



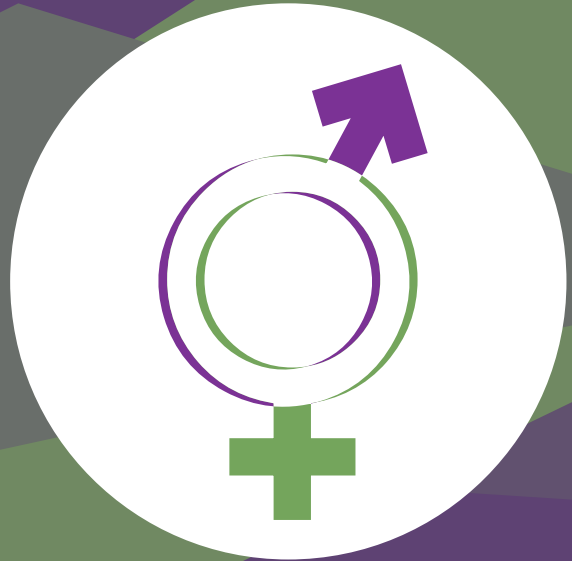
EuroMed Feminist Initiative
المبادرة النسوية الأورومتوسطية
Initiative Féministe EuroMed

BRIEF

Syrian Women's Right Civil Society Conference

Combating Violence Against Women and Girls
as a Main Barrier to Women's Participation
in Decision Making and Peace Building in Syria

9-10 DECEMBER 2021
BRUSSELS



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the European Union

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BACKGROUND

The peaceful protests in Syria that started in 2011 led to the ruthless killing of half a million Syrians, the disablement of millions, enforced disappearances, the mass influx of millions of refugees into neighbouring countries, and brutal violence against women and girls (VAWG). Women have been subjected to all forms of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). All parties in the conflict have used VAWG and CRSV as weapons of war, ranging from rape and sexual violence during checkpoint raids, arrests and detention, to human trafficking.¹ Refugee and displaced women, kidnapped or detained women and women living under siege in certain areas have been the most vulnerable. In areas controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Syrian women have faced the most heinous forms of violence, including slavery. Girls have been forced out of school, forced into early marriage, or faced the risk of human trafficking.² VAWG victims, particularly women and girls who have survived imprisonment, continue to face shame and social stigma.³ As the poverty rate in Syria has risen, women are most affected because they are more likely to be exposed to low-wage informal work.⁴

Women's rights initiatives are essential in challenging gender power structures on the national and local level. However, the protracted armed conflict, massive displacements, travel restrictions, and ban on civil society organisations have all hampered the development of sustainable communication channels among the Syrian feminist movement on the one hand, and with women activists from various local communities on the other hand.

The clear and urgent need for action to combat the major human rights violations taking place in Syria, particularly in terms of VAWG, was one of the main factors that pushed for the development of a *Common Agenda for Combating VAWG* as a main barrier to women's participation in decision-making and peacebuilding processes in Syria, established during a year-long consultation process with over 250 Syrian activists, gender, and legal experts from over 100 organisations and initiatives. This process took place in the frame of the program "***Enhancing women's participation in decision-making and peace-building processes in Syria***" funded by the European Union (EU). The consultations enabled a better understanding of the reasons underlying VAWG and favoured a debate on strategies to reduce all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls in the context of Syria, while emphasizing women's agency and participation in all stages of decision making. The *Common Agenda* is a tool to demand structurally improved access for women to decision making to enable their participation on local, national, and international levels. It is also a tool to raise broader awareness about VAWG, its devastating effect on women and how it is used to prevent women from public and political participation.

[1] *An Overview of Gender-Based Violence in Syria - Advocacy Brief / 2022 - Syrian Arab Republic*. (2021, October 12). ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/overview-gender-based-violence-syria-advocacy-brief-2022>

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

A Gender Advocacy Group was formed with a view to presenting the *Common Agenda* to international stakeholders and urge decision-makers to examine political solutions to the Syrian armed conflict and address the refugee crises and displacement through gender lenses, as per the recommendations of the *Common Agenda*.

