

Perspectives on the Peace Process

A Survey of Syrian Women

January 21, 2014 By Kristin Williams

As the international community, regime, and opposition parties prepare for the upcoming Geneva II negotiations, Syrian citizens—particularly women, who are actively fighting for peace in their country—must be directly engaged in defining the outcome. From July to September 2013, Inclusive Security and the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria (CCSDS) surveyed 110 women activists living and working inside Syria to document their views on international efforts to broker peace and perceived barriers to women’s full and meaningful participation. This project stemmed from a meeting convened by Inclusive Security, International Civil Society Action Network, and Nonviolent Peaceforce, in July 2013, to discuss options for an inclusive peace process in Syria. A full report of the meeting is [online](#). Special thanks to ICAN and NP for their assistance in conceptualizing the survey.

These survey respondents do not represent the entirety of Syrian society (see a demographic breakdown on page 10). They are, however, a diverse sample of the thousands of brave leaders who are currently holding communities together under dire circumstances—and who will be vital contributors to Syria’s peaceful and democratic future.

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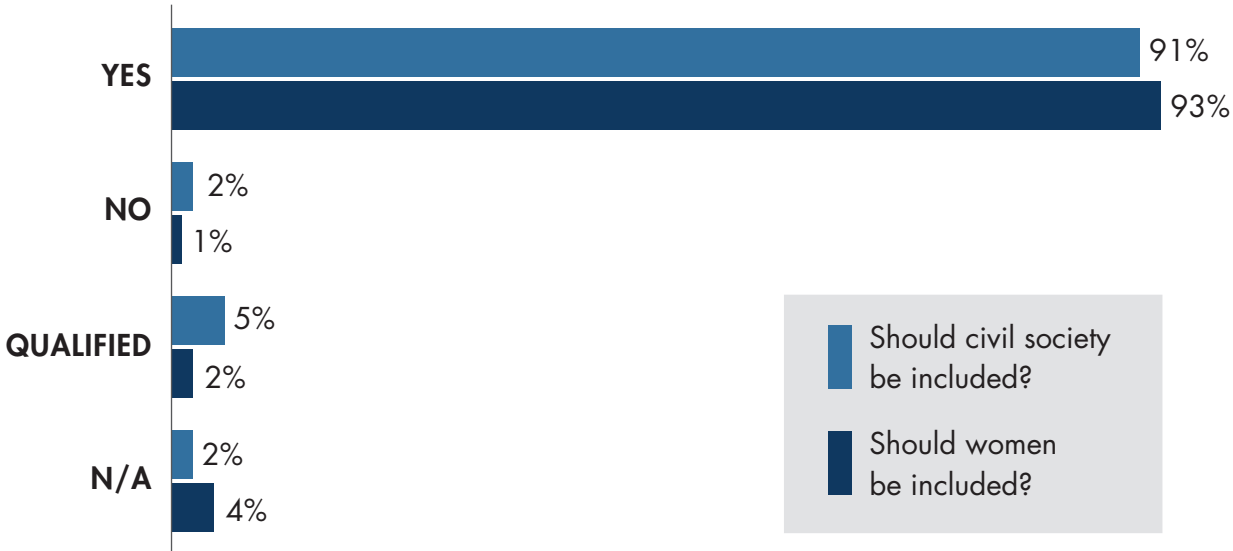
Syrian women support a broadly inclusive peace process

When asked whether they thought civil society should be included in the international-level efforts to end the war and negotiate a political

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transition, respondents were overwhelmingly in favor, with 91% stating that civil society should definitely be involved. As one woman put it, **“Civil society is the only one which knows the national interests and what would be better for the country...”** Another 5% stated yes, but with qualifications. For example, some thought that civil society should be involved, but only after their capacity to participate is strengthened. Others preferred civil society representation via the Syrian Opposition Coalition, rather than directly at the table as a separate entity. Less than 2% answered unequivocally that civil society should not be included.



Similarly, 93% of respondents asserted that women should be included in these efforts and only one respondent disagreed. Though they want to ensure **“having the right women, not just women in order to say there are Syrian women in negotiations,”** respondents emphasized the critical role women have played in leading the revolution, addressing humanitarian and social needs, and organizing efforts to end the war and build democracy. Women have been **“standing side by side”** with men and are **“the most damaged”** by the violence. Given women’s unique perspectives and experiences, respondents said, they are **“the essence to build developed communities”** and **“could succeed as a mediator between conflicting parties.”**

Who represents Syria?

