



**Report: online conference
Empowering Syrian refugee women and girls
25 March 2021**

EN: fb.watch/4z-k1PFNs6/

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EMPOWERING SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN AND GIRLS

25 March 2021


19h CET via Zoom

Register at

<http://tinyurl.com/nraem22>

Live stream at

 @NpwjPress

 <https://www.facebook.com/npwj.org>



Overview

Over the course of the war in Syria, widespread reports have documented that crimes of sexual and gender-based violence are continuing to take place within Syria and among displaced Syrian communities in bordering countries. However, the phenomenon remains among the unspoken horrors of the war due to the social and cultural stigma attached to such incidents. It is generally accepted that the prevalence of sexual violence during conflict, as in times of peace, is consistently underreported almost everywhere in the world, but the added culture of shame and dishonour that surrounds sexual violations among Syrian communities creates a toxic situation that presents particular challenges. The result is a complex and compounded security and protection problem where already vulnerable demographics are even more at risk. Since the inception of the war on Syria, the number of Syrian refugees seeking shelter in Turkey continued to increase. About half of the 3.5 million Syrians who have gained temporary protection in Turkey are women and more than 50% of all refugees are 17 years old or younger. Although the Turkish authorities have played a leading role in addressing the gender sensitivity of the refugee response in Turkey, Syrian women and girls remain at high-risk to be victims or witnesses of acts of sexual and gender-based violence and ending up in vulnerable situations, having fewer opportunities in their country of refuge. For the past ten years, the international community, UN Agencies and civil society actors mobilised to support the Syrian people and address the most critical humanitarian and resilience issues affecting Syrian refugee communities, both inside the country and in the region. In this contest, it is critical that the international community continues and redoubles its efforts to engage and support Syrian civil society, especially in the field of women's rights and contrast to gender-based violence.

Online Conference summary

1.1 The participants

Panellists of the meeting, chaired by **Gianfranco Dell'Alba**, President of No Peace Without Justice, included **Hon. Alessandra Moretti**, member of the European Parliament Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, **Hon. Brando Benifei**, member of the European Parliament Delegation for relations with the Mashreq countries, **Hon. Eva Kaili**, member of the European Parliament Delegation for relations with the Arab Peninsula, **Maryam Shamdin**, founding member of White Hats Organisation and **Hiba Alhaji**, Civil Society Strengthening specialist with UNDP and a co-founder of Equity and Empowerment. **Niccolò Figà-Talamanca**, Secretary General of No Peace Without Justice, provided closing remarks.

This online event, organised by NPWJ in collaboration with Equity and Empowerment, represented an opportunity to amplify the voices of Syrian women and girls and to ensure that every segment of the humanitarian response at all levels - national, regional and multilateral - is based on the active involvement of affected communities and victims in the elaboration of inclusive policies and practices. Migrant and refugee women and girls are too often treated as passive service receivers rather than right holders with agency. The aim of the meeting was to discuss how to change these dynamics, ensure a better tailoring of the humanitarian response to the needs of the affected communities and reinforce the concept that women and girls should be treated as rights-holders and active transformative agents rather than objects of protection.

1.2 The panel discussion

Mr. **Gianfranco Dell'Alba** thanked the panellists and introduced the topic under discussion. In particular, he underlined how since the inception of the war in Syria, NPWJ has worked with Syrian civil society organisations and human rights advocates and assisted them in amplifying their voice at the international level, including at the UN, the Assembly of States Parties of the International Criminal Court and the European institutions. NPWJ's most recent activities aimed at strengthening the resilience of refugee women and girls and empowering them to combat gender-based violence. Within the framework of a project funded by UN-WOMEN, NPWJ organised an extensive field research in five Turkish districts and sub-districts, which involved more than 200 Syrian women, men, adolescents

