

# **What Does the Syrian Peace Process Tell us About the Involvement of Women in Peacemaking in Religiously Dominated Societies?**

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**WORD COUNT:** 14871

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

BiH	Bosnia-Herzegovina
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
DPA	Dayton Peace Agreement
FIDH	Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme / International Federation for Human Rights
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GWU	Syrian General Women's Union
HNC	High Negotiations Committee
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
ICAN	International Civil Society Action Network
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICRtoP	International Cooperation for the Responsibility to Protect
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IQd	Initiative on Quiet Diplomacy
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IWPR	Institute for War & Peace Reporting
LCC	Local Coordination Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
PCS	Peace and Conflict Studies
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Kurdish party)
SWIPD	Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy
SWL	Syrian Women's League
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
VAW	Violence Against Women
WAB	Women Advisory Board
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WPS	'Women, Peace and Security' Agenda

## ABSTRACT

Women have been prominent actors of the Syrian Uprising. When the conflict shifted towards a civil war, they were the firsts to suffer from the unleashed violence of the regime, of the opposition, and of terrorist groups such as ISIS. Convinced that the future of Syria is democratic and cannot be without women, they risk their life on a daily basis, providing humanitarian support and leading initiatives for peace at the community level. Despite their local success and the extensive literature demonstrating women's involvement's positive impact on achieving sustainable peace, they are still cruelly absent from Track I negotiations. What is striking is that women are excluded from the UN-sponsored Geneva peace talks, despite the UN having been working on the issue since the adoption of UNSCR 1325 20 years ago, and regularly arguing for women's participation in peace processes. Even if some progress has been made, its support is still clumsy, plagued by gender stereotypes and rather theoretical. By putting forward a narrative focused on women as victims, it obliterates the active role they have had since 2011, their leadership skills, their ability to gather people, to cross barriers between opposing sides and to bring new perspectives to the table. In talks dominated by male leaders and armed groups, following a negative peace concept, women negotiating the end of the violence when they are not fighting doesn't make any sense. In a patriarchal system, women being victims appears more believable than female leaders. Moreover, for a society such as the Syrian one, where the ruling regime has been influenced for decades by a religious establishment that affirms women's inferiority in every aspect of life, them being so visible, challenging gender norms, pretending to be men's equals and to have a say in decision-making regarding their country's future is unbearable.

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‘Allowing men who plan wars to plan peace is a bad habit.’  
Swanee Hunt, former U.S. Ambassador to Austria and the Chair of Women Waging Peace

‘Given that accords are often more successful and peace more likely to prevail when women are included, it’s baffling that women remain the largest group of stakeholders regularly excluded from official peace negotiations. It’s also illegal under international law.’  
Lisa Davis, Human Rights Advocacy Director at MADRE

‘in the kitchen or death’  
Slogan commonly used in Salafi-Jihadi circles to talk about women’s place

## INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Uprising started in March 2011, following up on the Arab Uprisings that started earlier in Tunisia. Soon enough, the peaceful revolution turned into an armed conflict between the Syrian regime, led by Bashar al-Assad, and the opposition, with terrorist groups in the margins trying to take advantage of the resulting chaos and foreign states interfering by supporting either one or the other side. The conflict has now reached its 10th year, causing one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 21st century. 20 million people are in need of humanitarian and protection assistance in Syria in 2021 (UNICEF 2021) and nearly 500,000 people have died since 2011 (France24 2021).

In 2012, one year after the start of the revolution, Kofi Annan, Joint Special Envoy for Syria, exercised his peacemaker role.

‘Peacemaking generally includes measures to address conflicts in progress and usually involves diplomatic action to bring hostile parties to a negotiated agreement. The UN Secretary-General may exercise his or her “good offices” to facilitate the resolution of the conflict. Peacemakers may also be envoys, governments, groups of states, regional organizations or the United Nations. Peacemaking efforts may also be undertaken by unofficial and non-governmental groups, or by a prominent personality working independently.’ (UN Peacekeeping, *Terminology*)

Kofi Annan invited the Secretaries-General of the UN and of the League of Arab States, the Foreign Ministers of China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, and the European Union High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy to meet ‘to identify steps and measures to secure full implementation of the six point-plan [for peace] and Security Council resolutions 2042 [on ceasefire monitoring] and 2043 [establishing a UN supervision mission in Syria], including an immediate cessation of violence in all its form.’ (Kofi Annan 2012). These representatives, constituting the Action Group for Syria, then proposed a roadmap to peace called the Geneva communiqué, which included women (Moore and Talarico 2015). UNSCR 2118, adopted one year later, called for a Syrian peace conference to be organized in Geneva in order to discuss options for peace, reconciliation, reconstruction and security (Moore and Talarico 2015). At Geneva II, in 2014, women were nowhere to be found. Between the Geneva I Communiqué and the start of the

Geneva peace talks, women's involvement seems to have been forgotten by the parties involved.

What is particularly striking when starting to research women's involvement in peace process is the gap between Track I, negotiations 'between states or political groups seeking independence, representation or control of the government' (Moore and Talarico 2015, 220), which Geneva peace talks are, and Track II, 'negotiations or processes that include non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private citizens and are considered to be more informal' (Moore and Talarico 2015, 221). In the latter, women are striving, creating and leading initiatives for peace in local communities. In the former, such as the Geneva peace talks, women are absent, or are there only for communication purposes rather than the meaningful contribution praised by the UN. It's a pity, as the Laurel Stone study (2014), quoted by Moore and Talarico (2015), shows that including women in Track I, whether as third parties representing civil society or as members of the armed parties' negotiating delegation, cease-fire's chances of success are increased by 24,9%. Including civil society, which women can be part of, in the negotiation and signing of peace agreements also reduces risks of conflict relapse by 64% (WILPF et al. 2013).

A diversity of actors around the table leads to a diversity of subjects on the table, and later on to a diversity of issues and solutions included in the pages of a treaty. When women are included, they bring to the table their own perspective, and their experience of the war will shape their conception of peace (Krause and Enloe 2015). The assumptions made on women regarding politicisation and character can play in their favour as it leads to warring parties considering them as honest and non-partisan individuals. This assumed neutrality, whether true or not, is an advantage in peace processes as it 'may grant [women] access to parties to the conflict denied to male leaders' (Tabbara and Rubin 2018, 3). Still, while the World Bank recommends more inclusivity in peace talks (WILPF et al. 2013), the 2012 UN Women's report gives us the following numbers: women represent only 4% of signatories to peace agreement, 2,4% of chief or lead mediators are women, 9% of negotiators are women. The work done by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and other women's organisations (2013) adds to these findings that 'Between 2000 and 2011, one in five peace agreements failed within the first five years; more flailed or failed within the first decade' (1).



What is happening between Track I and Track II, why are women prevalent in one and cruelly lacking in the other? Why is it still the case despite the international community being fully aware that an inclusive Track I is more likely to create sustainable peace? ‘Armed conflict is not a gender-neutral event’ (Moore and Talarico 2015, 221), yet peace still has to become gender sensitive. As O’Reilly et al. (2015), Goetz and Jenkins (2016) and Lethi (2019) pointed out, in the context of negative peace, when peace is conceived only as ending a conflict, it seems logical for mediators and third parties to invite to the table the people that are committing such violence, including male militia leaders. In comparison, women’s organisations are perceived mainly as passive victims of the conflict and are excluded from the negotiations on this basis. Negative peace implies a denial of the violence committed by these groups against parts of the population, including women (Goetz and Jenkins 2016). Given that ‘[t]he masculinist institution par excellence may be the military’ (Moghadam 2012, 51), peace talks revolving around warring parties are less likely to include women and are pretty clear on their position. For example, ‘in Syria ..., soldiers hold a central position in negotiations and they quite openly express that women are not needed and not welcome at negotiating tables’ (Lehti 2019; 167). Sharing Davis’ (2015) reasoning that ‘[e]xclusion from negotiations ... is undemocratic and only fuels instability and conflict renewal’, I argue that this reluctance to include women in ending a conflict is the result of gender stereotypes and values deeply embedded in religion and culture in peacetime, values that are translated into the Syrian law itself.

Existing research separately studies gender stereotypes, women’s involvement in peace processes, women’s local activism, women’s rights in the Middle-East and in the Syrian state, etc... This study, adopting a feminist approach, will highlight bridges between these topics and demonstrate that the limited role and space given to women in the Syrian peace process finds its roots in Syria being a religiously dominated society.

In Chapter 1, the methodology used to gather and analyse data for this dissertation will be presented. In Chapter 2, Syrian women’s current involvement in the Syrian peace process will be laid out, further emphasizing the gap between the local and the international level and challenging gender-biased conceptions of peace. The role played by the international community and more particularly by the UN in reproducing gender stereotypes in the Geneva peace talks will be discussed in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I will provide an overview of Syrian women’s participation in the uprising and explain how the militarization and radicalisation of

the revolution impacted them. In Chapter 4, it will be suggested that women's limited involvement in the peace process, in complete opposition with their prominent role in other aspects of the conflict, is only a logical reflection of a religiously dominated society whose ruling party, the Ba'athist party, traded gender equality for power.

## CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGY

This chapter will present the methodology used to answer the research question 'What does the Syrian peace process tell us about the involvement of women in peacemaking in religiously dominated societies?'. This dissertation is based on the content analysis of secondary data: articles, reports, resolutions, etc.; produced between 1998 and 2021 by a wide range of actors including gender and/or Peace and Conflict Studies (PCS) experts, feminist individuals or organisations, NGOs, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). A literature review was privileged over interviews due to time constraints and the inability to visit the field, situated in a highly dangerous war zone.

