The Syrian Woman’s Suffering in Light of International Women’s Day, Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2015

¹⁸ See for example: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50794>

¹⁹ See: <http://www.alhayat.com/m/story/9787838#sthash.WTYBFDGn.dpbs> and <http://webtv.un.org/watch/zainab-hawa-bangura-srsg-on-sexual-violence-in-conflict-on-the-middle-east-press-conference/4223596145001>

²⁰ See for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/30/syrians-forced-sexual-slavery-lebanon>

justice was not sought. Participants told us: *“We don’t need new documentation [of sexual violence], we should demand using the files we already have, and inform survivors what is happening with their cases. Many of those whose rights have been violated no longer trust anyone. We should put pressure to bring these files into justice.”*

However, despite the challenging experience, the importance of documenting sexual violence and other forms of abuse has been stressed and recognised. But for documentation to work, and win back women’s trust, it must be properly researched, followed up, and conducted by Syrians themselves with the clear objective to bringing justice to the survivors.

- **Access to protection and support services**

Several participants voiced that support provided to the most affected VAWG survivors in Syria and refugee-hosting countries in the region, is limited in quantity and quality. This includes a shortage of funding, especially for safe shelters, limited accountability for results, a lack of gender markers, total absence of cultural sensitivity or specialised services to respond to the specific needs of certain groups, especially girls, widows, WHRDs and former detainees. Moreover, much needed psychosocial support is hard to come by, and sexual abuses of women and girls by aid workers do occur.

Concrete examples of such challenges were given. For instance, one humanitarian INGO put tents clearly marked ‘psychological support for women’ in the centre of camps with the effect of discouraging women from attending because of the fear of stigma. Participants also spoke about the case of a young volunteer working on a program to support internally displaced persons, who witnessed a 13-year-old girl being raped by a security officer. When he communicated this information to his supervisor he was told *“Please stop talking about it. We can’t do anything about it. We don’t need more trouble.”*

This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that the way in which IDP camps are designed may in fact increase the possibility of abuse, due to elements such as the vast distances between tents and bathrooms. This is unacceptable and demands urgent international attention.

Recommendations to the UK and international community

Adopt a comprehensive approach: raise awareness and speak up about VAWG committed by all parties to the conflict including the regime and its allies, opposition, ISIS and other extremist groups, and develop programming focused on both prevention and response to all forms of VAWG, not only rape and sexual violence. Prioritise women’s rights and respond to VAWG committed by the personnel acting under the auspices of international aid to Syria and advocate with other donors and international organisations to do the same. Link the UK’s response to VAWG with actions to support the protection of refugees, economic empowerment of Syrian women, and work towards a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Fund specialised programming: invest in a comprehensive approach to service provision (including provision of quality shelters, sexual reproductive health and psychosocial support) in Syria and neighbouring countries, and ensure that they reach the most marginalised women and girls, including former detainees. Strengthen accountability for results towards Syrian women and girls and ensure their democratic ownership by insisting on partnerships with local women’s rights groups, even if they are not officially registered. Support the creation of a central database of all services offered to women and girls in Syria and neighbouring countries to avoid repetition, ensure transparency, and identify gaps.

Support accountability and access to justice: provide long-term support to the documentation of VAWG and other human rights abuses by resourcing and strengthening capacities of Syrian organisations and WHRDs working in this field, allowing them to follow up on cases and to support survivors to access justice. Support creating a hub for all collected documentation. Apply political pressure on the Syrian government, including through the UN Security Council, to allow independent UN experts and Syrian WHRDs inside the country to monitor the situation. Ensure that access to justice for survivors of VAWG is at the centre of negotiations for a political solution to the conflict, leading to free democratic Syria.

Stand up for political detainees: apply political pressure on the Syrian government and its Russian allies, including through the UN Security Council, to allow independent monitors to access all prisons, and urge the regime to disclose the names and location and fate of all political detainees, granting them immediate release. Work with the UN to establish independent international mechanisms for prisoners' exchange and release, and together take action to hold accountable those responsible for arbitrary and/or mass arrests of woman. Support woman released from detention by, where appropriate, providing them with asylum, protection and relief programmes.