As a part of this process, the Syrian Civil Society Women's Right Conference "***Combating Violence Against Women and Girls as a Major Barrier to Women's Participation in Syria***" took place in Brussels on the 9-10 December 2021 to discuss the *Common Agenda* and mechanisms for its implementation. It built on the EU conference "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region" (Brussels V)⁵, and gathered in-person and online over 120 Syrian participants, representatives from civil society organisations and local initiatives, women's rights activists, gender and legal experts, as well as representatives from international civil society organizations. Representatives from EU and the United Nations (UN) and other international stakeholders also joined. The Conference presented a unique opportunity to further create synergies among Syrian civil society. It strengthened the common discourse and understanding on VAWG and provided recommendations for the upcoming Brussels VI and the international community.

[5] The EU conference "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region" (Brussels V), that took place on 29-30 March 2021 made emphasis on the role of civil society organisations, in particular with regards to economic development, sustainable livelihoods, humanitarian aid, justice and peace, and underlined the importance of "Syrian women's full and meaningful participation at all stages of the political process at a minimum of 30 per cent representation in decision-making structures", including women-led organisations. The EU has since 2017 organised 5 conferences on "Supporting the future of Syria and the region", bringing together representatives of States and international organisations, international and Syrian civil society, building on previous years conferences in Kuwait and London. These conferences have been an important venue for a continuous interactive dialogue with civil society and CSOs active in Syria and the region, addressing the most critical humanitarian issues affecting the Syrian people and communities hosting refugees from Syria, both inside the country and in the region.

OPENING PANEL

The opening panel emphasised the effects of the Syrian conflict on women and girls, as well as violations of international humanitarian law. Ms. Stella Ronner, Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, European External Action Service (EEAS), reassured that the EU has, and will continue to condemn all parties to the conflict, particularly the Syrian regime and its allies, for persistent, widespread, systematic, and serious violations and abuses of human rights. She discussed means by which the EU has been assisting the Syrian women and confirmed that the EU is acutely aware of the need to do more to protect girls, adolescents and young women who are at serious risks of child marriage, early pregnancy and gender-based violence, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. She stressed that there is an urgent need to combat VAWG as a main impediment to women's participation in decision-making and peacebuilding.

Building on Ms. Ronner's speech, Ms. Birgit Van Hout, Regional Representative for Europe, UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), shed light on the fact that women are frequently silenced, and even online, simply for demanding participation, and that even when they are allowed to participate, they lack the financial resources to participate genuinely and at equal terms. She explained that women participation is not only a right, but it also results in better outcomes. It leads to reducing discriminatory practices that harm the enjoyment of human rights, which is critical for political and peace processes. She stated that the Syrian people require both medical and psycho-social support, and that inclusion must be prioritised and ensured through practical and concrete mechanisms. She emphasized that the *Common Agenda* provides opportunities for women and opens the door for the greater representation of women in politics.

Ms. Lilian Halls-French, Co-President of the EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI), mentioned the tragic context in Syria which has hampered the development of sustainable communication channels among the diverse components of the feminist movement, despite the importance of amplifying women's voices and disseminating needs from the ground to international forums. She emphasized that the conference is one step further on the long common path that EFI and their Syrian partners are taking. For nearly 15 years, EFI has been supporting not only Syrian women's rights organizations and activists, but also human rights and political activists who stand up and advocate for gender equality and women's rights as central to political transition, peace-building, and transitional justice efforts. EFI believes that without justice, there can be no peace or political solution, and shares the determination of its partners to combat impunity for crimes committed in Syria. She assured that that EFI will continue its efforts to shed light on the violence of the last decade and hold perpetrators accountable.

The final panellist Ms. Sawsan Zakzak, Gender Expert, Coordinator of the Coalition of Syrian Women for Democracy and a Member of Women Advisory Board for UN Envoy for Syria, emphasized that the oppression women face in Syria is the result of the patriarchal mentalities in society and politics, and that this should be addressed. She also discussed the dream of living as citizens in a democratic State that guarantees citizenship rights to all residents, whether they are

men or women. The wish is for all citizens to be free of fear, poverty, and tyranny in all its forms and manifestations, whether patriarchal, political, or religious, and for them to be able to decide everything concerning their destinies.