Overall, this work is part of the literature on the inclusiveness of peace talks and the demands for more civil society's representatives, including women, and for the deconstruction of gender bias still at play in peacemaking. The preliminary research I conducted showed an existing gap between the observation that there are not enough women in peace processes, repeated by many organisations and in many UN resolutions, and the statement acknowledging gender stereotypes as an obstacle to said involvement. Not enough was done to identify the people and entities carrying and reproducing these gender norms, even though they are often involved if not in charge of peacemaking. Such an identification cannot be made without acknowledging the fact that national culture and religion play a huge role in assigning men and women to specific roles, and that similar norms are reproduced at the international level. My research revealed another gap: a lot of studies are exploring women's working for peace in their community, others are looking upon women's being absent from international processes, unable to contribute to deciding on the future of a country at war. In this paper, I am explaining why women appear confined to a role of local actors, their legitimacy to be involved in high-level meetings still unrecognized despite the work of the UN and other NGOs. More specifically, through religious studies, I am looking for

explanations on the side of the governing regime itself, its institutional and juridic system, and the way it treats women and gender issues in peacetime.

The case of Syria was chosen for various reasons. First, the author has been conducting research on the Syrian conflict for a year prior to this dissertation which gave her an in-depth knowledge and understanding of its dynamics. Then, as an ongoing conflict that started ten years ago, its peace process has been evolving through time, which represents an opportunity to analyse evolutions and changes between different rounds of talks without having to compare different countries. Only previous research conducted in Bosnia-Herzegovina by the author herself will be used throughout the dissertation to draw comparisons between women's involvement twenty years ago, prior to UNSCR 1325, and now.

A choice has been made to leave the Kurdish movement out of this analysis as the Kurdish population is highly diverse, overlapping between different territories and, de facto, multiple cultures, religions and histories. The Kurds cannot be confused with the Syrian population and their perception of women's roles would not be representative of the broader context. The possible influence of the Kurdish women's movement on Syrian women is only mentioned in Chapter 2.

The French mandate on Syria will not be extensively discussed here either, as it is not the topic of this work but rather a subject that deserves an entire book, such as *The Arab State and Women's Rights: The trap of authoritarian governance* (Manea 2011).

On another note, the author chose to focus mostly on the Geneva peace process for Syria, which is sponsored by the UN and lasted longer than any other with a starting point in 2012. The UN being the international organisation with the most Member States (193), its scope of work and its influence potential regarding gender matters is critical in apprehending the last twenty years of evolution in this area and the current state of affairs.

Critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk 1993) is also used in these pages to enhance the importance of the vocabulary used in i) religion, with Islam being the major religion in Syria (in 2017, 87% of Syrian are Muslim according to the Central Intelligence Agency - CIA) and ii) officials texts and communication materials published by entities working on women and peace (i.e.: UN). The assumption here is that language is not neutral and rather has a double

dimension. On one side, it reflects the reality and the mindset of the writer/speaker, including internalised prejudices. On the other side, it shapes identities, social construction and perception.

## CHAPTER 2: WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN PEACE PROCESS

### **Syrian Women: Humanitarian and Peacebuilders in their Local Communities**

As often observed in war settings, the conscription of men, their departure for the front lines and, eventually, their death, leave space for women to organise themselves within their community. Being alone, at the head of their family, they must 'take on responsibilities that were once a man's domain' (Asad 2017, 118). Even if they are forced to step up by the context, because there is no one else to act at the local level, the absence of men does allow women to enjoy more freedom and autonomy, and they often discover themselves being as capable as men. Assuming new roles in the public sphere during the conflict and gaining new skills can 'stimulate a desire among women to take on even more unconventional challenges' such as peace activism (Goetz and Jenkins 2016; 212). This phenomenon can be observed in Syria (Krause and Enloe 2015), where women quickly became local agents of change, taking the lead on multiple initiatives by 'delivering humanitarian aid, documenting human rights violations and enabling mini-ceasefires to allow for the delivery of food and medical supplies' (Krause and Enloe 2015; 330). To do so, they often benefited from gender stereotypes, escaping security checks because of their assumed innocence for instance (Tabbara and Rubin 2018). Below, some concrete Syrian women-led initiatives, listed by Lisa Davis (2015):

'in [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] ISIL-controlled Deir Ezzor and the government-controlled Al-Hasakah, women are working to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers and small arms proliferation. In the contested city of Idlib women have organized discussion workshops on the links between Islamic principles and democracy. In Damascus, women are advocating for peace processes to include the political solutions laid out in the Geneva I Communiqué.'

Federica Marsi, writing for *The New Humanitarian* (2017), notes that Kurdish forces present in Northern Syria have introduced some measures to increase women participation. For

instance, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Rojava is promoting gender equality and power-sharing between men and women at the governmental level. It is likely that the adoption of such decrees influenced the broader Syrian society, as ‘groups of non-Kurdish women also reportedly created similar female popular assemblies in battalions in villages liberated from the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), including in Manbij and Raqqa’ (Marsi 2017). Even though analysts reportedly reject the hypothesis that the Kurdish model can be applied to the entire Syrian society, arguing that Kurdish people are not Syrian people but a distinct population, these are still indicators of Syrian women’s local involvement.

This type of participation, through local activities related to humanitarianism and peacebuilding, is not less political than any other (Krause and Enloe 2015). Contrary to Goetz and Jenkins’ (2016) theory, which states that a ‘decimation of women’s organizations ... typically takes place during [civil wars]’ (211), Syrian women’s organisations are numerous despite a 10-years long conflict. In the Syrian local peacemaking landscape, there are many women-led initiatives that have already started rebuilding tomorrow’s Syrian society while ‘connect[ing] between democracy, justice and gender equality’ (WILPF et al. 2013, 1). One year after the start of the revolution, 29 NGOs and 200 individuals gathered to create the Syrian Women’s Network, aiming at achieving inclusive democracy in Syria, a democracy that cannot happen without obtaining gender equality, new rights and freedom for women (Asaf 2017). Syrian women are demonstrating leadership skills, cultivating their knowledge and understanding of their environment. They are making groundbreaking progress in areas that, internationally, are still male-dominated. Indeed, at the local level, women have been proactive in the sector that ‘prevent[s] and counter[s] violent extremism (P/CVE)’ (Al-Khadi and Vale 2020, 248). The gender dimension of violent extremism is dramatically overlooked, and the role of women in this area has only been touched upon in 2015 with UNSCR 2242 (Al-Khadi and Vale 2020). Thanks to this local experience, these women are more than equipped to be part of any peacemaking and reconstruction effort in the future (Haddad 2014).

However, this type of involvement has its limits. Firstly, women’s emancipation is uncommon if not non-existent in areas controlled by traditionalists (Haddad 2014). In the Middle East, among other parts of the world, ‘Islamic movements sought to reinforce religious values, recuperate traditional social and gender norms’ (Moghadam 2012, 15). The

development of Islamic terrorism in certain zones of Syria is part of this phenomenon and already led to the application of an even stricter *shari'a*. ISIL, while restricting women's freedom, established 'a police force of women who patrolled Ar Raqqa streets fully armed, yet dressed according strict Islamic standards with niqabs, scarves that cover the head and face and only reveal the eyes' (Aljundi 2014, 30), manipulating women's involvement at its advantage. In the testimonies collected by Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR), the influence of the ISIL and its restrictions regarding 'women's code of dress and movement' (30) is also mentioned to explain the lack of women involved in the Ar Raqqa Council. In fact, some of these groups recently adopted a new strategy of normalization, with groups like Hayat Tharir al-Sham in the Idlib region cutting ties with terrorism in order to pacify relationships with other warring parties present on the Syrian soil. The long-term objective for these groups is to gain the right to be part of the future of Syria through negotiation, governmental structures, etc... In order to gain enough legitimacy for this to happen, these groups will likely have to soften their ruling. However, their Islamist foundation is likely to influence the way women are and will be treated and included in rebuilding Syria. Moghadam already expressed concerns in 2012 about 'whether Islamists movements are able to contribute to, and help consolidate, democratization that is also women friendly' (49). Only the future will tell us about the final impact of their integration within governmental structures.

In parts of Syria that are not and have not been under terrorist control, women are still 'regularly harassed, arrested, and exposed to defamation and the threat of being fired' because of their activism (Syrian Women's Forum for Peace 2012, 245). The Assad government itself is a threat for women activists, with many of them having been arrested and detained in regime's jails since the beginning of the conflict (Al-Khadi and Vale 2020). And because of the length of the conflict, '[there is no real] political process in Syria right now for either men or women to emerge from as political leaders' (Marsi 2017). Besides, the Syrian conflict has led to millions of people fleeing the country, forced to exile to avoid torture, jail, death... A large part of the civil society, including women groups and their leaders, fled Syria in fear of the regime's repression. They now have to pursue their action from afar, losing the advantage that their local anchorage originally gave them (Krause and Enloe 2015).