4.3. Institutions, Security, Justice and Legal Frameworks

“Security and justice mechanisms are almost absent, and where they are, they are male dominated” Women’s rights advocate at the workshop in Beirut

Discussion about security, justice and legal frameworks has been particularly challenging due to the general collapse of the rule of law in Syria, the ongoing conflict, militarisation, impunity, proliferation of armed groups, and a majority of the population seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. Though substantial elements of security and justice have been addressed in other parts of this report, arguments have also been made that as long as the conflict continues, there will be no stability, security, justice or peace. One participant told us: *“women feel that there is no right time to claim our rights because of siege and bombardment.”* A political solution to the conflict, which guarantees peace and accountability is paramount and international support is required for that to be possible. Nevertheless, the following issues were put forward for the attention of the UK and the international community:

- **Proliferation of weapons and impact of militarisation on woman**

In clear violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2139 issued on February 22, 2014, the Syrian government forces continued to launch systematic and extensive indiscriminate air strikes, throwing barrel bombs on civilian populated areas. The impact of explosive weapons on civilians is not confined to the number of victims only. They also have many indirect effects, including forced displacement, the erosion of social capital and the destruction of basic infrastructure, which in turn affects women distinctively and disproportionately. The insecurity caused by the use of explosive weapons in civilian populated areas undermines women’s social, political and economic participation in a society already suffering from discrimination, patriarchy and gender-based violence. This establishes a stereotype of women as victims in need of protection, rather than active agents in society and in conflict resolution. In addition, women are more likely to face stigma, persecution or marginalization by their husbands and families in the event of injury or disability. UK has been engaged in the increased militarisation of the conflict in Syria and the region, which has a

significant and disproportionate impact on women and girls.²¹

The use of explosive weapons hinders women's access to basic services including medical care. When unable to access emergency medical assistance, pregnant women are at risk of losing their own lives or their unborn children because of fear or severe haemorrhage resulting from explosive weapons. The World Health Organization reports that complications of pregnancy and childbirth kill approximately 830 women every day, making maternal death the second biggest killer of women of reproductive age.²² With explosive weapons being the main cause of the destruction of healthcare infrastructure, their use in populated areas can exacerbate the threat to women's health.

Individual small arms, which have been proliferating since the beginning of the conflict, pose a great threat of growing domestic violence, especially in an atmosphere saturated with tension and external pressures. In light of the low social and economic living standards due to the war (displacement, living in camps lacking basic needs, and poor income), women are usually the most affected by the acquisition of this type of arms. The report of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom on small arms and their impact on women points out that the presence of a such arms in a household will increase by five times the likelihood of turning spousal violence into murder.²³ On average, one third of women killed are murdered with a small firearm. The proliferation of individual arms increases GBV forms and manifestations already existing in a predominantly patriarchal society. This increases the vulnerability of women, especially in the absence of the rule of law.²⁴

- **Justice and the rule of law**

Security and justice apparatuses in Syria are variously controlled by the regime, ISIS and other extremist groups, or opposition factions. Each group has its own institutions, which are partial and ineffective to protect women and girls from abuse.

For decades, the Syrian government failed to guarantee women protection and equality. For over 30 years gender discrimination has been prevalent in the Personal Status Code, the Nationality Law, the Penal Code and the Civil Status Law. Participants have also spoken out against the regime's ongoing practices of setting up unconstitutional special courts, trying civilians in military field courts, confiscating personal property, and passing terrorism laws, which predominantly target peaceful activists. They have noted full immunity granted to members of the police, army and security services, which makes accountability under the current legal system impossible.

Outside the regime held areas, especially in areas controlled by ISIS and other extremist groups, *"tradition rules the situation now"*, with Shariah courts controlling all civil status cases. In case of a divorce, for example, a sheikh can decide to grant custody over children to the husband, and force the woman to get married to another man, while she has no access to a lawyer and limited power to defend herself. In words of the participant *"we have what we call 'Bermuda triangle' in ISIS areas (...). We know nothing about women there, how they live, and what laws there are."*

In other areas, for example those controlled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), there have been

²¹ WILPF: EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS AND THE RIGHT TO HEALTH, EDUCATION AND ADEQUATE HOUSING - EXTRATERRITORIAL OBLIGATIONS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM UNDER CESCROW REPORT TO CESCROW 58th SESSION (May 2016)

<http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Publications/wilpf-cescrow-uk.pdf>