We asked respondents: “If delegations of civil society representatives are invited to participate in the formal negotiations, what are the baseline criteria for the groups or networks that should be represented?”

Respondents identified the following criteria, in order of most to least listed:

1. Representative/inclusive/diverse
2. Connected to ground
3. Politically independent
4. Skilled/qualified (e.g., negotiations, communications)
5. Experienced (e.g., politics, civil peace, human rights, gender)
6. Impartial/neutral
7. Democratic
8. Has organized, sustained activity
9. Prioritizes citizens’ interests
10. Effective
11. Nonsectarian
12. Legitimate/credible
13. Has clear and strategic vision
14. Believes in national unity
15. Accepts others/nonprejudiced
16. Respects opinions
17. Attends to humanitarian needs
18. Transparent
19. Secular
20. Nonviolent
21. Moderate
22. Humane, noble
23. Open to debate
24. Efficient
25. Committed to peace
26. Promotes transitional justice

Civil society representatives must:

“...serve the interests of citizens”

“...respect all the perspectives of other parties”

“...have real representation on the Syrian street”

“...be composed of representatives for all sects”

“...not be on a direct relation with any party from inside or outside Syria”

“...possess negotiation and communication skills”

“...[be] at least 50% female”

Women inside Syria are generally not being engaged or informed by international actors

While they expressed clear support for a peace process that meaningfully includes both women and civil society, respondents indicated they themselves have little access to the talks or the actors planning them. Of 110 women surveyed, *only 37 said that they have suitable access to information about international-level efforts to end the war and transition to a democratic state in Syria* (including the upcoming Geneva II talks). Another 19 women responded with qualified answers that indicate they have partial access to information. Many said they only know what they hear through the media or announcements of the opposition parties; others maintained they have heard “**contradictory**” or “**conflicting information.**”

Forty-five of the women surveyed—nearly half—replied that they have no access at all to information on the peace and transition planning. As expressed by one activist: “**Unfortunately, we do not know anything about the negotiations... as if we are not a part of this society.**”

Most of the respondents (90%) have also not engaged with any of the international actors working on the political transition. Stated reasons for this include: 1) security issues; 2) desire to focus on grassroots work; 3) lack of strategy by international actors to involve civil society; and 4) lack of reliable international interlocutors.

Of the 5% of respondents (6 individuals) who *have engaged with international actors*, two indicated that they currently have access to information on political transition planning, while the other four gave qualified answers. Their responses

International Actors Cited by Respondents:

- Office of the UN and Arab League Special Envoy to Syria
- UN Security Council
- Other UN agencies (e.g., High Commissioner for Human Rights, Population Fund, Human Rights Council, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, International Court of Justice)
- Governments of: Belgium, Canada, France, The Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Switzerland, United Kingdom, US
- International NGOs (e.g., Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva Call, Kvinna till Kvinna, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom)
- High Relief Commission, Lebanon
- National Kurdish Council

“Unfortunately, we do not know anything about the negotiations... as if we are not a part of this society.”

reveal a range of barriers to their effective coordination with the international community, including the existence of conflicting or partial information and the lack of coherent strategy by international actors to brief local civil society activists.

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Women activists inside Syria are striving to be involved in efforts to determine the country's future

When asked what strategies they are currently employing to assert their voice in the negotiations, the survey respondents presented an assortment of activities and approaches. The strategy most cited by the women (20 responses) was *networking and mobilization* with other civil society organizations. The second most-mentioned strategy was *advocacy to the conflict parties* (14), including the opposition coalition, the regime, and Free Syrian Army battalions. [*Advocacy to the international community* (4), as well as *advocacy broadly* (4) were also cited.]

Media outreach, including social media, and *building public awareness* in support of peace were also top of the list, with 12 and 9 respondents, respectively, listing these strategies. Others were focused on obtaining direct representation at the table (6), particularly for women (3). A full list of strategies named by the respondents is below.