Another obstacle is the reluctance of electors and of male local leadership to trust and to cooperate with women and women's organisations. Syria counts 427 Local Coordination

Committees (LCCs), also called local councils, which are local governing bodies created around 2012 to mitigate the chaos created by the conflict (Aljundi 2014). Observers say that there is a ‘tendency to elect men with connections to certain families or ethnic groups’ within these local councils (Marsi 2017), and this tendency seems to apply to women too, when and if they’re considered for election. According to Mariam Jalabi, member of the Women’s Advisory Committee at the UN and director of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces’ Representative Office, women are also likely to be considered for election if men consider them as non-threatening (Marsi 2017). Even though some councils were created by existing women’s groups such as Gosin al-Zaytoun (created in October 2012 and headed by Dr Jumana Aba Zaid), the IWPR report (2014) notes that overall LCCs ‘lack the presence and participation of women’ (11), with women’s contribution being limited to humanitarian work. Another example is brought to us in the UN-commissioned report *Women on the frontlines of conflict resolution and negotiation* (2018). The report mentions the city of Zabadani, in the Rif Dimashq Governorate, that came under siege in 2012. A women’s organisation named Damma tried to organise a safe zone in the city and to negotiate a ceasefire between the opposition and the regime forces. The group organised demonstrations and quickly got designated as ‘the women working on de-escalation’ (Tabbara and Rubin 2018). Its members worked for months to negotiate a deal, and finally managed to secure a safe zone for civilians. However, this zone quickly got unsafe again and was abandoned due to abuses committed by the warring parties. Damma then moved on to negotiating a ceasefire, in 2014. These women did the work, built a network within the military, got the support of official mediators, drafted a deal and ‘formed a women’s committee to facilitate a ceasefire agreement’ (Tabbara and Rubin 2018, 10). The final objection didn’t even come from their interlocutors for negotiation, but from the local council itself:

‘[Zabadani’s] local council, which was concerned that the Damma committee lacked the experience and clout needed to influence the Government ... chose instead to establish a group of all male community elders to act in their place. Sidelined by the council’s decision, the women watched as the elders’ committee struggled and ultimately failed to reach a successful agreement’ (Tabbara and Rubin 2018, 10)

This example shows the extent to which gender stereotypes can spoil an opportunity for peace. It shows that clichés about women have been so internalized that they override simple

logic and can be put above creating the right conditions to end violence. We will never know what the outcome of the negotiation would have been were Damma's committee involved until the end, but it does not sound extravagant to imagine that having around the table the very people that worked on the topic for months, getting to know the subtleties of the process by heart and more than anything creating trust-based relationships with other actors involved, would have increased the chances of success.

Despite the above mentioned challenges, Syrian women and feminist as a broad movement are still challenging patriarchal norms, defined in Al-Khadi and Vale (2020) as 'the system of familial and societal customs whereby "biological dominance of male[s is] translated in[to] their dominance in general societal activities and projected in local culture"' (252). Tackling gender stereotypes aims at achieving gender equality for all. To do so, feminists argue that personality traits usually attributed to either men or women are only the result of a social construction, rather than attributes depending on gender itself, and that it should not be assumed that women are for instance fragile, sensitive and obliging, while men are strong, determined and dominating (Tabbara and Rubin 2018). Yet, the reasoning behind campaigns for the involvement of women in peace processes often appeals to women being softer, less aggressive and warlike than men, having social qualities that would be useful when intervening in peace talks, presenting women as a group of individuals born to be mediators (UN Women 2017). It is admitted that, thanks to their positioning as local activists, women are indeed closer to the population and more aware of their direct needs regarding health, protection, human rights and social justice. Women, however, are not natural caretakers or peaceful individuals by nature (Tabbara and Rubin 2018), they have been limited to this type of role and character by a patriarchal society which considers that war and the negotiation of its end should be the concern of a men-only club. As a result, '[women's] early organizing at community levels has not easily translated into a voice at the international level, or among key parties to the conflict.' (UN Women 2017).

### **The Difficult Task of Mirroring Women's Local Involvement at the International Level**

While civil society, including women's organisations, often and successfully acts as a mediator at the local level between armed groups (Krause and Enloe 2015), this capacity is not reflected throughout the spectrum of peace processes. Women's organisations' work, as well as their claims, have been overlooked by the international community, and many



women's organisations have been dismissed as non-relevant at the international level, often because of working at the community-level. Being closer to the population, working on the ground directly in contact with people suffering from the conflict, should be an advantage. It should be perceived as an added value by actors involved in the peace process as the opportunity to draft a peace plan in line with the population's needs. If Syrian women were indeed invited to join the Geneva talks, not only to be there but to meaningfully contribute to the discussion, '[i]t would protect local agreements from the dangers of outside interests and more faithfully represent a ground-up approach, which nurtures sustainability' (Davis 2016). Indeed, many local issues, such as disputes over lands or access to water, can fuel tensions that in turn adds up to the broader conflict (Tabbara and Rubin 2018). Only people that are on the ground dealing with these issues on a daily basis can accurately translate the importance of these topics and defend the population's best interests. Otherwise, deals negotiated during peace talks without involving women's organisations and the broader civil society may end up being more harmful than helpful and in complete opposition with what has been asked by the Syrian population.

Without women at the table, issues such as sexual violence are often not discussed, and by consequence not included in the resulting agreement (UN Women 2012). Addressing conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) is a matter of social justice, without which a society is likely to build up resentment, as well as a matter of reconstruction, with the affected population (women victims like men victims) often in need of psychological or even physical support to deal with the traumatism.

Women's capacities are underestimated, if not ignored, hence they are underrepresented in high-level meetings and international processes. Yet, Tabbara and Rubin, in their 2018 report for UN Women, note that, because of their extensive suffering during a war, 'it is believed that women are more willing to negotiate [than men] and, by extension, better able to reach sustainable solutions with opposing parties' (iii). Coupled with this assumption is the following fact: women have been organizing themselves since the beginning of the conflict, organizing international conferences and meeting to exchange with other groups, women from other countries, to discuss strategies to end the conflict and plans for the future of Syria, to come up with proposals for the parties to the conflict. It started as soon as 2012, with the Syrian Women Making Peace conference in Cairo, Egypt (Syrian Women's Forum for Peace 2012), while Geneva I was starting without any women involved at any level (Asaf 2017).

The Syrian Women's Forum for Peace has been developing a national plan to implement Resolution 1325 in Syria since 2014 at least. Tired of waiting for an invitation from the international community, women have been working hard on their side.

Even when invited, their scope of action is limited. Women participation is considered negotiable rather than mandatory, therefore a seat at the table is not guaranteed and in fact clearly depends on the good will of other parties. For instance, the Women Advisory Board (WAB), created by the UN special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura, 'just has an advisory role, its influences on negotiations are limited and up to official participants' decision' (Lehti 2019; 169). Moreover, the WAB is suspected of being composed mainly of pro-regime members (Asaf 2017) and of women from a Syrian elitist social class (Tabbara and Rubin 2018). While the objective was to improve women's participation in the peace process, the WAB is not representative of Syrian women and has limited access to peace talks taking place in Geneva (Marsi 2017). Women's participation is often similarly instrumentalised by parties to the conflict rather than being seen as a real opportunity for change. I will take the case of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), whose reaction to the creation of WAB was to create another advisory committee on women, its own, rather than by taking interest in gender and inclusivity issues and nominating women directly within its team. Women remain on the consulting side, stuck far from the negotiation table.

Regarding the Geneva II peace talks (22 January 2014, 23-31 January 2014), feminist organisations praised 'that the UN and the Arab League of Nations meaningfully include women civil society representatives ... [but] civil representatives were not invited to the negotiating table and Syrian women activists remained excluded from the talks' (Krause and Enloe 2015; 329). This relates to a broader issue that has been repeatedly pointed out in the last years: Syrian peace talks have not been and still are not inclusive enough. In a conflict, the main parties identified and invited to the table usually do not represent the whole population (Lehti 2019), and it is particularly true for the Syrian conflict. Being a highly fragmented conflict, it is difficult to first identify relevant actors for negotiation and then to convince predominant ones to tolerate apparently 'secondary' actors around the table, which women are considered being a part of.

Limited to the margins of Geneva II, Syrian women from the civil society still managed to meet with multiple officials, including 'state delegations, the European Union foreign minister Catherine Ashton, staff from UN Women, ... international non-governmental

organisations' (Klause and Enloe 2015; 334). Even though they were not invited at the negotiation table, they made the trip to Geneva to vocalise their will to be part of the official peace process, as well as to share their ideas for the future of their country. They were told by these representatives that 'It's too early. You're not ready. You aren't organized. You don't have a plan to bring peace.' (Klause and Enloe 2015; 335). Davis (2016) characterizes this type of reaction as a 'fai[ure] to recognize the critical work of ... women's rights groups'. This line of reasoning demonstrates a lack of knowledge regarding Syrian women activists, the work they have been doing for the past years, the proposals they have been working on with other parts of civil society. Indeed, initiatives such as the Syrian Women's Charter for Peace, or NGOs such as Madani, have been drafting recommendations and plans for peace in Syria, with concrete measures, for years now (Klause and Enloe 2015). The working group composed by WILPF, International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), Human Rights Watch, Kvinna till Kvinna, Oxfam and DemocraShe, in December 2013, published a list of action points titled *Ensuring the Effective Participation and Rights of Women in the Syrian Peace and Mediation Process*. One idea was to build on women's capacity to cross barriers between groups, cultural and religious barriers. This would have been done by creating an Independent Women's Delegation, acting as 'a third party, comprising an all-women independent delegation, with equal rights and responsibilities to participate, negotiate, and determine the agreements and pathway to the future' (2). Let's consider this proposal from the warring parties' point of view. The war already led to the emergence of new leaders with bold ambitions among militias, military men, etc... Giving space and visibility to another group of people, hereby women, would create an opportunity for a new leader to emerge, a potential threat for the numerous groups already competing for Syria's governance.