²² See: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/en/>

²³ See: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Report: Women and Explosive Weapons available at:

<http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Publications/WEW.pdf>

²⁴ Ibid

cases of girls being kidnapped and forcibly recruited into military groups. Fear of such attempts has led many parents to stop sending their daughters to school, or move to Iraqi Kurdistan. Moreover, one participant shared a story of a pregnant Kurdish journalist being attacked when visiting her relatives in Qamishli. When her parents tried to press charges, they were told that it was her fault due to 'unfavourable reporting' on the PYD. Hence all justice and police institutions are controlled by the Democratic Union Party, no charges against the attackers were brought.

Moreover, legal challenges experienced by woman refugees in neighbouring countries, just like those faced by internally displaced persons inside Syria, are plentiful and elaborated upon in the next section of this report.

- **Response to terrorism and violent extremism**

Another challenge to security and justice is the rise of terrorism and violent extremism, which as participants have noted, is a surmounting problem in the areas controlled by ISIS and other extremist groups, but is also perpetrated by forces affiliated to the regime and conservative elements in the opposition.

With regard to the politics of the regime, participants noted that it has numerously used and abused the term 'terrorist' to pass authoritarian and unconstitutional agenda, and to crack down on protests and human rights defenders. Participant told us: *"Before 2011, we had the Emergency Law, then came the Anti-Terrorism Act, which is very broad and through which the regime can arrest any Syrian."*

Yet concerns have been shared that international efforts to prevent terrorism and violent extremism have been narrowly focused on ISIS only, which has led to the instrumentalisation of women's rights for the purposes of counterterrorism. Moreover, securitization of the work of local organisations has been observed, especially with regard to the counterterrorism financing policies leading to grassroots human rights groups having their bank accounts frozen and being unable to access crucial funding.

Participants emphasised that women's rights activists have led protests against all forms of extremism, from ISIS to the Assad regime - for which they paid a high price. The regime reportedly accused them of being 'terrorists' which, in the context of ongoing war, makes them a legitimate target. ISIS and other extremist groups attempted to suppress women's rights activism in its entirety, and conservatives within the opposition resisted the vision of women's rights in a free Syria. It is essential that international actors do not also instrumentalise or securitise the crucial work of WHRDs for expedient ends.

Recommendations to the UK and international community

Address the gender impact of militarisation and proliferation of weapons: Take additional measures to ensure the implementation of UNSCR 2139 (2014), and put pressure on the Syrian regime and allied groups to commit to stop the indiscriminate bombing with all kinds of weapons, especially explosive weapons, against civilian areas protected under the international humanitarian law. Exert pressure on the regime to allow international observers and human rights organizations to access areas of conflict in order to observe the situation closely and unconditionally, and to investigate the use of toxic gas in attacks against civilians. Pressure all warring parties to the conflict allow access to humanitarian aid, vaccines and relief crews to access all areas without being targeted.

In particular, UK must strengthen its policy coherence including by ending support to militarisation

of countries, which violate human rights, such as selling arms to Saudi Arabia, and establish a mechanism for rigorous, transparent, and gendered risk assessments of international transfers of arm and export licences by adopting national legislation and policies to this effect, developed in full consultation with civil society organisations, in order to fully implement the UK's obligations under International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Arms Trade Treaty. UK must deny authorisation of any arms sales or transfers when there is a risk that they would be used to commit or facilitate human rights violations and must lead international efforts to control sale of such arms by any member state to warring parties in Syria. UK shall introduce disarmament, demobilization and reintegration strategies that are inclusive and gender sensitive. UK and international community must hold states that are participating in armed activities in Syria to account through diplomatic and legal means including boycotts and sanctions

Support justice and equality in law for women and girls: Apply diplomatic pressure on the regime to stop using military courts in civilian cases, targeting activists with anti-terrorism laws, and lift he immunity to security forces. Publish condemnation statements against discriminatory rulings of Sharia courts. Use international treaties to review the discriminatory impact of laws inside Syria and hold perpetrators of violence and human rights abuses accountable, including through reparations for survivors. Invest in women's rights groups working on access to justice.