Syrian women are clearly utilizing a broad range of approaches to become involved, directly or indirectly, in the peace process. Of those who answered this question, 9 were employing 3 or more strategies simultaneously, 22 were employing at least 2 strategies, and 46 respondents mentioned only 1. This shows that over 40% of Syrian women who are actively striving to be involved in the negotiations are doing so through multi-faceted approaches. At the same time, 7 women expressed that they didn't have any particular strategy in mind. This may indicate the need for additional training and capacity-building in skills such as planning and advocacy.

Nine respondents answered that they are not attempting to influence talks because they don't agree with the premise of negotiations between the opposition and regime. In addition, several women (13) agreed that

Why Women?

We asked respondents what perspectives or issues they thought women would bring to the peace talks that men would not. Here's a partial list:

- Importance of education
- Violence against women and children
- Constitutional and legal reform
- Disarmament
- Psychological support for war trauma
- Women's political representation
- Sexual violence
- Equality of work
- Addressing extremism
- Household/family needs
- Humanitarian aid
- Illiteracy
- Mobilization of public support for peace
- Basic human needs
- Nonviolence
- Sexual harassment
- Victim compensation
- Infrastructure
- Food security
- Reconciliation
- Shelter/housing

“The most important strategy is...to stop the armed conflict in the shortest time.” Without a cessation of violence, many women, especially in regime-held or contested areas, are unable or unwilling to attempt to impact the international-level processes.

What Strategies Are Women Using to Influence the Peace Process?

- Civil society networking/mobilization (20)
- Advocacy to conflict parties (14)
- Media outreach, including social media (12)
- Building public awareness (9)
- Debate/dialogue (7)
- Getting representation at the table (6)
- Advocacy, generally (4)
- Advocacy to international community (4)
- Documentation of the situation on the ground (4)
- Working to elevate women, in particular (3)
- Nonviolent/popular protest (2)
- Other (11) [e.g., justice, listening, nonviolence, training, planning]
- Not answered/answer unclear (17)
- Disagree with negotiations (9)
- No strategy (7)
- Instead of engaging with negotiations, focused on improving local peace and security situation (13); building democracy (2); or providing psychosocial support (2).

When asked whether they'd like to participate in future discussions about the peace and transition process, 77% of the women answered yes. Only 7% said they would not like to participate. These respondents cited security concerns, an absence of trust in the efficacy of international efforts, or personal lack of expertise. These rationales were also mirrored by the 6% who stated they would like to participate, but with qualifications: e.g., if the security situation improves, if there are confidence-building measures, if it was in secret, if it was not in secret, or if it was designed by Syrians themselves. Of those who said they would not personally like to be involved, 88% indicated in an earlier question that they believe generally that civil society should be included in international-level talks.

In order to participate meaningfully in the peace process, Syrian women must overcome multiple challenges

Women inside Syria face innumerable obstacles when it comes to making their needs and priorities clear to the international actors responsible for peace talks. The following quotes paint a picture of the issues they are facing:

“I don’t feel comfortable with the intentions of the international community, the regime, and some parts of the opposition...”

“...there are people who are more qualified than me.”

“The security status in my region due to the existence of armed and extremist people...”

“...the financial situation because I do not have an income.”

“Politicized logistical support, which serves foreign, not local, agendas.”

“Fear of prosecution.”

“I am a girl. I don’t get any attention and am treated as useless. And since I am from a small, unknown town, we do not receive any invitations.”