Among the working group's proposals was also the systematic presence of women representatives within negotiating delegations, raising gender awareness among negotiators and mediators, calling on gender experts and reports to provide analytics tools and data relative to issues discussed in peace talks, creating an 'Independent Civil Society Forum with a Fair Representation of Women' (3), appointing an 'additional Special Envoy or Joint Mediator ... ensuring the dialogue with civil society and women is an integral part of the [peace] process' (5). This document, published more than a month before the talks took place, was ignored.

Women are also a scarce part of the negotiating delegations themselves. In 2015 ‘the delegation of the Assad regime included two women and the opposition delegation sent three women representatives’ (Krause and Enloe 2015; 329). Two years later, for the Astana peace talks (January, February, March, May, July, September 2017), the HNC sent two female representatives against none on the side of opposition military delegations (Marsi 2017). Women, as well as feminists organisations, are not only asking for a woman to be seated at the table. In Syria, they are asking for various women that are representative of Syrian women on the ground, that share their experience of the war and of peacebuilding, women that are not only given a seat but also the opportunity to speak at said table (Krause and Enloe 2015). And it sounds only logical that the UN, sponsor of the Geneva peace talks, leading the WPS agenda, should be the one pushing for such representation.

### CHAPTER 3: INVOLVING WOMEN IN TRACK I NEGOTIATIONS: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Following the conflicts in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, feminists movements and individuals worked towards integrating gender issues into the international community’s agenda (Goetz and Sandler 2020). In 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC or ‘the Council’) adopted resolution 1325, focusing on women-in-conflict. This resolution, logical follow-up to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), constitutes an ‘internationally recognized legal framework for promoting gender equality and addressing issues affecting women’s peace and security at the local, regional and internal levels’ (Dharmapuri 2011, 56). It is often presented as an historic moment for women and international peace and security (Shepherd 2020, Dharmapuri 2011, Bell and O’Rourke 2010), as it was the ‘the first time the Council had debated the gendered effects of conflict and the gendered exclusions in conflict prevention’ (Shepherd 2020, 315).

Through UNSCR 1325, the UN did recognize the issue of representation and women’s right to participate in peace processes. This institutional affirmation goes even further. Since the 2000s, the UN officially acknowledged, through multiple resolutions, that 1) a peace agreement is more likely to be reached if and when women are included and 2) long-lasting peace is more likely to be achieved if and when women are included. Alongside the participation of the broader civil society, women’s meaningful contribution has been identified as crucial for ‘economic recovery, political legitimacy and social cohesion’

(A/69/968-S/2015/490 2015, 20), all supposed to limit the risk of relapse. Apart from resolutions, inclusiveness and gender have been integrated into many other UN documents: the *UN Guidance on Mediation* (2012), the *UN General Assembly Resolution on Peaceful Resolution of Disputes* (2011), the *CEDAW General Recommendation 13* (2013), the *UN Seven Point Action Plan* (2010)... Studying peace agreements including a UN third party, Bell and O'Rourke (2010) found that 'the post-1325 references to women were more marked in [these] agreements' (958). They also found that the rise between pre- and post-1325 agreements mentioning women was more marked in agreements including a UN third party. Women are indeed systematically involved on paper, and the adoption of such a high number of resolutions related to women-in-conflict can be perceived as a proof of the long-term engagement and political will of the Council (Bell and O'Rourke 2010).

But isn't the multiplication of resolutions, papers, reports, decisions, since the adoption of the CEDAW (1979) a sign that in practice progress is still to be made? That the objective of systematic and meaningful involvement of women in peace processes has still not been reached, in 2021? Even though the positive and crucial impact of women's involvement has been demonstrated again and again over the last twenty years (Dharmapuri 2011, Paffenholz et al. 2016), the Council's engagement with both women and gender is fundamentally limited. The adoption of UNSCR 1325 was only the beginning of a long lasting discussion at the Council around women-in-conflict, and the engagement of this major body of the UN and its members is still way behind feminists' aspirations. The UN Women, in a report published in 2012, also recognized the lack of states' efforts to push for women's substantial and meaningful participation leading to a 'troubling gap between the aspirations of countless global and regional commitments and the reality of peace processes' (UN Women 2012, 1). Women are still underrepresented and overlooked in this area, more than in any other, and Syrian peacemaking is no exception. The consequences of such a phenomenon go far beyond the peace agreement itself: the exclusion of women will affect their living conditions within the involved country or countries for years to come (UN Women 2012).

UNSCR 1325 represented undeniable progress. However, its significance has been distorted. As the 2010 report of the UN notes, the 'substantial representation [of women]' (15) has been traduced by many in the international communication by 'women being there' rather than 'women being there and contributing to the discussion'. This way of thinking further endorses gender equality as a bonus rather than a requirement, even years after UNSCR

1325's adoption (Mlinarević and Porobić 2019, 176). Paffenholz et al. (2016) emphasized that '[w]omen's inclusion is still only seen as a normative obligation, rather than a beneficial or necessary feature of peace processes' (55). Hence, women are still facing challenges, indifference and rejection when vocalising their will to be involved, in particular from political and military elites (Paffenholz et al. 2016). At the end, '[i]t is the level of influence that women can assert on the process that makes a difference', they wrote, 'not only their presence by numbers [at the negotiation table]' (55), and it is the role of the UN to clarify this point. Moore and Talarico (2015) perfectly summarise the paradox between what the UN says it supports, and what the UN actually supports:

'The 2002 United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) report, *Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peacebuilding*, recommends that women be represented at the negotiating table, making up at least thirty percent of those present. ... If the thirty percent quota is a true U.N. requirement, why then are Syrian women being excluded from representation in the Geneva II peace negotiations, which are U.N.-backed peace talks? '

Besides, due to the very nature of the UNSC, it doesn't have a coercive power over UN member states, which fundamentally restrain the impact of its Resolutions (Goetz and Sandler 2020). 'UN Resolution 1325', wrote Dharmapuri, 'was passed under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, not Chapter VII which invokes coercive enforcement and penalties for noncompliance' (2011, 57). Let's add that the points mentioned in the Preamble are 'not binding or actionable, unlike the numbered operative paragraphs' (Shepherd 2020, 327), and suddenly the meaning of the text is more symbolic than real. These procedural aspects have been argued to diminish the resolution's power of influence, as well as the Council engagement with women in conflict.

I argue that the limitations to UNSCR 1325 go beyond procedural considerations and touch upon the reproduction, whether deliberate or not, of gender stereotypes by the international community. Sure, on paper, the involvement of Syrian women is supported by the international community. In practice, however, this support stays rhetorical and diminished by the mirroring of gender norms and roles. Mediation teams, third-parties and facilitators severely lack training and awareness (Initiative on Quiet Diplomacy - IQd 2020), which

reflects on the way they communicate and negotiate as well as on the final result of peace talks, with the ‘Women, Peace and Security’ (WPS) agenda often being left out. Women are excluded from negotiations, they ‘face discrimination and security concerns’ when asking to be part of the official peace talks (IQd 2020, 28), as if they were less trustworthy than the men invited to the table. In the case of the Geneva peace talks, ‘[women’s] participation has been conflated with that of the opposition and relegated to vague promises that women will most likely be included on the government side as well’ (Davis 2016), as if the topic was secondary and non-relevant. As reported by Davis (2016), ‘[s]ome have gone as far to dismiss women as too “emotional”’, reproducing the wildly popular gender cliché according to which women are less capable of managing their emotions than men are. The fact that women ‘are not granted adequate protection’ either (IQd 2020, 28) tells us that their action as local peacemakers and humanitarian, and the risks they’re facing by being so visible, are not taken seriously by the international community. This lack of protection can discourage women from asserting themselves, from traveling to the country where talks are taking place and from claiming the seat they deserve at the negotiating table. And if women are not on site, close to the peace talks, it becomes easier to dismiss them.

To encourage gender equality in the Syrian peace process, the UN Women launched the “It Takes a Woman” campaign in parallel to the Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region (4-5 April 2017) to ‘raise the public profile of Syrian women activists who are involved in formal and informal peace processes, and to influence public debate on Syrian women’s right to participate’. The objective was to encourage the international community attending the conference to acknowledge women’s added value in peace talks and actively support their participation. One issue can be mentioned here, which is the use of the word ‘woman’, singular. The use of this terminology suggests that there is one typical Syrian woman, or one homogenous group composed by the Syrian women. Women around the world are multiple, with multiple identities, and the same is true for Syrian women. Lehti (2019) argues that women, including Syrian ones, can’t be treated as one homogenous group and therefore can’t be represented by only one entity such as WAB, due to the diversity among Syrian women (i.e.: religious affiliation, experience of the war, geographic location, political affiliations, interests, aims, modes of action, etc.). According to Lehti, there is no such thing as ‘the Syrian woman’ but rather multiple ones, multiple individuals. Denying their diversity and the wide spectrum of their experience and objectives would ‘only undermine processes that aim to build inclusive peace’ (169). In addition, it is not excluded

that ‘women - like men engaged in the peace process - start to use dialogue processes merely for satisfying their own political ambitions’ (169).