and elders. Based on this work and in partnership with its local partners, NPWJ elaborated a series of recommendations¹ to ensure an active and meaningful involvement of Syrian women and girls in the implementation of international policies and practices to fight against GBV. He recalled how the Syrian conflict has caused the biggest displacement crisis since World War II, creating over 5.5 million refugees and more than 6 million IDPs. Turkey alone hosts more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees, about half of them women and girls. Women and girls bear the brunt of the conflict as pre-existing power dynamics often become even more entrenched. This might not depend on malice or ill-will, but on survival strategies for “protecting” women and girls while at the same time denying their agency and violating their human rights. On the eve of the fifth Brussels Conference on Syria, convened by the European Union on 30 and 31 March, Mr. Dell’Alba expressed the hope that the international community will begin a process of analysis and reinforcement of the practices adopted to counter SGBV among Syrian refugees based on the active involvement of local communities and survivors. This will allow a real empowerment of women and girls and enable them to become actors for change for their communities and for the future of Syria.

Hon. Alessandra Moretti underlined that this year marks the tenth anniversary since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, which has caused one of the largest humanitarian crises since World War II. Consequences for women have been particularly brutal: women and girls face increased risks of GBV due to harassment, family violence, sexual abuse, child and forced marriage, and sexual exploitation. Moreover, the spread of COVID-19 threatens the most vulnerable populations and their precarious livelihoods. Women tend to be those who sustain families and communities after losing husbands and fathers, but they have also registered higher rates of poverty compared to men. Syrian women and women’s organisations play a central role in responding to the crisis, in humanitarian assistance and peace-making efforts, healthcare and education and in other sectors. We should stop looking at women as victims because political transition and democracy can only take roots if the human rights of both women and men are respected. Hon. Moretti stressed how more than 11.7 million Syrians are internally displaced or living as refugees in neighbouring countries. This shows us how important it is to manage the migration crisis in a united way within the European Union. The key word must be solidarity towards refugees and European countries who are at the frontline. Moreover, Hon. Moretti reiterated that Europe must be a credible actor in the Middle East and urged the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and all Member States to speak with one voice in order to be relevant in the solution of the conflict in Syria.

Hon. Brando Benifei recalled how ten years ago Syrians took the street to reclaim their rights and call for a more open and democratic society. The war that ensued has particularly targeted women and girls. Widespread reports have documented that SGBV continues to take place within Syria and among displaced Syrian communities in bordering countries. The prevalence of sexual violence during conflict is underreported almost everywhere in the world, but the added culture of shame and dishonour that surrounds sexual violations among Syrian communities creates a toxic situation and makes it an unspoken horror. The conflict has caused the biggest displacement crisis since World War II, creating over 5.5 million refugees and more than 6 million IDPs. Turkey alone hosts more than 3.6 million refugees, about half of them women and girls. The dire humanitarian situation is being further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated health hazards, including inadequate sexual and reproductive healthcare, strained mental health, and increased GBV. Syrian refugee communities have been particularly affected by the spread of the virus with more severe repercussions on women and girls, aggravating pre-existing inequalities and socio-cultural discrimination. In such a fragile environment, women’s rights risk a further deterioration and SGBV becomes even more difficult to prevent and contrast. The limitations of movement have forced women to spend the lock down within their family units, even if they do not always represent a safe space. Moreover, women and girls risk losing job opportunities and access to education. Hon. Benifei stressed how the European Union remains the biggest international donor in assistance for needs inside Syria, in support of refugees and in support of refugee-hosting countries. It is critical that the EU, its Member States and the international community continue their efforts to engage with and support Syrian civil society, especially in the field of women’s rights and contrast to SGBV. Their voice is crucial to understand

¹ See Annex I

what is happening and their contribution critical to evaluate what is needed. In order to better tailor the humanitarian response to the needs of the affected communities, it is paramount that their active involvement becomes the bedrock upon which rest every segment of the humanitarian response.