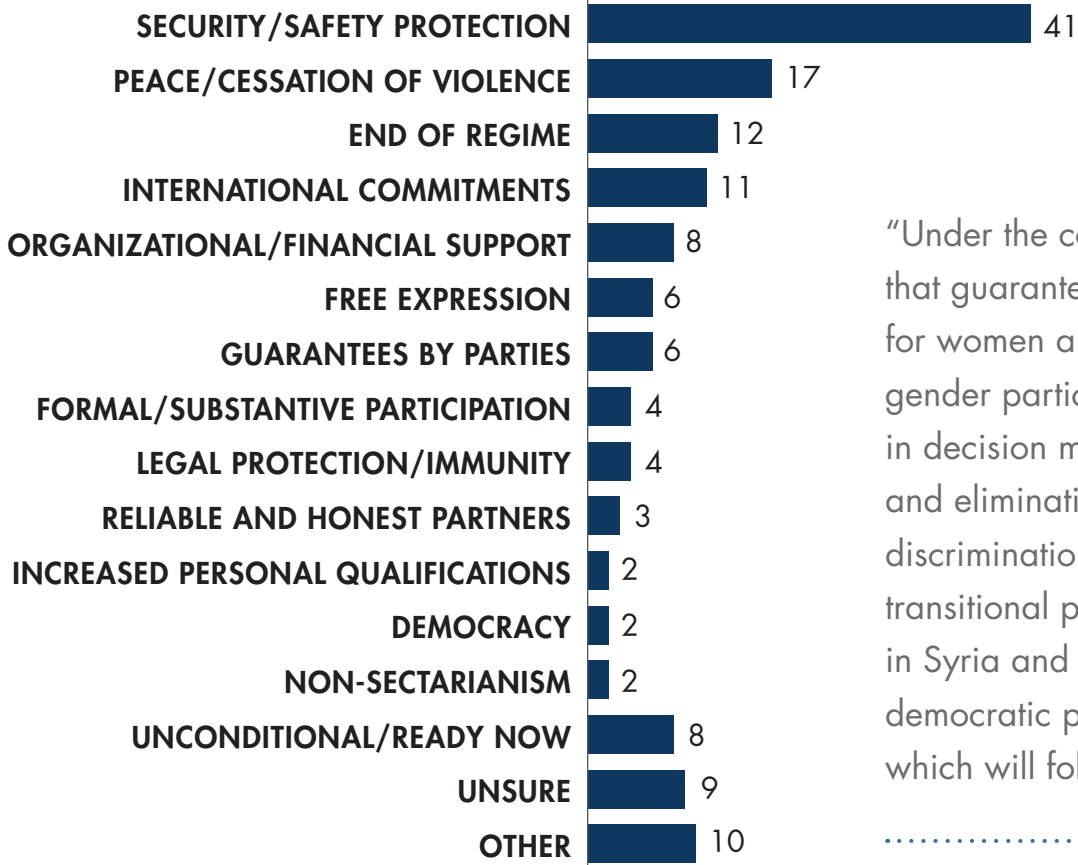
“[Without] communications tools or even internet, it is very difficult to contact people... to make my voice heard and participate in building peace for my country.”

Respondents identified a number of conditions that would help them feel safe enough to engage with the international-level peace process. The most listed was improvements in security, from disarmament of armed groups to protection of civil society activists. Many respondents said they would not feel safe participating until their families were taken out of harm’s way. Three other main conditions were 1) the cessation of violence, 2) the end of the current regime/establishment of a new democracy, and 3) robust international commitments. Only 7% of respondents said they would or are participating in international fora without preconditions.

WHAT CHALLENGES LIMIT WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PEACE PROCESS?



UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS WOULD YOU FEEL SECURE ENOUGH TO ENGAGE IN INTERNATIONAL FORA?



“Under the conditions that guarantee security for women and ensure gender participation... in decision making and elimination of discrimination in the transitional period in Syria and the democratic period which will follow.”

Methodology

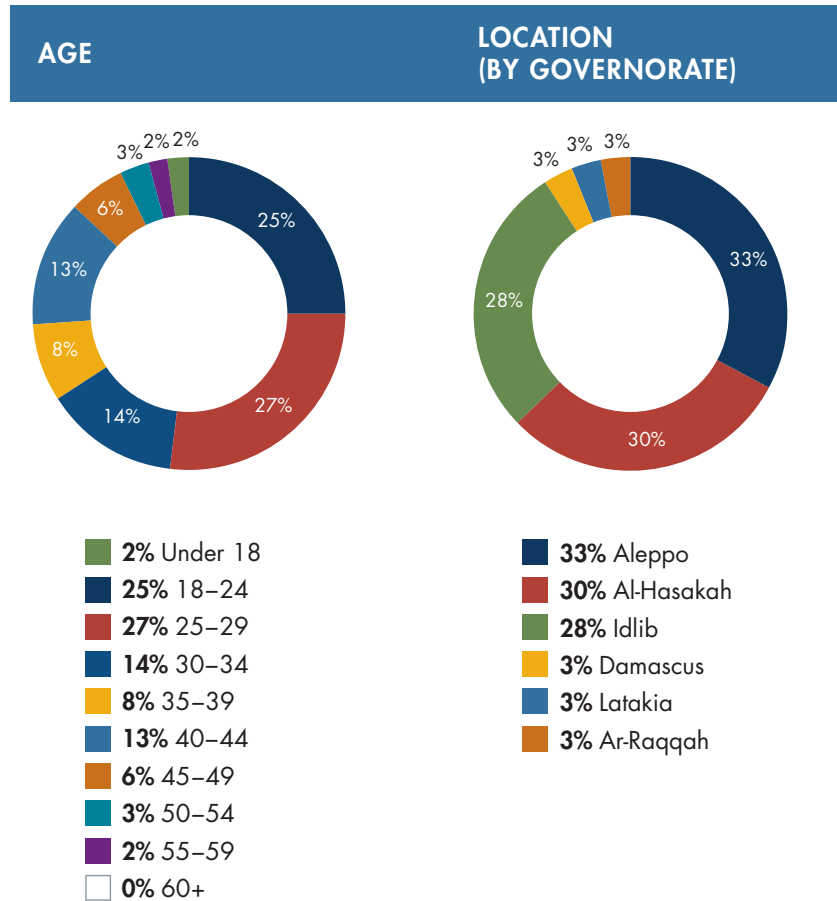
The survey was distributed by CCSDS and Inclusive Security to 110 women activists. Many of the respondents were participants in advocacy workshops conducted by Inclusive Security in partnership with CCSDS; these individuals filled the survey out on the first day of the workshops, before the training commenced. CCSDS disseminated the questionnaire to additional women activists inside Syria who they engaged during the course of other work.