The paradox here is that (some) women activists are advocating in the name of all Syrian women, presenting themselves as the group that have the capacity to and should be the one to ‘rise above any political affiliation’ and bring peace (UN Women 2017). In fact, this is not really a paradox as it must be understood as it has been written by UN Women (2012), which encourages the creation of a broad coalition of women’s organisations and activists to act as a third party to the negotiation, in order to count and represent as many women, experiences and contexts as possible. Following this model, the Syrian Women’s Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD, created in 2013) is a ‘network of civil society organizations from inside and outside the country’ (Leimbach 2016), including women from both the opposition and the regime. SWIPD asked to be a formal Syrian delegation at Geneva III, the peace talks organised in February 2016. While Staffan de Mistura insisted that women needed to be part of the Syrian peace process, his team published an article two months before the talks, explaining that, in order to gain their seat at the table, women’s organisations ‘needed to control their emotions’ (Leimbach 2016). This article is reproducing gender stereotypes by completely ignoring the fact that men too can lose control of themselves while reminding everyone that only women can be accused of being unprofessional for doing so, because of their lack of perceived legitimacy (Leimbach 2016). Staffan de Mistura’s team managed to demonstrate the extent to which negotiators and mediators lack gender training and awareness. Please note that the talks got suspended after three days of negotiations, with the negotiating teams never being in the same building at the same time and disagreeing even on ‘[t]heir conditions for engaging in negotiations... : the opposition wanted sieges lifted and prisoners released, the Syrian government played for time, asking for a written agenda and a full list of participants’ (BBC 2016). In December 2015, the Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura declared “Women’s leadership and participation in conflict resolution are critical for sustainable solutions. The engagement of women in shaping the future of Syria is more important now than ever before” (Davis 2015). Then, when the talks resumed on March 2016, in Geneva, numbers finally shown some progress regarding Syrian women’s presence: each negotiating team included 3 women out of 15 members, 2 out of 34 members of the HNC were women, and Staffan de Mistura has 12 Syrian women and 1 international gender advisor on his side (Williams 2016). Once again, these figures should be considered



cautiously, as being present doesn't mean to make a substantial contribution nor does it mean being heard and listened to.

The indicators of success for peace talks, or for a peace agreement for that matter, are not oriented towards sustainability. There is no obligation of results, which would be something like 'long lasting peace and no renewed conflict in the next 5 years'. Instead, there is only an obligation of means, which equals to bringing warring parties to the table and to signing the agreement (Davis 2016). Consequently, the presence of women's rights organisations doesn't appear necessary. A difference is made between women representing civil society and women affiliated with one party to the conflict or the other. The latter is considered more legitimate by officials, as she can be truly labelled as a belligerent, someone carrying and understanding security issues rather than human rights ones (Davis 2016). However, the major part of women peace activists has been automatically linked to the opposition, which, after ten years of conflict, 'has come to mean different things to different geo-political actors' (Davis 2016) and it undermines their potential as agents of change.

In the meantime, on the international scene, and more particularly with peace talks such as the Geneva ones, reigns the idea that 'promoting women's capacities to act autonomously might actually exacerbate conflict.' (Goetz and Jenkins 2016, 212). In the words of the UN itself:

'[There is] a long-running perception [among official mediators and negotiators] that women's participation and the inclusion of gender issues can be detrimental to the success of peace negotiations ... However, nothing indicates that women's demands would be less amenable to discussion and negotiation than many other provisions that are routinely included in the text of peace agreements' (UN Women 2012, 26)

Admittedly, the support of the international community to women's participation can have a counterproductive effect in certain situations where it is perceived as a Western agenda being imposed on the parties. As a result, 'it may end up undermining women's roles when they're not perceived as legitimate power brokers' (Lehti 2019, 167), which would certainly be harmful, but peace talks have reportedly never failed because of women (UN Women 2012). Nonetheless, because of this misconception, mentions of women in negotiations as well as peace agreement's measures concerning women can be limited. Third parties and mediators

will primarily focus on avoiding contradicting the religion, the traditions and the resulting gender norms of one or more of the parties to the conflict.

The extent to which the positioning of the UN and the broader international community impacts women's involvement in peace processes is up to debate. O'Reilly et al. (2015) suppose that many Western countries have seen their influential power decrease lately, undermining their ability to push for the involvement of women in peace processes affecting other countries. Their paper also invokes 'a deeper resistance to change and a reluctance to share power ... - particularly on the part of the conflict parties themselves' (1). On their side, Goetz and Jenkins (2016) reaffirm the responsibility of the international community and 'argu[e] that increasing women's "participation" in peacebuilding requires international actors to provide specific resources and opportunities that make the exercise of genuine agency possible ... It also requires the development of mechanisms to hold international actors accountable for the intensity with which they fulfil their commitments in this regard' (213). The UN Women report (2012) also points out the responsibility of the UN and its Member States regarding incentives, accountability and guidance.

In the following chapter, I will consider the victim status Syrian women inherited from the war and the way the UN has contributed to the dominance of this victim narrative, overlooking the prominent role of women in the 2011 revolution.

## CHAPTER 4: WOMEN IN THE CONFLICT: VICTIMS BEFORE ACTORS?

### **The Patriarchal Reflex to Essentialise Women's Victim Status**

Women and girls are the first victims of the Syrian conflict. They bear a multi-faced burden that endangers their rights and reinforces pre-existing gender inequalities (UN Women 2017). The impact of the 10-years long war on the legal system leads to a lack of personal documentation and issues regarding access to legal assistance and services. Syrian women are undeniably and 'particularly at risk in accessing inheritance, property, and child custody (UNOCHA 2019, 17). Due to the involvement of men in the conflict and its risks (death, injuries, disappearance, etc.) women are more likely to become the head of their household, taking on new responsibilities and roles that are not in line with traditional norms. By doing this, they are carrying an economic burden and are 'struggling to ensure livelihoods for themselves and their families' (UNOCHA 2019, 23). According to the 2019 UNOCHA

report, not only do women now represent 51% of the population against 49% prior to the conflict, but they also represent 57% of displaced persons (both refugees and internally displaced persons, the latter being known as IDPs) and 72% of people in need of health assistance in Syria. These women are particularly vulnerable as they ‘are facing sexual and gender-based violence [GBV], early marriage, overwhelming economic strife, and psychological scarring caused by a war that seemingly has no end’ (Asaf 2017, 112).

With conflicts, militarization, peer pressure and women perceived as strategic tools, women are getting more and more vulnerable. Systematic violence against women (VAW) has been used by both the Syrian regime and the rebels (Nasar 2013): feminists activists are targeted, women are kidnapped in order to be exchanged for prisoners, women are raped as a war trophy, as if men had won the right to do whatever they want with their body. It has been demonstrated that ‘war and war-making reiterate and project conceptions of womanhood and manhood’ stereotypes (Maktabi 2017, 7), which can be observed in the following example. Since the beginning of the war, the regime gave more authority and freedom to the security branch, already known for its violence and abuse of power, while civilians were left unarmed :

‘arms became the sole source of power and justice. And while they are only available to men, Syrian women were left with no power or protection and had to retreat quickly from being active right-bearers into subjects in need of protection by men, reaffirming masculine stereotypes that harms men and women alike.’ (International Cooperation for the Responsibility to Protect - ICRtoP 2015, 3)

According to statistics presented by Boylan (2019), ‘the number of women and children killed [in a conflict] is around 56% of the total casualty number’ (31). As a reminder, VAW in war time also includes what the UN calls CRSV which can be ‘rape, forced impregnation, forced sterilization, forced abortion, forced prostitution, sexual exploitation, trafficking, sexual enslavement, forced circumcision, castration, forced nudity or any other form of sexualized violence’ (Henn 2019, 17), which have been on the rise lately (WILPF 2020).

The rise of GBV that came with the conflict adds up to women’s vulnerability, especially for refugees and IDPs (UNOCHA 2019). GBV has been seen in conflicts and even included in warfare strategies for a long time now (Asaf 2017), even though the first conviction for the

use of rape as weapon of war was only pronounced in 2016 by the International Criminal Court (ICC), against former Congolese vice-president Bemba (UN News 2016). Regarding Syria, in 2013, the Lancet journal pointed out that ‘6 000 women had already been raped in only 2 years of conflict, and that it was happening at checkpoint, detentions centres, and during military raids’ (1858). There, GBV is ‘the most extensive form of violence faced by women and girls ... within their homes or in detention ... coupled with other forms of physical assault, torture, kidnapping, and sometimes murder’ (Asaf 2017, 116). ‘Sexualized violence has been observed to increase simultaneously with the militarization and the proliferation of weapons’ (Henn 2019, 20), due to both the lack of efficient justice in the midst of a conflict and the ‘peer pressure’ effect within male armed groups (Boylan 2019). In Syria, rape is used by Jihadists groups, by the opposition and by Assad’s regime too. According to Lauren Wolf’s *Syria Has a Massive Rape Crisis* (2013), quoted in Moore and Talarico (2015), 60% of CRSV against both men and women are allegedly committed by Syrian government forces.

Based on the honour/shame dichotomy attached to a woman’s body (see Chapter 5), we can understand how ‘[a]ggression or violence against women is a means by which combatants show who controls the ‘sexual property’ and political process’ in a conflict or post-conflict context. By violating women’s sacred body, fighters are challenging their husbands’, families’ and communities’ honour all together (Olujic 1998). Then, it appears evident that VAW in wartime, including rape, is not only a way to terrorize women but rather a way to humiliate a whole country or warring group (Olujic 1998; Henn 2019). By inflicting pain to women rather than killing them, perpetrators force them to live with the shame of it (Boylan 2019). They also reinforce gender stereotypes observed in peace time, such as ‘cleanliness and dirtiness associated with sexuality’ (Olujic 1998, 39), which in turn forces women to remain silent in order to protect themselves and their family from public humiliation and exclusion. In such a context, it doesn't even matter that the woman was raped, hence not consenting to sexual intercourse, as the fact remains the same either way: she was penetrated by another man (or by other men) than her husband (Olujic 1998).