Panel 1: Key findings on main areas of the Common Agenda

This panel provided details on the main areas of the *Common Agenda* and recommendations under each area. Ms. Maya Al Rahabi, Gender Expert, Women's Rights Defender, and Director of Women's Studies Centre Musawa in Syria reminded the background of the *Common Agenda*, which was the result of the combined efforts and analyses. She emphasized that women suffered VAWG prior to the war and explained how this violence exacerbated during the heinous war. She also addressed the challenges that the Syrian Civil Society faced both inside and outside of Syria. She summarized the three phases of the consultation process leading to the establishment of the *Common Agenda*, underlining the *Common Agenda's* principles and values and the Gender Advocacy Group required for the implementation. The other six speakers presented and discussed the main areas of the Common Agenda.

Women, Peace, and Security Agenda and Women's Participation

Ms. Khawla Dunia, Gender Expert in Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) and Women's Rights Defender, spoke about the Common Agenda's section on Women, Peace and Security. She reflected on all heard horrific stories about women, and it was through those stories that the Common Agenda was developed. The voices of Syrian women and girls needed to reach civil society. The Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPSA) focuses on resolving conflicts and achieving equality to achieve social peace. One of the most important recommendations was to halt all conflict activities in Syria and to incorporate gender considerations into all peacebuilding activities and decisions. Another important recommendation was for greater transparency. Recommendations also included the necessity of conducting extensive research on gender issues and combating VAWG in Syria, and women's participation in all aspects of society, particularly decision-making as well as a peaceful return of immigrants to Syria, especially for women, who are the most vulnerable to discrimination. Social awareness was emphasized during the open discussion with participants. Given the complexities of Syria's political situation and the authority system, some participants expressed concern about developing a National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. One of the main challenges identified was the inability to transfer money within Syria, which prevented them from assisting women and girls. There was consensus about the importance of resolving this issue. One participant stated, *"there is no method to transfer money in any way, even organizations are unable to do so due to all the sanctions and punishments."*

Legislation

Ms. Sawsan Zakzak presented Syria's legislation, emphasizing aspects that make the legislation discriminatory and a factor influencing VAWG. Syria has ratified a number of international human rights and gender equality conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and the 1951 Immigration Convention. Some of the key points she emphasized regarding the Syrian Constitution of 2012 and the national laws are: 1) The Constitution of 2012 does not guarantee equality between men and women, does not criminalize violence and discrimination against women, and is not gender sensitive; and 2) It is an undemocratic constitution, which does not respect the separation of powers or the independence of the judiciary, and does not prevent the formation of exceptional courts. Discrimination in Syrian laws included: First, the Personal Status Laws of all denominations, since the Syrian society is made up of multiple communities from various confessions, each confession has its own set of Personal Status Laws. All these laws include provisions that discriminate against women in matters related to marriage, divorce, guardianship, custody, and the legality of early marriage. Second, discretionary text within the Penal Code where crimes are defined, or in terms of unequal punishment for the same crime committed by men or women, or in terms of punishment inconsistency with the committed crime. Third, there is discrimination in nationality law that prevents women from passing on their nationality to their children. Fourth, there are labour laws, social security, and agricultural relations to consider. The recommendations included a necessary reform to repeal discriminatory legislation, as well as the implementation of signed international conventions and the adoption of new gender-sensitive laws. Following Ms. Zakzak's presentation, almost all participants agreed on one point: the critical importance of secularism and cancellation of all discriminative laws and articles of laws. Another significant concern was that the reality on the ground is quite complicated, given that the court of justice is appointed by the President and is not an independent entity.

Access to Justice

Ms. Joumana Seif, Legal expert, Women's Rights Defender, Member of the Gender Advocacy Group, and Ms. Michelle Jarvis, Deputy Head, International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), portrayed the horrendous situation women and girls face in Syria, stating: *"There is no peace without justice and there is no democracy without gender equality."* Ms. Seif emphasized that incorporating a gender perspective is critical for both the peace and justice processes, particularly transitional justice. She added that 10 years after the revolution and the formation of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, and despite the establishment of the IIIM, transitional justice remains absent from negotiations and peace talks. In terms of accountability and justice efforts currently available, she explained that activists are still fighting for recognition of gender-based violations and recognition of women's experience in armed conflict, the crimes women have been subjected to, the harm women have endured, and

all forms of political, social and economic violence.