The survey progressed in two stages: the first round went to 40 women. After analyzing these preliminary results, Inclusive Security and CCSDS decided to add questions about demographic data (age, location, background) plus the two questions (#8 and #9) that inquired specifically about women's inclusion. This second round of surveys was answered by an additional 70 women. The results for these supplementary questions encompass only those who had the opportunity to answer them.

The survey was distributed in Arabic. Respondents answered in Arabic; responses were collected and translated into English in-house by CCSDS interpreters. Results were then transmitted to Inclusive Security for coding and analysis. This assessment of results was conducted by Kristin Williams, Writer and Program Associate at Inclusive Security, who also drafted this report.

Who are the survey respondents?

The 110 women who answered the survey represent a diverse range of ages, sectors, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and geographic areas within Syria. Not all respondents indicated their age or location; these charts break down the demographics of those who did.



Survey Questions

1. Do you think civil society should be included in the international-level efforts to end the war and negotiate a political transition?
2. Do you, or individuals you work with, have access to information about ongoing planning for the political transition – both what is being led by the Coalition and what is being led by international actors?
3. What strategies, if any, are you currently employing or considering to assert your voice in negotiations between the regime and the resistance?
4. Have you engaged with any of the international actors who are trying to mediate a political transition? If yes, which?
5. What challenges and limitations for this type of participation do you face (e.g., security, financial, legal status, etc.)?
6. Under what conditions would you feel secure enough to engage in the international fora?
7. If delegations of civil society representatives are invited to participate in the formal negotiations, what are the baseline criteria for the groups or networks that should be represented?
8. Do you think women should be included in the international-level efforts to end the war and negotiate a political transition?
9. If yes, what are three perspectives or issues that you think women would bring to these talks that men would not?
10. Would you like to join future discussions about these issues?

Acknowledgements

CCSDS and Inclusive Security would like to thank all of the survey participants for their responses, as well as their ongoing work to bring peace and freedom to Syria.

The Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria

The Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria (CCSDS) is an independent Syrian center that seeks to support and strengthen civil society and democracy and promote the values of freedom, justice and coexistence through the analysis of the current situation and developing and implementing solutions. For more information, visit <http://ccsdsyria.org/>.

The Institute for Inclusive Security

The Institute for Inclusive Security's bold goal is to change the international security paradigm. Sustainable peace is possible only when those who shape policy include women and other affected groups in the prevention and transformation of violent conflict. Guided by this belief and vision, Inclusive Security, a program of Hunt Alternatives Fund, supports women's leadership as an essential tool to prevent violence, stop war, and restore communities after deadly conflicts. We also provide expert advice to policymakers grounded in research that demonstrates women's contributions to peacebuilding. For more information, visit <http://inclusivesecurity.org>.

Since 2013, CCSDS and Inclusive Security have partnered to equip over 100 women inside Syria with the skills to advocate to key decision makers regarding local and national security concerns.



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