Syrian women being victims of the conflict is not up to debate, the objective of this work is to challenge the essentialization of such status, which the UN is partially responsible for. In 2013 the focus started shifting with UNSCR 2122, ‘which aims to strengthen women’s roles in conflict prevention and resolution’ (Krause and Enloe 2015, 329), but prior to this the UN

was mostly focusing on women as victims, as if it were their sole identity. The recognition of the vulnerability of women is a positive and welcomed progress, as well as the acknowledgement of their particularities, as it allows international actors to adapt their approach to the ‘distinct needs of women, girls, boys, and men’ (UNOCHA 2019; 36). Nonetheless, feminist thinkers and organisations are ‘concerned with the tendency of the UNSC Resolutions to advance protective stereotypes that essentialize women in conflict situations as either victims of sexual violence, mothers, or as uncritical advocate for an end to conflict’ (Bell and O’Rourke 2010, 945). For instance, recognizing women as a vulnerable group on the same level as elderly and people with disabilities (UNOCHA 2019) sends the wrong message (Goetz and Jenkins 2016). In parallel, addressing extensively the issue of GBV and CRSV is also important as it increases support and protection for the victims and raises international awareness on the topic, but it creates two issues at least.

First, because of the extra focus on women, the fact that men too can be victims of CRSV and suffer from its stigma (Dharmapuri 2011) is often left out (Asaf 2017). Using the word ‘gender’ to talk about women and girls only and limiting the discussion around CSRV around women and girls being victims of it marginalises men and boys’ experiences of war (Bell and O’Rourke 2010). Second, this essentialization is made at the expense of women’s other skills and roles, and women’s participation in peace negotiation is overlooked to the profit of GBV (Krause and Enloe 2015).

Women are well aware of their victimization by the international community and are challenging this assumption. Syrian women are in fact asking to be recognized ‘in all their diversity, [as] people who have a stake in the direction that their country will take; they are people with skills, expertise and knowledge. Syrian women are citizens.’, not only victims (Krause and Enloe 2015, 331). Until this is understood and integrated in the UN approach, critical thinkers will continue to argue that the WPS agenda is not a feminist one, that gender mainstreaming is only a box to tick among others for the UN and that its engagement with women-in-conflict reproduces patriarchal discourse and power relations (Cook 2016).

A different way of looking at things would be to see victimhood as an identity common to all parties to the conflict. Recognizing that the population, regardless of which side each individual is on, suffered greatly from the war should not be an issue. On the contrary, it could be an asset for reconstruction and reconciliation. It would give Syrian people the

opportunity to gather, to share and to discover that they are not so different from each other, that their pain is shared, and that they can learn from each other in dealing with the remnants of the war. As noted above, CRSV is an issue that touches both men and women, from all sides of the conflict. And this is only one form of violence that every person involved in a war usually experiences. People living in a country at war have gone through similar violence, seen similar events, felt similar feelings, and will live with similar traumatizations and stigma. Women initiatives successfully manage to gather people, both women and men, around victimhood. In Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), WILPF brought together women and war veterans from different sides at the same table, and they were able to talk, to exchange around their common experience of the war. Similar initiatives could be implemented in Syria in the conflict's aftermath.

Another major challenge is that, in this extensive debate about victimization, the active participation of Syrian women in the 2011 uprising has been drowned out.

### **The Forgotten Involvement of Syrian Women in the Uprising**

In a militarized conflict, women are rapidly side-lined and shift from active actors of the revolution to victims of aggressions, sexual assault, rape, etc, a violence that often continues after the revolution (Alvi 2015; Hafez 2020). But originally, Syrian women were truly and actively involved in the 2011 uprising.

The events forced Syrian women out of their daily life. According to Krause and Enloe (2015), 'women were prominent in the leadership of the early nonviolent, pro-democracy demonstrations in 2011' (331). They were alongside men, protesting in the streets, taking part in demonstrations, organising marches and sit-ins, putting their life at risk everyday (Tabbara and Rubin 2018). Even if many women were not political prior to the conflict, their politicisation came as a reaction to the regime's repression, its violence, its killings, and to the role played by Assad (Krause and Enloe 2015). The uprising was not fundamentally a feminist movement, however it was ceased by women as an opportunity to claim their rights, to give both national and international visibility to their cause (Tabbara and Rubin 2018). Syrian women considered that democracy in Syria would not look like democracy without women's rights (Tabbara and Rubin 2018), which is in line with Doctor Sen's theory (1999) that '[f]reedom in one area ... seems to help to foster freedom in others'. Unfortunately, this

theory is based on the assumption that the repressive state has been removed in the meantime. Given the fact that a revolution does not obligatory lead to democratization (Darhour and Dahlerup 2020), and that Assad's authoritarian regime is still in place ten years after the uprising, it is highly unlikely that women's rights will soon progress at a national institutionalized level.

Since the revolution turned into a civil war, Syrian women have and still do suffer disproportionately from it (Moore and Talarico 2015). In reaction, some Syrian women chose to continue to peacefully resist and did not become fighters in this war, others became members of opposition groups (i.e.: smuggling weapons) (Haddad 2014).

In the words of Manea (2014), 'women have often defied social norms by participating in public events, only to be pushed back into their former traditional roles by conservative backlash' (81), and the Arab Uprisings, including in Syria, are no exception. This is a relatively common pattern, as it had already been observed with the Syrian Independence Movement of the 1930s (Manea 2014). By being on the frontlines of the Syrian uprising, women exposed themselves to retaliation. Many of them were arrested, detained and even tortured for their active participation in the revolution (Moore and Talarico 2015). These arrests pose a critical issue for women living in a patriarchal society entangled in discriminatory gender prejudices. As a Syrian activist testified for the International Federation for Human Rights' (FIDH) 2013 report:

'Traditionally it is considered shameful for a woman to even enter a police station, it's even worse if she is arrested or spends time in detention. People suspect that women are sexually abused in these places. Hardly anyone makes complaints about such crimes or even talks about it. If it is known that a woman has been raped, nobody will want to marry her.' (56)

In armed revolutions, '[s]ocial relations are not only militarized, they are also shored up by extremist religious ideologies where stereotypical and hyper-masculinist portrayals of gender roles are central elements" (Maktabi 2017, 8). On this line, the development of Daesh in Syria and its ability to control territory and apply a strict *shari'a* on said territories did not do any good to women's rights. For extremist terrorist groups such as ISIS, women are inferior to men, they are perceived as sexual objects to be used by men as they wish to. It is therefore

not surprising to read that, under ISIS control, Syrian women were either sold and used as slaves or forcibly married to ISIS fighters (especially young girls), or that many suffered from female genital mutilation, etc. (Moore and Talarico 2015). Even after ISIS' defeat and loss of territory, the places where it exerted its influence have retained its imprint, with 'a marked increase in patriarchal practices such as forced marriage and polygamy, and gender segregation is also used to exclude women from local councils [LCCs]' (Al-Kadi and Vale 2020, 254). Some Syrian Salafi-Jihadist sympathisers even go further by 'directly manipul[at]ing gender norms to endanger and shame female activists and public figures' (Al-Kadi and Vale 2020, 254), trying to tarnish women's image and to manipulate their family and community into thinking that they are unfaithful, for instance. The ease with which women are attacked and with which their already limited rights are questioned remind us that, even before the rise of ISIS, Syria was a fertile soil for gender stereotypes and the persecution of women by religious traditionalists.

## CHAPTER 5: PEACETIME SYRIA UNDER ASSAD: ENDORSING WOMEN'S INFERIORITY TO PLEASE THE RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT

### **The Ba'ath Party in Power: Complacency Towards the Traditional Conservative Sunni Majority at Women's Expense**

The Ba'ath party was created in Syria in 1940 and quickly got popular among minorities, especially the Alawites, which constituted most of its internal structure, both civilian and military branches (Manea 2011). The multiple coups in the second part of the 20th century, following the independence, and the progressive replacement of Sunni military by Alawites is still influencing Syria to this day (Manea 2011).

#### SYRIAN ALAWITES: A RELATIVELY MODERATE MINORITY

The regime, both government and army, contains a majority of Alawis, including the Assad themselves. This sectarian affiliation plays a significant role in securing their power and legitimacy, and even in supporting the entire regime (Manea 2011). Below is a brief presentation of the Syrian Alawite minority (Kerr & Larkin 2015, 3):

'Descendants of the followers of Muhammad Ibn Nusayr, a disciple who split from the Shi'a branch of Islam in the ninth century, the



Nusayri were a mystical heterodox sect originating from Iraq and settling in Syria. The term Nusayri came to hold negative connotations for the community in the Levant. Thus, in modern times, it adopted the name Alawi, meaning followers of Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin, and for Shi'a Muslims his righteous successor. The Alawis account for around twelve percent of Syria's population.'

