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CRISIS IN SYRIA: NOW IS THE TIME TO SEEK MALE ALLIES FOR LEADERSHIP EQUALITY



December 2015

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Crisis in Syria: Now is the Time to Seek Male Allies for Leadership Equality



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By Jessica Huber, IFES Senior Gender Specialist

December 2015

Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems.



Crisis in Syria: Now is the Time to Seek Male Allies for Leadership Equality
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About IFES

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) supports citizens' right to participate in free and fair elections. Our independent expertise strengthens electoral systems and builds local capacity to deliver sustainable solutions.

As an effective and valuable leader in inclusive democracy and governance, IFES works to fortify women in political and electoral processes as candidates and elected leaders, technical experts in elections, engaged civil society leaders and informed voters. IFES implements innovative women's empowerment activities to increase women's political participation and leadership. IFES uses evidence and technical leadership to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment activities into our democracy and governance work by providing gender-sensitive technical assistance and analysis on electoral legal frameworks, election systems and the administration of elections. IFES consults with a broad range of women's groups and leaders and takes into account specific local contexts. This is particularly relevant in countries with less stable democracies. Countries in conflict or transitioning from conflict often lack structures, including democratic processes leading to elections and a stable democracy.

About the Global Women's Leadership Program

In support of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), and in accordance with the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) commitments under the U.S. National Action Plan (NAP) for Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), the Global Women's Leadership Program (GWLP) aims to reduce the individual, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers that inhibit women from participating in peacebuilding and transitional political processes, as well as increase the substantive participation of women in these platforms so that their voices are heard and included in the development of peaceful, democratic societies. Through GWLP, the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) partners – IFES, the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute – support women's direct engagement in a number of the high-level global forums that will frame the future of the gender equality and women's empowerment agenda focused on increasing participation in conflict prevention and resolution, democratic development, human rights, and the establishment of good governance mechanisms. For more information, visit www.ifes.org.

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Table of Contents

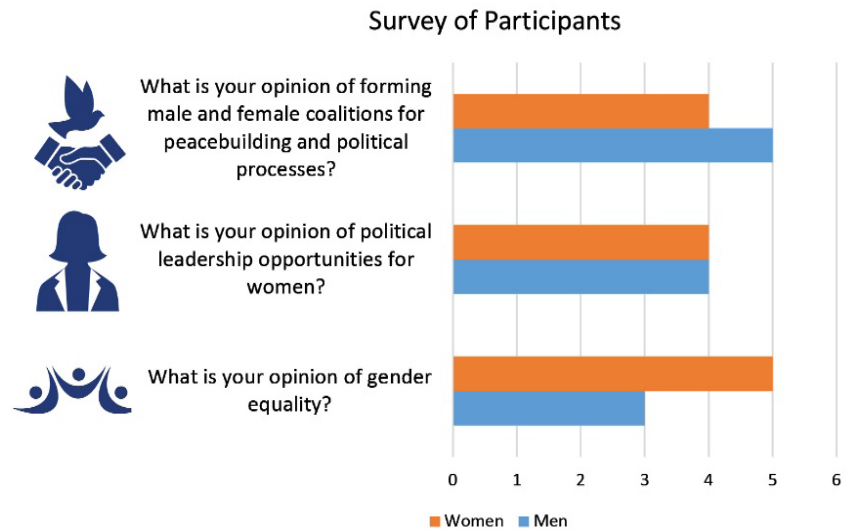
Executive Summary.....	1
Key findings and recommendations	1
Introduction	3
Male Allies for Leadership Equality Program.....	3
Male Allies Discussions in Turkey	4
Professional and Household views of Gender Equality & Women’s Leadership in Syria	5
The Current Situation for Women in Syria.....	5
Women’s Leadership	6
Engaging Men	9
Recommendations for Women’s Leadership in Syria.....	10
Women’s Empowerment Support for Professionals	10
Women’s Empowerment Support at the Community Level.....	10
Engaging Men at the Political Transition Level.....	11
Engaging Men at the Household and Community Level.....	11
Conclusion.....	12

Executive Summary

The crisis in Syria is a hardship for men, women, boys and girls who struggle to subsist amid a brutal conflict with widespread and indiscriminate violence. Men are disappearing from their communities into the fog of war, and boys are preparing to join them. Women and girls are left behind in most cases and are desperate for opportunities to provide for their families and communities, while playing any part they can to end the conflict.