Hon. Eva Kaili reminded that women were at the forefront of the Syrian uprising: the first protests were organised by a group of mothers calling for the release of their children. Forced to leave their country, Syrian women have become the leading force of their local communities, taking on new responsibilities and roles in their families as breadwinners and decision-makers. A generation of Syrian women's rights defenders has evolved in the past ten years. However, the war, the crimes and displacement exacerbated tensions within families and communities bringing further disempowerment and exclusion. Too often during armed conflicts women and girls are seen as objects in need of protection, rather than as rights holders, and violence and subjugation are perpetrated by family members and communities as "protective measures". For instance, studies report that child marriage rates are four times higher among Syrian refugees today than before the crisis, indicating that, due to displacement, instability and poverty, families are more prone to wed off their daughters to offer them a better life. The chaotic environment in which refugees are forced to live and their precarious conditions lead to the reinforcement and worsening of traditional, cultural and religious practices. In the context of international development, cooperation and emergency response programs, women and girls are still seen as objects of protection. This results in focusing primarily on "gender-coded" occupations, typically mirroring the domestic (unpaid) labour that women are likely to carry out within the household and which does not challenge the existing status quo. The unspoken implication of offering these occupations as the only jobs that women are able, willing, suited or allowed to do is to reinforce gender stereotypes and inequality. As the biggest donor in Syria, it is fundamental that the EU, along with UN agencies and the international community, make sure that every segment of the humanitarian response is based on the active and meaningful involvement of affected communities in changing the current dynamics, focus their efforts on inclusive policies and practices that treat and engage with migrant and refugee women and girls as right holders and agents of change rather than passive service receivers. Hon. Kaili also remarked how it will be critical for the new American Administration to play a stronger role in the Middle East and that the recently adopted EU sanction mechanism could be imposed on Bashar al-Assad, his wife and on all parties who committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria.

Maryam Shamdin recalled how, since the inception of the revolution, women have asked for political change and justice. Syrian women made many sacrifices and linked their destiny to the Syrian revolution. They participated in social, political, and civil activities in the hope to gain freedom, equality and a role in the political transformation. Unfortunately, until now Syrian women could not achieve any gains in terms of political or social rights. This depends on social division and on the control of national forces that limit the role of women because of security justifications.

Hiba Alhaji stressed how diversity and solidarity among women are the only ways to build sustainable peace. In 1991, the UNHCR adopted the guidelines on the protection of refugee women, which called for integrating the resources and needs of refugee women in all aspects of programming to ensure equitable protection and assistance. There is an urgent need to achieve harmonisation between the multiple backgrounds of refugee and the laws of host countries. In different asylum cases in neighbouring countries, there is no special asylum law. For instance, polygamy is permitted in Syrian culture and law, but it is forbidden in Turkey, where the second wife remains unrecognised and has no legal status over her children. Furthermore, underage marriage is common in Syrian society and cases increased with the deterioration of the economic situation, but it is considered a crime by Turkish law. Syrian refugees can report these cases to the Turkish police, but most of them feel divided between two difficult choices: either reporting their parents and the groom, who will be imprisoned or deported to unsafe areas, or accepting the marriage. There is an important role for both the Syrian and the Turkish civil societies to play since intersectional relationships bring better results. The most important things that civil society should do are a real assessment of the situation of refugee women and advocacy for the enactment of laws in which refugee women are involved in order to ultimately have policies that include them.

Annex I

“STRENGTHENING FIRST LINE RESPONDERS AND EMPOWERING REFUGEE WOMEN AND GIRLS IN TURKEY TO COMBAT AND OVERCOME SGBV”

Final Recommendations

In light of their long-standing work with Syrian CSOs and of the results of the field work with Syrian refugees living in Turkey, NPWJ and its local partners have jointly formulated a series of recommendations for international organisations, Turkish public institutions and civil society with a view to amplifying the voice of Syrian women and girls and preventing any form of sexual and gender-based violence on this population.

The following stems from the results of an extensive field research in five Turkish districts and sub-districts (Istanbul, Gaziantep, Nizip, Antakya, and Kilis), which involved more than 200 Syrian women, men, adolescents, and elders. The recommendations aim at summarising and voicing their needs and remarks as a basis for advocacy and policy making, implementing a participatory approach to eradicate GBV against women and girls in the context under analysis.