According to the *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life* (2017), Syrian Alawis women have more freedom due to the secular nature of the state and its soft application of the *shari'a*. Even though Alawis are a patriarchal minority with restrictions upon women participation in religious rituals, based on the 'belief that women are born of the devil' (31). Alawis are still presented by Kerr and Larkin (2015) as more progressive than other religious communities, with 'women [being] subject to fewer social barriers and religious constraints than their more conservative Sunni counterparts' (93), and the veil not being mandatory (Manea 2011). As a result, they have access to both education and a professional career. Kerr and Larkin go on and note that, in the Alawis parts of Syria (Latakia, Tartus), education infrastructures funded by Hafez al-Assad registered a higher rate of enrollment for women (40% of university graduates) than the national one (30%). In 2009, the University of Latakia still had more enrolled female students than the national average (54.3% against 51% - Kerr & Larking 2015).

The Ba'athist regime, or Ba'ath regime, officially adheres to a secular socialist ideology. In 1950, it was among the Syrian parties that fought for a secular Syrian Constitution, not mentioning Islam as the state's religion and the origin of its law (Manea 2011). According to the 'Ba'ath party's Constitution ... Arabs should oppose all other forms of factional solidarity "such as religious, sectarian, tribal, racial and regional factionism"', in opposition to national solidarity (Manea 2011, 102). In parallel, gender equality is considered by many, both members of the Ba'ath party and the opposition itself, as a core aim of the socialist ideology adopted by the Party. Through time, the regime compromised with its entire ideology, hoping it would ease the relationship with Sunni traditionalists at first (Aldoughli 2020), using it to counter the uprising later on.

It is one of the paradoxes of the Ba'ath regime: 'It displays the empowerment of women as a centerpiece of its modernizing, socialist ideology, while preserving patriarchal structures within the law' (Aldoughli 2020). Some studies retort by mentioning the 2003 ratification of the CEDAW, presenting it as a sign that the Syrian government was on a track towards progress prior to the war. Talking about 'state feminism' may be exaggerated here, as the ratification contained 'reservations based on incompatibility with the Family law as well as with the Shari'a' (Gissi 2020, 6). In the introduction to *The Arab State and Women's Rights: The trap of authoritarian governance* (2011), Manea notes that this is a phenomenon common to many Arab states following independency: granting women the right to vote was quick and not an issue, in Syria it was even a top-down decision and the first of its kind in the Arab region, but attempting to the Personal Status Laws (family laws impacting people's private life) is something else. Indeed, these specific laws are 'primarily derived from theological interpretations and judgments. [They] originate in the remote past when gender discrimination permeated society and they have acquired a sanctity and absoluteness' (The Fourth Arab Human Development Report 2006 quoted in Manea 2011, 6). In Syria, the situation is a bit peculiar as there is not only one set of Personal Status Laws for everyone but different sets for each religion and this has been since the 1947 independence, a legacy of the French mandate. The Syrian Personal Status Laws applying to Sunni Muslims are inspired by the Hanafite Jurisprudence and the Ottoman Islamic Law and have only been slightly altered twice in the last 68 years, without attempting to change their religious character in any way (Manea 2011). Regarding other religions' Personal Status Laws in Syria, the state is equally reluctant to make any change, leaving in place measures giving the Church and male guardians power over Christian and Greek Orthodox women (Manea 2011). The various Personal Status Laws and sets of laws are all restraining women's rights regarding freedom of movement, divorce, marriage, child custody, etc., conditioning most of her action to the authorisation or presence of a male guardian (Manea 2011). In complete contradiction with the Constitution, which states that women and men share the same equal rights, these laws endorse what Maktabi (2017) calls the status of 'enfranchised minors' attributed to Arab women, including Syrian ones. This means that in many if not all aspects of life and society, women are placed under the authority of men of their family, either their husband, their father, their brother, or even their own son. This status reinforces gender stereotypes according to which women are not responsible and mature enough to be independent and make life choices, while men have what it takes to not only be in charge of their own life but also control women's life and body. Regarding women's claims in relation to the Personal

Status Laws, most of the women's organisations have adopted an overall approach, working on changing the entire legal system rather than only one set affecting one particular religious group (Manea 2011). Achieving such progress is not easy. The only two Syrian women's organisations allowed to work, Syrian General Women's Union (GWU) and Syrian Women's League (SWL), are linked to the party and/or the regime, which drastically reduces their scope of action (Manea 2011). Even the amendments to the Family Law approved in 2019 have been pointed out for their shyness, Syrian women remain under the legal control of a male authority and [their] rights to property, divorce and child care are still very limited' (Gissi 2020, 6).

Previous research conducted by the author on the involvement of women in BiH peacemaking demonstrated the incompatibility between a governance based on the 'divide and rule' policy and the advancement of women's rights. In the case of BiH, the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) that ended the 90s conflict 'institutionalised ethnic and territorial divisions' (Mlinarević and Porobić 2019, 174), dividing the society between Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. Porobić, in an interview conducted in April 2021 with the author, declared that 'Ethnic identity [became] the main political identity in the country'. In countries where every issue goes along either ethnic or religious lines, whether it is BiH or Syria, there is no place left on the political scene to carry issues that go beyond these affiliations, issues that are common to a group that is neither ethnic or religious and that may cross or even soften divisions. As Manea (2011) wrote, it is believed that the 'Assad regime ... is reluctant to change the pluralistic Syrian family law [through unification] because it needed to preserve the division between religious and sectarian communities in Syria' (171), whose worries and divisions are useful in maintaining its hegemony. It explains why Assad had issues with the Syrian Committee of the Social Initiative, a women's organisation that was 'able to bridge all sectarian and religious differences and attract supporters from all spectrums of Syrian society' (Manea 2011, 174). It is also another reason why the regime refuses to modify the Personal Status Laws. These laws all contribute to making interfaith marriage difficult if not impossible, hence 'it has kept the society divided ... between Sunnis and Shi'ites, Christians and Muslims and Jews, superior tribes and inferior tribes, etc.' (Manea 2011, 198).

Demands regarding women's rights to education and letting down the veil started as early as the 19th century with the Great Syria's renaissance movement (Manea 2011). Later on, the right to vote was discussed by Emir Faysal in 1919, even before the French mandate, and 'By

1928 Syria had eight women's societies, most of them concerned with women's education and welfare' (Manea 2011, 73). But women's emancipation is not and has never been a priority for the Ba'ath party, nor as it has been for the regime. Admittedly, Syrian women were granted political representation by King Faysal with the right to vote in 1949 and when they became eligible for office in 1953 (Manea 2011). Plus, 'in 2016 Syrian women still held 13 percent of seats [in Parliament]' despite the ongoing conflict (Marsi 2017). However, the meaning itself of politicisation is diverted in Syria, it 'has been shrunken to mean solely to be part of, or complicit with the regime. To be anything other than supportive, complicit or passive has come to mean being a "terrorist" in the view of the Assad regime' (Klaue and Enloe 2015, 331). Only women that are being co opted by the regime or the party are allowed to run for office (Manea 2011). The former independent Syrian M.P. Maria Saade herself, while praising the opportunities for Syrian women in politics, recognised that her discourse changed, getting softer and more politically correct once she started seating at the Parliament in 2012 (Marsi 2017). This partially explains why the politicisation of Syrian women in the last 40 years has been limited. Fully aware of the risks related to being political, Syrian women have been restraining themselves until the uprising (Gissi 2020). This must not be confused with a lack of interest for or understanding of politics, but must be understood as a conscious survival strategy adopted by women for 'their own safety and the protection of their families from state violence' (Gissi 2020, 7) and a result of women evolving in a gender-biased, paternalistic culture (Marsi 2017).

The Assad regime had and still has to adopt a fragile positioning, oscillating between official modernization and the need to survive, what Joe Midgal calls 'the politics of survival' and has been contextualized in the Arabic world by Manea. As Manea (2011) puts it, the survival of the Syrian regime depends on the support of 'sectarian, religious, tribal and/or regional [groups]' (95). To secure the support of this social base, which is mostly religiously conservative, the regime sacrificed women's empowerment and rights, restricting them to a status of secondary citizens. Hafez al-Assad (in power from 1971 to 2000) was influenced by prominent Syrian *ulamā* (Islamic scholars) in maintaining women's low status. The Ba'athist regime never adopted civil marriage, a refusal which 'curtails women's right to choose their partners and keeps them locked into traditional roles defined by their position within ethnic or sectarian groups' (Aldoughli 2020). In turn, his son Bashar al-Assad keeps a tight grip on civil society by choosing which women's movement deserve the state's support, encouraging controversial Islamist groups while crushing others that are manifesting their will for change,

that do not demonstrate the expected religious piety and/or that are not tolerated by the *ulamā* (Aldoughli 2020, Pierret 2013). In 2006, a book judged controversial by the *ulamā*, titled *Down with the Veil!*, became off-limits for the population (Pierret 2013). And it doesn't stop there:

‘Other decisions aimed at satisfying the religious establishment included the quadrupling of the number of sharia high schools between 2005 and 2008, the appointment of the highly respected Ibrahim al-Salqini as Mufti of Aleppo, the opening of a faculty of sharia in that latter city (September 2006), a 50 per cent salary rise for mosque personnel, and authorisation for the Qubaysiyyat to operate in mosques after forty years underground. However, the most symbolic event of this ‘Islamic Spring’ was the acceptance by the regime of al-Buti’s demand for the re-establishment of a representative council of ulama.’ (Pierret 2013, 199)

The *ulamā* are particularly opposed to feminism, women activism, birth control, AIDs prevention and any type of sexual education. Their ties with the regime had made them bolder, and in the 2000s they were not afraid to publicly express such disagreement anymore, even if it meant criticising the regime itself for some of its social policies (Pierret 2013).