IFES, with support from USAID’s Global Women’s Leadership Program, is developing a systematic approach for engaging men to support women in leadership and decision-making roles in political and electoral processes. On November 10, 2015, an IFES delegation traveled to Gaziantep, Turkey to meet with Syrians to discuss male allies for leadership equality.

IFES asked participants in the Male Allies for Leadership Equality (MALE) focus groups and interviews to answer a few questions about gender equality and women's leadership on a scale of “Not Useful” (1) to “Very Useful” (5), which revealed perceptions that were echoed in further detail during discussions.



Key findings and recommendations

While matters of life and death, peace and security overwhelm the people of Syria, it was clear from these discussions that the inclusion of women as partners in Syria’s future must not be delayed and there are steps that can be immediately taken to close the existing gender gap. During focus group discussions and key informant interviews with over 50 Syrians living inside Syria and in Turkey, there emerged visions for movement forward. Highlights include:

1. There are highly educated and active women who are opting out of transition politics because they do not want to be treated as “decorations,” but rather as equal power brokers in finding peace for Syria. **Women who participate in the transition must be supported as equals and involved in key decision-making events** at the international, national and local council levels.
2. **Professional women repeatedly requested training to enhance their skills related to peace and political transition**, including mediation, negotiation and peace-building skills.
3. Women at the community level need support in every way possible, as the humanitarian crisis inside Syria and the poverty and discrimination for those in Turkey overwhelms their daily life.

Despite these hurdles **many women still believe that if the opportunity came about to lead or if they saw other women as leaders in their communities, they too could step into such roles.**

4. **Female mentors are critically important to women** both as professionals and as community members, yet such role models are vanishing within the crisis and increasingly conservative culture.
5. **As education is interrupted for women and girls, they must have access to creative channels to continue to empower them.** Education and empowerment need not center on traditional female roles (sewing, nursing, teaching, etc.) but can and should include preparing for professions that will help rebuild the country's administration and infrastructure.
6. With early marriage on the rise for young Syrian women, **opportunities to engage in supporting their families and continuing their education should be prioritized** to provide an alternative to this potentially very abusive future.
7. **Women and girls who have been arrested need access to psycho-social support and treatment.** Their communities, who may reject them as "impure" because of the sexual gender-based violence they suffered while in prison, must be sensitized to support these women.
8. **Male professionals could learn from both female colleagues and other male champions who promote gender equality.** They could also use basic gender and gender integration training.
9. Policies that support meaningful gender integration, even at this moment of crisis and transition, will ensure that **as Syria returns to peace, gender equality is in its foundation.**
10. Mentoring is seen as a critical tool to encourage men who may not value women's leadership. Particularly, occasions to bring male allies together with men who maybe resisting gender equality could **reduce the zero-sum assumptions about gender equality** and engage those who are new to the concept.
11. **Families must respect both husbands and wives' roles as leaders in the household and the community.** In cases where women want to become more active in activities outside of their homes, they should be supported and enabled by their husbands and family.
12. Mothers and sons are a critical cohort as Syria faces daily pressure from increasingly conservative culture and daily violence. **Mothers can use their influence with their sons to create understanding and support for gender equality.**
13. **It is imperative to focus on boys and young men who are catalytic to Syria's future,** because they bear the brunt of the violence, are deeply traumatized and now have psycho-social disabilities, and will need continual support to recover.

Introduction

Syria's revolution was a defining moment in changing the traditional role for women in society.¹ Although women were part of the professional workforce in Syria prior to the revolution, the patriarchal social environment prevented many from achieving leadership roles within their professions. Likewise, many women would leave their professions upon marriage and the start of a family to take up household responsibilities.

For many women interviewed, education is a clear indicator of the capacity of women to be leaders.² They acknowledge, however, that without experience to demonstrate their knowledge and capacity, women are marginalized from decision-making on issues outside of the home.