Embed the women's rights approach into countering terrorism and violent extremism: Review the gendered impact of counter-terrorism financing on grassroots women's rights groups and curb the administrative procedures that hinder their access to resources. Pressure relevant states to stop financing armed factions affiliated to the conflict in Syria. Support development of international mechanisms to report violations of the regime and other armed factions. Work towards developing mandatory mechanisms to enforce implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325, and related resolutions, towards creating arms control and monitoring mechanisms for disarmament during the transition.

4.4. Refugees and forced displacement

The number of registered Syrian refugees has exceeded 5 million and is on the rise.²⁵ More than 4.8 million refugees are currently seeking refuge in just 5 countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt)²⁶ and almost 9000,000 have applied for asylum in Europe.²⁷ In addition, at least 6.3 million people have been displaced inside Syria.²⁸ This often means moving from one open and insecure area to another, living in houses without doors or windows, or in badly equipped tents, in constant fear of bombardment. Women constitute more than 50 percent of refugees and internally displaced persons.²⁹

Syrian refugees suffer from poverty and deteriorating conditions, legal insecurity, limited livelihood and educational opportunities, declining aid, and increasing violence. Integration with host communities is not easy. One participant told us *"We are not integrating because we are still affected by a traumatic conflict. I cannot make any efforts because I am a victim of six years of continuous political violence. My family and I are still affected by it."*

The following issues have been brought to the urgent attention of the UK and the international community:

²⁵ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ See: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/asylum.php>

²⁸ <http://www.unocha.org/syria>

²⁹ UNHCR, February, 2016: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

- **Legal status**

“Laws targeting Syrians are exceptional and they are always changing.” Women’s rights activist at workshop in Beirut.

The processes of registration and acquiring legal status and residency permits have proven to be key challenge, following the journey from Syria, in a context where neighbouring countries have closed their borders, cut off vital escape routes and refused to register refugees, at times even sending them back to the war-torn country.³⁰ One participant told us: *“We need to push these [neighbouring] countries to consider them [Syrians] refugees. Jordan accuses them of being terrorists, in Lebanon they are invisible, and in Turkey they are guests.”*

While systems vary from country to country, high fees for obtaining residency permits, as well as registering birth, deaths, marriages, and other situational changes are all a common practice. *“[In Lebanon] For example, a refugee needs \$100 to register a marriage, \$50 to register a birth, and \$25 to register a death or to get a transcript of civil status record, while each refugee only gets \$27 a month from the UNHCR.”*

High fees in combination with the weak and inconsistent application of civil procedures within host countries, are stopping very many from having their status legalised. Many refugees lost their official documents during the journey and/or simply have no money to pay the fees. In Lebanon, the situation is further exacerbated by the system of ‘kafala’ (sponsorship), perceived by many as a form of modern-day slavery, which requires Syrians not registered with UNHCR to have a Lebanese sponsor to remain in the country legally. Consequently, sexual exploitation and violence against the most marginalised, including women and children, have been reported and there have been cases of refugees being deported when they spoke up.³¹

Furthermore, discriminatory personal status laws in Syria deny mothers the guardianship of their children and allow husbands or paternal family members to restrict their freedom of movement. In the case of disappearance of the husband, some women have been able to obtain guardianship for 3 months in order to travel out of Syria. But as a result of these laws, Syrian women, both in Syria and in neighbouring countries, suffer from complex administrative procedures that hinder them from managing their affairs, including preventing them from obtaining family civil registries, which is a requirement to receive humanitarian aid for their children.

Participants noted good practice in Jordan, where special courts were established to address refugees’ legal affairs, and recommended its replication.

- **Economic situation**

“There are no rights for Syrians in the Turkish labour market. The most vulnerable people are women, who came without their husbands, especially with care responsibilities. Often, they are abused, work long hours, are treated inhumanely and just have to put up with it” Women’s rights activist at the workshop in Gaziantep

Syrian refugees face significant, and at times insurmountable, obstacles to obtaining work permits and accessing decent jobs in host countries. This is especially true for women, who often have no previous work experience and lack educational qualifications, and face systematic gender

³⁰ See for example: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2016/04/turkey-illegal-mass-returns-of-syrian-refugees-expose-fatal-flaws-in-eu-turkey-deal/>

³¹ See for example: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/01/12/i-just-wanted-be-treated-person/how-lebanons-residency-rules-facilitate-abuse>

discrimination in the labour market. Moreover, Syrians are prohibited from performing certain jobs. In Lebanon, for example, refugees are only allowed to work in three sectors: construction, agriculture and cleaning - all known for their poor working conditions and poor rate of pay. Of the 26,000 work permits issued to Syrians in Jordan in 2016 (as of end of August), only two percent of permits were granted to female workers.³² Skilled professionals such as teachers and doctors are forbidden from working in the professions they were trained in, despite the pressure on public services.