Ms. Michelle Jarvis gave the participants information about IIM and how it has been working to provide Syrians with access to justice. IIM is referred to as a "justice facilitator" because it collects, preserves, aggregates, and analyses information and evidence for international crimes committed in Syria. IIM's mandate is to prosecute the cases, and it was able to assist 102 instances by sharing relevant evidence, analysis, and other expertise. Throughout the work of IIM and data collection, it was estimated that statements from women and girls would be significantly underrepresented in the materials represented and documented, and the assessment proved to be very accurate. As a result, the IIM has been developing and implementing a proactive strategy to fill those gendered evidence gaps and is committed to being inclusive and seeking to incorporate a comprehensive gender analysis into all of its efforts. During the open discussion, participants emphasized the challenges that families of the missing and disappeared face, as well as the heart-breaking reality of not knowing whether their husbands, fathers, brothers, or loved ones are alive. This panel and follow up discussion offered a ray of hope for future accountability.

Access to Economic Resources

Ms. Sabiha Khalil, founding member of Komela Jin and Chairperson of the Organisational Committee of the Syrian Women Political Movement, Member of the Gender Advocacy Group, underlined that women's structural exclusion from access to financial assets, which is enforced by cultural norms and the legal system, prevents women from participating equally in the economy. This was true even before the war, but war and conflict only exacerbated the situation. 80 percent of Syrians live in poverty, with Syrian women making up the majority of the population. Food safety and water sanitation are jeopardized, and Syrians have witnessed numerous roadblocks in the path of humanitarian aid. Women bore the brunt of the consequences of aid and food has been used as weapons of war. They face sexual abuse while attempting to obtain humanitarian aid, often being forced to sell their bodies for food. Ms. Khalil emphasized that statistics claiming that 13% of women are economically active are incorrect. Rural women who work in agriculture and on family farms are excluded from the economy; men are paid while women work in the fields. The significance of education was also emphasized, with education varying depending on where one lives, and which political party controls the region. Despite this, some stereotypes have shifted since the war, as women were forced to take on the role of family breadwinners in the absence of husbands and fathers.

Challenging Gender Stereotypes, Changing Public Opinion

Ms. Doris Awwad, Women's Rights Defender, Member of the Gender Advocacy Group, spoke about the different types of abuse women face in Syria, and how much the conflict has exacerbated the situation. She laid great emphasis on the issue of stigmatization and provided a testimony of how stigma follows a woman in all aspects of her life. She explained that while

the woman was detained and subjected to torture and maltreatment in the detention centre, all she could think about was her children and how much she wanted to hug them, but once the woman was released, she returned home to find out her husband had divorced her because she was subjected to assault and possibly rape while she was detained. Not only did the husband divorce her because she was detained and sexually assaulted, but he also barred her from seeing her children. The woman's family was estranged, and they pressured her to marry someone else, an immigrant because no one wants a divorced woman in their "culture". After remarrying, the woman gave birth to two children, her husband was abusive to her and her children. This testimony illustrates the extent to which gender stereotypes and stigma can affect a woman's life. Ms. Awwad underlined that the *Common Agenda* evokes many useful means to mitigate these challenges that Syrian women constantly face. The topic was followed by a discussion where participants underlined the severe lack of shelters for women victims of VAWG in Syria, making it difficult for them to assist women victims. *"What's the point of telling her to fight back if I can't offer her an alternative? This will only aggravate her situation. This is why, we urgently need more shelters."* They also stated that unless the armed conflict is stopped, there is no way to end violence against women.

Panel 2: Working in groups and Plenary session on mechanisms to promote and implement the Common Agenda and formulation of recommendations

On the second day of the conference, participants were divided into working groups to discuss means and ways to promote and implement the *Common Agenda*. Three working groups discussed and provided recommendations on the following topics:

- Building coalitions across sectors (women's rights, human rights, legal expertise, humanitarian assistance, policy and advocacy networks, etc.)
- Setting up a feminist platform to enable gender approach and expertise from grassroots to policymaking
- Supporting the freedom and independence of Civil Society in Syria where Women's Rights organisations can prepare the ground for a long-term process towards peace and democracy integral of gender equality

During the plenary sessions, the outcomes of the working groups were presented, followed by rich discussions. The following recommendations were summarized according to the three topics of the sessions:

Building coalitions across sectors (women's rights, human rights, legal expertise, humanitarian assistance, policy and advocacy networks, etc.)