With the 2011 uprising in Syria, embracing the state’s Islamic identity became a way to reinforce its legitimacy in the middle of the crisis. In 2014, Assad, facing the *ulamā*, stated that the Syrian state was a religious one that had always respected and followed Islamic principles, notably through the application of the *shari’a* regarding personal status law (Aldoughli 2020). Indeed, the latter is a principle written in the Syrian Constitution, as is the fact that the Syrian President must practice Islam (Manea 2011). Even if this disposition alone didn’t make Islam the religion of the state itself, the policy adopted in parallel by the Assad to avoid antagonizing the Sunni majority gradually gave more and more power and authority to religious entities and personalities regarding Syrian matters.

Bashar al-Assad pretends to adopt a modern and feminist attitude by defending women’s place within religious institutions, praising them for their reliability, while the real objective of this tactic is in fact to 1) shame male religious leaders opposing the regime or staying neutral and 2) transforming women into agents of the state, trading their loyalty for religious representation (Aldoughli 2020). Following this logic, every elected or appointed woman,

whether within religious institutions or the government, has no other choice than to adhere to the official discourse. On the surface, this ideological rhetoric allows the regime to present itself as a feminist one promoting women's empowerment and representation, if not a regional and modern rolemodel.

### **Gender Stereotypes Embedded in the Day-to-day Syrian Interpretation of Islam**

According to Moghadam (2012), in the Muslim culture, hegemonic masculinity as defined by R.W. Connel is about 'the capacity to protect family or personal honor by controlling the comportment of the women in the family, the community, or the Nation'. Various feminists academics identify these norms, also called heroic masculinity or even hypermasculinity, as a cause of conflict and women oppression. Alvi (2015) incriminates the ideological and cultural misogyny in the broader MENA region, the presence of a patriarchal system using a certain interpretation of the Quran to restrain women's rights, where the observed violence against females 'indicate the extent of the investment of patriarchal systems in maintaining their hegemonic control of the political sphere' (Hafez 2020, 352). This resistance against females' empowerment through the law also comes from religious spheres (Alvi 2015), as demonstrated above.

In the Syrian culture, women are supposed to be caretakers only, 'hav[ing] dinner ready, the house cleaned, and rais[ing] children' (Asad 2017, 119), while men are protectors and breadwinners. Women are often considered as inferior to men, or even not considered as people (Boylan 2019; Manning 2019), but rather treated with regards to the function they hold within the society: 'sex objects, mothers, and workers' (Olujic 1998, 34). It is expected that women will accomplish some sort of sexual, reproductive and work mission, 'while still conforming to socially accepted ideals of female respectability, decency and integrity' (Gissi 2020, 5). Women that challenge these gendered expectations are 'seen as a threat to societal traditions and stability' (Al-Kadi and Vale 2020, 254), and being a female activist is badly perceived.

While men win their masculinity by reaffirming their sexual and physical power (Boylan 2019), women are put under great scrutiny to assess whether or not they are chaste enough, obedient enough, discrete enough to be respected. Their sexuality is commonly affiliated with notions of honour and shame (Olujic 1998) and these notions are not restrained to the woman's sole reputation, but rather enlarged to her whole family, family in-law and even community. A study looking at Arab youth vision of gendered relationships has shown that,

for young Muslims, women's sexual liberation is associated with Western societies and immorality (Nasser El-Dine 2016). In countries such as Syria, women having multiple partners, dressing in a certain way, being close to men they are not related to, all of this is perceived as not honourable and not compatible with Islam (Nasser El-Dine 2016). Following the Arabic concept of jealousy, it is a man's role to control its female partners and relatives' relationships with men, to protect these women from both violence and dishonour (Nasser El-Dine 2016). These concepts of honour and shame go beyond consensual relations; indeed, women that suffer sexual violence face the same stereotypes, even though they are victims. Yasmine and Moughalian (2016) lay down the consequences of such a system of values for women:

‘It is particularly difficult for Syrian women to report harassment or rape due to the severe social stigma they are likely to face, which might lead to exclusion by family members and society at large. In patriarchal societies where honor crimes are still the norm, women are blamed for the invasion of and violence on their bodies.’ (31)

As put by Teays (2019), ‘victims are seen as part of the problem’ (4) and their attitude prior to the violence is questioned, sexualized and often pointed out as some sort of encouragement or imprudence on their side, which must have caused the following violence.

In peacetime, we observe the cumulative aspect of violence and structural and cultural discriminations against women. Women are restrained to gender roles which makes them not only vulnerable to violence but also to being blamed for being a victim. This work demonstrated how this everyday violence and biased perception of women has repercussions on their role during a conflict and in ending said conflict.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued throughout this work that the lack of Syrian women involved in Track I negotiations, understood here as the Geneva peace talks, has nothing to do with a lack of will or skills on the part of women. In particular, I demonstrated that the combination of an international community lacking gender awareness and reproducing a patriarchal model, the rise of extremist terrorist groups treating women like sexual objects or even like a currency and a Syrian regime maintaining women's inferior status to please the religious establishment

leads to the reproduction of gender stereotypes in all aspects of both the conflict and the peace process.

Despite the ongoing civil war, the rise of ISIS and both the violence and the religious extremism that come with it, the traditional reluctance of men to elect influential women or to let women's organisations in charge of local negotiations, Syrian women still manage to i) take on leadership roles in their local communities, ii) be proactive in providing local humanitarian support and implementing peacebuilding initiatives, iii) exchange with other women's organisations to learn from their experience, iv) gather women from all over Syria to propose actionable recommendations for the future of the country.

Even though they proved their skills, their knowledge of local requirements for peace and their understanding of the broad context and its challenges, Syrian women were and still are refused a seat at the negotiation table. The international community, including mediators, negotiators, third parties and the UN itself, in its treatment of women and women's issues, demonstrate a continued lack of gender awareness and training. Gender stereotypes are reproduced in official communication, in the way the talks are managed, and reflected on the fact that women's organisations and women representatives are kept in the corridors in Geneva, providing advice when they are lucky enough to be asked to do so, but still far away from the table.

The UN is no stranger to this state of affairs. Twenty years of texts, conferences and declarations, and still, the approach is problematic. Even though the UN has made progress towards the inclusion of women issues and gender into its agenda, its resolutions are not only non-binding for its Member States but unclear, leaving room for interpretation and giving warring parties opportunities to keep women in secondary roles, far down on everyone's priority list during negotiations. Gender stereotypes and other prejudices continue to be at play on the international scene, keeping it a male-dominated scene. Mediators themselves argue against mentioning women in negotiations, afraid their interlocutor has such a low opinion of women that the talks would immediately collapse, while issues way more sensitive are already at the center of the talks on a daily basis. In addition, the terminology used by the UN is misleading, denying Syrian women's diversity on one hand and restraining gender issues to women as if men didn't suffer from CRSV on the other hand.



Studies have demonstrated the disproportionate suffering faced by women in conflict, especially regarding GBV and the use of rape as a weapon of war, and the UN took it into consideration, including in Syria. However, the focus on GBV has come to override everything else, at the expense of women's involvement in decision-making regarding their own country. Women's victim status is now essentialized by the international community to the point that their active role in the revolution and in the ongoing conflict is often drowned out. This is a serious mistake, as it obliterates the risks taken on a daily-basis for the last ten years by these women, whose activism exposes them to violent retaliation from every side of the war: terrorist groups, the opposition, the regime itself...

Indeed, Syrian women, by taking up new roles and responsibilities usually reserved to men, becoming more independent, are challenging gender norms and therefore becoming a threat for traditionalists. They are questioning a patriarchal system that is deeply rooted in Syrian culture, that has been pushed for by the *ulamã* since Hafez al-Assad and the Ba'ath party came into power and started showing complacency towards the Sunni majority of the country. The role of the state in the development of women's movements, if not feminist ones, is crucial because it 'remains the body primarily responsible for guaranteeing the rights of citizens and human rights more broadly' (Moghadam 2012, 46). The state is in charge of public policies that can have a tremendous impact on women, such as reproductive health, family law, work law, etc... In Syria, laws regarding citizenship, property, divorce and killing have barely been modified since 1953. The juridic system is endorsing a patriarchal model, reinforcing gender roles, discouraging women to get involved in politics, and showing leniency towards perpetrators of VAW by keeping some subjects such as honour crimes off the table. Every proposal for progress made by women and women's organisations has been rejected, as the regime cannot afford to lose the support of the Sunni religious establishment, completely opposed to the advancement of women's rights. Despite their Alawite affiliation, despite the party's official secular ideology, the Assads, father and son, conducted a nation-building process endorsing women's political exclusion and inferiority on a religious basis.

This research, while challenging the idea that the UN has managed to become a feminist organisation, revealed bridges between gender stereotypes, women's involvement in local peace and official and women's rights in the Syria state. It showed that the limited role and space given to women in the Syrian peace process finds its roots in the Assad regime having

betrayed its ideology and traded women's rights for the support of the religious establishment. Courting the *ulamā* to maintain its power meant letting religion dictate the extent to which Syrian women can be given rights, freedom and consideration, from their day-to-day life to negotiating the end of a 10-years conflict. And if you seat at the table opposing parties that come from a country where women's inferiority is repeatedly affirmed, in religious circles, in political circles, in the law itself, and a mediator or a third party that reproduces gender stereotypes, the chances to bring women issues at said table are very low. The chances to bring women directly to the table are even lower. And the chances to achieve a long-lasting peace are virtually non-existent.

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