Women, who become breadwinners because of their husband's absence (death, injury or military activity), face extreme pressure, which makes them even more vulnerable to physical and sexual exploitation. They are sometimes forced to provide sexual services in return for basic needs and protection. This situation is further exacerbated by limited legal literacy and a lack of residency permits and other legal documents, which discourages them from reporting experienced abuse.³³ Limited access to education and language barriers further increase women's vulnerability and marginalisation.

Participants noted efforts by donors and NGOs to provide vocational training, but they also expressed that a one-week workshop is insufficient to provide women with the skills required to compete in the labour market, especially in a context of extremely limited opportunities. They have also called for the implementation of the Jordan Compact,³⁴ agreed at the London donor conference in August 2016, and for more economic exchanges with refugee hosting countries in the MENA region to boost their economies.

- **Humanitarian aid and access to services for women and girls, refugees and internally displaced persons**

Humanitarian aid provided to the most vulnerable women and girls is insufficient and often does not respond to the specific and strategic needs of women and girls in the refugee and internally displaced person camps, especially those in areas under the regime control. There are only 3 agencies providing female internally displaced persons with relief (Red Crescent, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and the Syria Trust for Development affiliated with Asma Al-Assad³⁵). Organisations working outside the orbit of the regime face serious security challenges and operate under multiple limitations including funding and access, leaving a big part of the populations, especially those perceived to be affiliated with the opposition, in need of aid and services.

The situation in the besieged areas is catastrophic. According to participants, this is largely because the UN and other members of international community have not put enough pressure on the regime to let aid in. According to the 'Siege Watch' – quarterly report on besieged areas in Syria – the regime has been responsible for 98 percent of sieges between May and June 2016. However, participants also noted that armed opposition groups are applying similar tactics in areas under their control. For instance, Jaysh al-Islam and other armed groups have controlled humanitarian aid to maintain political and military influence.

Participants noted that women and girls continue to be exploited by relief workers in the camps, and urged donors to address the limited number of women in emergency relief teams. It is also well known that female internally displaced persons and refugees are often coerced into 'marrying' relief

³² https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp-from-words-to-action-syria-refugees-070916-en.pdf

³³ See for example: "I want a safe place": refugee women from Syria uprooted and unprotected in Lebanon - 2016 Amnesty International report: <https://goo.gl/3rTKnQ>

³⁴ <http://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/jordan-compact-new-holistic-approach-between-hashemite-kingdom-jordan-and>

³⁵ Asma al-Assad is the First Lady of Syria, married to the 19th and current President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad.

workers as a result of threats that they would stop providing aid to their families. On this subject, a participant shared the story of an internally displaced woman who had to lock her 14-year-old daughter in a room to protect her from abuse by the official in charge of the camp.

Refugee and internally displaced women also suffer from a near total absence of sexual and reproductive health services; many reside in informal camps, where they have infrequent access to service providers, and when services are available they are often understaffed, overcrowded, and lack specialist gynaecologists. Women often do not know where to go and have no access to transportation, and frequently, their relatives prevent them from seeking medical assistance for sexual and reproductive health issues.

Education opportunities and psychosocial support for girls, in particular those aged 12 – 15, are sparse and do not come close to addressing the needs of this population. One participant shared: *“Six girls have recently committed suicide in the countryside in Idlib, but the incident was kept secret.”* Situation is also very difficult for boys, who are out of school and in increased risk of being recruited by different armed fractions to the conflict.

This situation has been left to deteriorate further since Syrian organisations are unable to operate in Lebanon and Jordan due to legal constraints, and those operating inside Syria face huge risks. In the words of a participant *“Every time we visit our beneficiaries or implement an activity, we are risking our lives and their lives. It has become extremely frustrating and feels pointless. But then we remember the desperate situation of our beneficiaries, who have no one else to support them.”*

- **Routes to safety in Europe**

“As feminist movements we need to challenge the way how these women reach their destinations. They are not getting there in the right way. We always tend to speak about the culture, but in reality we are not that different. We are not integrating because of our affiliation to the conflict”
Women’s rights activist at workshop in Gaziantep.