- * Support the broad coalition building of women's organizations both inside and outside of Syria.
- * Overcome fears that networks and alliances will devolve into organizations by implementing a horizontal rather than hierarchical mechanism of action within alliance leadership and member organizations to preserve organizational identity.
- * Encourage and support networking among all Syrian organisations and across all regions.
- * Provide training for local organizations and activists to enable their inclusion in international discussions.
- * Create a directory of women activists who have access to international forums, allowing for and facilitating communication with them (email, phone, etc.)
- * Hold regular meetings between organizations and activists both inside and outside of Syria.
- * Adopt a mechanism that connects potential women activists in international forums with women activists inside Syria, with the goal of enabling new activists to reach international forums.
- * Open field of communication and increase understanding of the Syrian situation by international organizations and personalities by inviting them to conferences and meetings.
- * Use the existing expertise and specializations of Syrian civil society organizations and Syrian activists to promote the *Common Agenda*, so that the work is complementary rather than competitive.
- * Continue advocating for the adoption of the *Common Agenda* by holding meetings with local and international organizations, as well as activists.
- * Consider and address the temporary and urgent needs that must be prioritized at this time.

Setting up a feminist platform to enable gender approach and expertise from grassroots to policymaking

- * Reach out to other feminist platforms and attract more feminist groups for the common goal.
- * Create a work agenda that includes all groups willing to join and coordinate with other organizations that have similar goals.

- * Create alliances, bridges, and networks inside and outside of Syria, as well as with all political and humanitarian groups that share the values of long-term justice and peace.
- * Work on governance and organizing the platform's work on a more practical level.
- * Present the new organizations that are joining and their work and divide them according to their specialties and scope of work in a way that makes reaching out and working with them easier. Fill out a form on the platform to participate or form a new association or organization. The platform should provide space for collaborative work and curb competitiveness.
- * Present all groups on the platform, as well as leaders of societal groups, on an individual level. Ideological differences should be tolerated because the goal is to share expertise and information and to collaborate to improve the situation of Syrian women. (Participants drew on a database of victims of violence to emphasize the importance of violence in all its forms. They also insisted on how they could reach the target groups and pave the way for women to participate in decision making in a real and effective way.)
- * Improve the pathways to reach marginalized women and those in the rural areas as well as the organizations they are related to or that represent them.
- * Spread awareness and knowledge about the platform and how it can be beneficial to improving the situation and the reality of women and communicate this to the international community.

Supporting the freedom and independence of Civil Society in Syria where Women's Rights organisations can prepare the ground for a long-term process towards peace and democracy integral of gender equality

- * Work and contribute to the strengthening of the civil society and advocate for its independence.
- * Advocate for Syria's sanctions to be reformed.
- * Establish more safe spaces for meetings of civil society actors across different areas to enhance trust building among them.
- * Raise awareness about the role of women in the Syrian context and break down gender stereotypes.
- * Encourage research, particularly on gender issues.
- * Encourage the implementation of UNSCR 1325, where the UNSCR 1325 is a tool for women gatherings and empowerment.

Panel 3: Working Groups and Recommendations for the International Community and Brussels VI for the implementation of the Common Agenda

Participants returned to their working groups and continued the discussion to provide recommendations to the EU and the international community in three main areas:

- Enabling international commitments to support the availability of services for victims of VAWG
- Enabling international commitments to support women's participation at all stages of peace negotiations
- Enabling international commitments to support women's rights organisations, networks and platforms

At the end of the second day, the following recommendations for the implementation of the *Common Agenda* were shared with the European Union:

Enabling international commitments to support women's participation at all stages of peace negotiations

- Exert pressure on all local and international parties to end the armed conflict and efficiently implement the international commitments related to women's rights and gender equality within the UN political process, while supporting pro-actively women's participation in all processes and at all levels, through the implementation of the international resolutions related to Syria, especially UNSCR 2254 together with UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security.
- Encourage all the local and international parties to adopt and consult the *Common Agenda for Combating VAWG*, which responds to specific needs and considers the current and evolving situation of women and girls in Syria and in hosting countries.
- Continue promoting women's rights and gender equality, including in terms of women's participation at all levels, as key element in all EU funding mechanisms for humanitarian assistance and international partnerships.
- Keep up in the public debate on the issue of forced returns to Syria, especially from European and neighbouring countries, highlighting the heightened risks of all forms of violence for Syrian women and girls in the current context of political pressure on returns. Draw the attention of European asylum countries to the gaps in asylum policies

that allow male family members to practice violence against women by preventing family women from learning the language, integrating, and working.