Recommendations for International Organisations

- Treat and engage with migrant and refugee women and girls in need of protection as right holders with agency rather than passive service receivers;
- Consolidate an approach to protection which is community-based, continuing to build survivor-centred responses;
- Make sure that every segment of the humanitarian response by all involved stakeholders is gender-responsive (e.g. considers and acts upon the indirect repercussions that said response may have in terms of GBV and gender equality in general);
- Make sure that every segment of the humanitarian response at all levels (national, regional and multilateral) is based on the active and meaningful involvement of affected communities in the elaboration, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of inclusive policies and practices;
- Base GBV response on an intersectional approach, cooperating with organisations working on supporting women with disabilities in order to enable societal participation of girls and women with disabilities;
- Fight stigma around GBV survivors and ensure their reintegration into their communities;
- Encourage views of cultural and religious discourse that respect and promote women's and girls' rights and do not perpetuate GBV through television, radio, or any other means;
- Develop long-term, sustainable psychological support programs to help survivors overcome trauma – if necessary refraining from using clinical language to avoid perceived stigma around psychotherapy;
- Organise awareness-raising sessions with women and girls, men and boys, on GBV for a perspective shift that encourages survivors to speak up and perpetrators to frame their acts as rights violations (e.g. marital rape, child marriage);
- Implement effective legal, judicial and reporting mechanisms to ensure accountability for GBV perpetrators;
- Elaborate and implement plans to foster intergenerational work (awareness-raising, discussion) with groups of both men and women to eradicate negative coping mechanisms which perpetuate GBV within families and communities;

- Strengthen interinstitutional collaborations among national and international agencies and civil society actors in order to improve data collection and optimise existing mechanisms of response against GBV;
- Manage cases of sex trafficking within the camps ensuring that individuals fundamental rights are not hampered or stymied due to mere association to the perpetrators (e.g. expelling individuals who are involved in sex trade may have negative repercussions on other people who are not directly involved).

Recommendations for Turkish public institutions

- Create safe spaces for women and girls to engage with each other, build solidarity and support with other women and girls, exchange information, rebuild community networks and empower female population, especially in the context of the COVID crisis which has seen an increase of IPV and other forms of GBV especially in the family context ;
- Provide clear follow-up mechanisms for women and girls survivors of GBV, including medical and psychological care, with the objective of preventing societal stigmatisation, further violence and negative coping mechanisms and reintegrating them into society;
- Ensure the presence of an adequate number of legal centres for legal advice, as well as websites and helplines in Arabic that provide legal assistance;
- Provide female translators in Turkish protection centres and public institutions that Syrian population may need to resort to and improve Turkish language training for Syrian refugees;
- Prepare an in-depth study on Syrian girls and women who are sexually exploited through human trafficking and sex trade to conduct a more in-depth analysis of violence occurring against women and girls across different sectors and gather reliable, disaggregated data on the conditions of Syrian girls and women in Turkey;
- Carry out awareness campaign on the illegality of child marriage (marriage under 18 years of age) in Turkey;
- Ensure that the level of coverage of social and health insurance costs for refugee women allows for increased autonomy and economic independence;
- Secure job opportunities for Syrian refugee women in accordance with their experiences and education, to achieve and improve economic independence and thus tackle this important root cause of violence towards them;
- Provide direct economic support to women with a view to provide a sense of security and dignity and preventing violence stemming from economic disempowerment within the family;
- Provide women with IT devices and with workshops on how to use them in order to enable them to network amongst them and reach out for help outside the home or community if needed.

Recommendations for Civil Society

- Raise awareness amongst Syrian refugees, particularly women and girls, on their rights under Turkish law and under international human rights law;
- Advocate for Turkish authorities to enact anti-discrimination campaigns on Syrian population and fight hate crime on-line;
- Establish protection and special care centers for refugee women and girls to provide an inclusive and safe entry points for services, information, as well as to build resilience and begin rebuilding community networks;
- Raise awareness amongst refugees, especially women and girls, on the existence and functioning of available care centres and helplines, as well as possibilities of seeking redress when experiencing any form of violence.