Abuses against women and girls crossing the borders, the vast majority of whom are forced to do so illegally, are myriad and include threats, intimidation, looting, robbery, kidnapping, sexual harassment, rape, torture, murder, human and organ trafficking, to name but a few. Many refugees lose their lives on the way. The resources and capacities of neighbouring countries are exhausted, yet western countries, including the UK, are not stepping up.

The UK and other western countries’ reluctance to share responsibility and accept more refugees, and to ensure safe and legal routes to sanctuaries, was strongly criticised. Participants said: *“People have been displaced because these countries did not take action early. They have failed to contribute to the solution in Syria and have even helped complicate the situation further. Thus, they bear responsibility for those who had never expected they would become refugees.”*; *“All these powerful countries are trying to keep the Syrian people in their place. They are not helping, rather they are complicating things. Refugees are being instructed on issues of hygiene and sanitation, but what we need is political solutions. These powerful countries should work on that instead.”*

Participants also shared their concerns about resettlement programmes being too few and not targeting the most marginalised groups, such as former women detainees. The prevailing pattern is for men to reach Europe first, while women are left behind waiting far too long for family reunion, struggling to provide for the family. These programmes also discriminate on refugees’ sectarian and religious affiliation, which is shameful. Stories of divorce and abandonment have been shared, as well as a rise in those suffering from depression.

For refugees who manage to reach Europe, the journey has only just begun. Difficulties faced by newly arrived include challenges in obtaining legal status, identity issues, language barriers, having their educational and professional qualifications recognised, and limited job opportunities. One participant said: *“In Europe, the focus is on integrating in one and not another way - you are expected to join certain projects in order to integrate in a certain way.”* Many participants experienced humiliation, islamophobia, and hate, including in the UK, and called on western countries to open their borders and respect international human rights obligations.

Recommendations to the UK and international donors

Address root causes: Apply political pressure on the Syrian regime and its Russian ally to prevent and put an end to forced displacement inside Syria, and to push for a political solution, which would allow for a safe, dignified and voluntary return for refugees, with international guarantees to ensure their security.

Prioritise legal protection: Work with hosting countries in the MENA region to strengthen legal protection for refugees by setting up simple, accessible and cost-effective procedures to process valid documentation, residency, registration, and work permits, especially for the most vulnerable groups (single mothers, children, widows, and former detainees). Apply diplomatic pressure on host countries to stop all administrative procedures that hinder women’s access to documentation, including dropping the fees. Invest in legal aid for refugees and encourage host countries to set up special fast track procedures to solve refugee cases. Support host governments to provide decent work opportunities for women, and call upon them to end violence and exploitation of refugees at work, and to remove all legal and administrative barriers which prevent refugees from entering the labour market on just conditions.

Provide aid and access to services: Pressure the UN to change its funding and distribution channels when providing aid for internally displaced persons in Syria and hold it accountable for reaching out to the most vulnerable populations, including by setting up independent international and national committees to monitor distribution of aid and abuses against woman and girls. Prioritise investments and partnerships with local organisations in both Syria and neighbouring countries, regardless of their registration status. Continue supporting programmes working on education for girls, GBV response and prevention, sexual and reproductive health, and livelihoods. Address violations against women and girls by humanitarian aid workers. Strengthen coordination and accountability for results by applying gender markers to all supported programmes and share information about on-going projects with Syrian women’s rights activists.

Open borders and welcome refugees: change the narrative and position of the UK on the so called ‘refugee crisis’ and share responsibility by receiving a fair share of refugees. Significantly expand resettlement programmes and ensure they prioritise the most marginalised women and girls, including former detainees. Scale up access to legal and safe routes out of Syria and from neighbouring countries through family reunification, scholarships, and other employment based schemes. Ensure that training and integration programmes respect human rights, dignity and culture of Syrians. Sensitise hosting communities to refugees’ experiences, and take immediate and concerted action to address islamophobia and the rise of xenophobic and racist attitudes in the UK.