Enabling international commitments to support women's rights organisations, networks and platforms

- Continue acting as an important agent in supporting and funding women's rights organizations, platforms and projects, studies and research on the situation of women in Syria as well as of Syrian women residing outside of Syria.
- Address the issue of sanctions, considering the negative effects that these sanctions have or have had on the work and existence of women's rights organizations and defenders.
- Design mechanisms to offer protection to women's rights organizations and defenders, specifically on combatting VAWG (support the provision of a safe environment for them to participate and play their effective role in every step of the political decision-making process). This includes facilitating access to visa for women's rights organizations and defenders.
- Rely on and support the grassroots expertise from women's rights organisations and women's rights defenders to support the monitoring, evaluation and learning system of Gender Action Plan (GAP) III.
- Collaborate with women's rights organizations and defenders including the Gender Advocacy Group as a means of better understanding the field reality and the experiences of women while promoting the recommendations stemming from the *Common Agenda*.

Enabling international commitments to support the availability of services for victims of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)

- Provide additional and focused political and financial support to women's organizations and initiatives aiming at enhancing availability, accessibility, acceptability, and affordability of services for victims of VAWG in Syria and in hosting countries:
 - Shelter/homes provided for emergency and longer-term protection to women and girl victims of violence and their children.
 - Emergency toll-free number available 24/24 and a mobile application.
 - Access to health services (including medico-legal certificates, psychosocial and mental health support).

- o Capacity building to organizations to enhance the capabilities of workers in this field.
 - o Free legal aid and counselling.
 - o Economic support and income-generating initiatives.
 - o Spreading information on all available services.
 - o Support organizations to establish an appropriate referral system.
- Promote collaboration of EU partners with women's rights organizations and defenders, relying on their grassroots expertise to ensure effective implementation of humanitarian and international cooperation priorities planned within the GAP III, including gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, the Gender-Age Marker and women's rights.
 - Support civil society efforts in creating a code of conduct in the prevention of VAWG.

Panel 4: Reception of the recommendations to the European Commission

Ms. Henrike Trautmann, Acting Director, Southern Neighbourhood and Turkey, Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) emphasized that there should be a coordinated action on the ground for the sake of Syrian women, and added that the *Common Agenda* serves as a strategic guide for determining what should be accomplished and what actions should be taken. She explained that Syria, like all other countries in the region, faces enormous challenges in terms of youth participation, participation of the minorities, and women's participation in the political process or the labour market. She emphasized the EU's willingness to support women's roles in the political process toward negotiated peace to achieve equality, as well as evoking many useful means to alleviate the difficulties that Syrian women face. As the Syrian political process is extremely difficult, she concluded that the EU intends to encourage advocacy.

Mr. Carl Hallergard, Deputy Managing Director for the Middle East and North Africa, European External Action Services (EEAS), stressed that women and girls are the most vulnerable victims of conflict, but they should play a significant role in bringing about change and peace. He laid emphasis on the need of coordination between actors and noted that it is very important that different women activists in different places work together to link support and make effective change. He also stressed the need to educate men and boys to understand that there's a new reality that they should adjust and adapt to and be part of. Lastly, he thanked the participants and EFI for their work, recommendations, encouragement, and support and stressed the EU's openness to welcome the activists in Brussels and continue the exchange with such initiatives.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In her concluding remarks, Ms. Sawsan Zakzak stressed that the discussions helped shed light on the difficulties and challenges the Syrian civil society organizations and women face, and the options of in-person and online participation allowed everyone to be present and participate. Ms. Boriana Jonsson, Executive Director of EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI) underlined the importance of the conference in highlighting the role of women, who have been at the forefront from day one of the peaceful protests and never backed away from the goal of reaching a political transition in Syrian towards democracy. For this to happen, violence against women should be addressed to structurally ensure women's participation. There was a unanimous agreement that only a credible, long-term, and inclusive political solution based on the full and comprehensive implementation of UNSCR 2254 and UNSCR 1325 can bring Syria lasting peace. Women's participation in the peace process is critical to its success as women's involvement is not only ensuring a lasting and durable peace but is also a matter of justice.