Men and women in Syria point to the critical role of women during the revolution and their actions that supported the movement, many times in ways that men were unable to accomplish. Women and men were both part of the protests that took to the streets and women worked behind the scenes to prepare materials, food and supplies to assist the movement. Women were also more able than men to attract new people in their communities to the revolution because they were viewed less suspiciously than men. So while both men and women acknowledge the importance of women's role in the revolution, *why doesn't this translate to a greater role in leadership and decision-making in Syria's political transition and in Syrian society?*

Why doesn't this translate to a greater role in leadership and decision-making in Syria's political transition and in Syrian society?

Male Allies for Leadership Equality Program

IFES is seeking to address this question through its USAID/Global Women's Leadership Program (GWLP), which is developing a Male Allies for Leadership Equality (MALE) training curriculum. IFES' approach to engaging male allies lays the foundation for women participating alongside men in making decisions that lead to peaceful, inclusive and sustainable democracy. For a country undergoing political transition, it puts into practice a systematic and practical approach for women and men to work together to lead peacebuilding and transitional political processes. Overall, it creates opportunities for male colleagues, family members and government officials to support women in decision-making roles by engaging both

¹ West, Nicola, "The Protester, the Activist and the Mother: Women in the Syrian Uprising," Oxford Brookes University, September 2012, pp. 49.

² Syrians are an educated populace, where women and men attend primary and secondary schools and university. According to the 2014 Global Gender Gap Report, Syria has near equality between men and women in educational attainment. For more, please see http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR14/GGGR_CountryProfiles.pdf (p.342).

women and men to cultivate a shared vision of stability and good governance, where men are called upon to strengthen channels of strategic influence for women leaders.

MALE engages men as allies in peacebuilding and political transition processes from three perspectives, recognizing that they are intertwined and mutually reinforcing:

Men in the home. The program examines and reflects the need for male allies at the household level, where supportive household environments are vital for women's participation in leadership development. Engaging family members is critical to maximizing women's participation by eliminating basic barriers such as restrictions of movement and household responsibilities. MALE ensures male family members are actively supporting leadership equality.

Male colleagues. The program includes a component for male engagement at the institutional level, where officials and key interlocutors are shown how to include (and stop excluding) women in key political decision-making roles, especially in transitional processes. It engages male gender champions, such as supportive government officials. It also addresses men who may not have previously considered gender equality in the workplace or those who have obstructed women's leadership in a systematic way. Specifically, MALE targets male government officials, civil society and activists who have or should have a collegial relationship with the women in the training.

Women leaders. Essential to its success and as part of IFES' Women's Leadership Training, the MALE module helps female participants develop strategies to identify allies and opportunities for engagement, build relationships, create alliances, and expand their networks. It simultaneously sensitizes women and men to the importance of their working together to lead political and democratic development and develops a practical approach on how to share power, provides an organized approach to training men on women's rights and leadership, and demonstrates how to create opportunities for alliances and coalitions between men and women working on democratic and peacebuilding processes.

Male Allies Discussions in Turkey

As part of the broader GWLP program to inform the IFES MALE module, IFES conducted focus group discussions and key informant interviews with 54 Syrian men and women in Gaziantep and Kilis, Turkey from November 11-18, 2015; 31 participants were women and 23 were men. Fourteen of those interviewed were Syrians living inside of Syria and 40 were living in Turkey, including people living in refugee camps. Although all discussions touched on household and professional level gender dynamics, 25 discussants were sought for their professional associations and 29 were sought for their reflections on community and household. Participants were from different socioeconomic statuses. The IFES team consisted of Jessica Huber, IFES Senior Gender Specialist; Tazreen Hussain, IFES Gender Program Coordinator; Elizabeth Reiter Dettmer, IFES Syria Senior Governance and Inclusion Specialist; and Medya Ayob, IFES Syria Research and Logistics Coordinator.

Cities in Turkey were chosen as locations to conduct meetings because IFES currently actively engages Syrians living in Turkey in political transition initiatives through the USAID-funded “Promoting Inclusive and Democratic Engagement in Syria” project. Men and women in Syria are steadfastly seeking to stabilize their country and searching for a lasting peace. As underscored by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, women must be a part of this process, and there have been efforts made by many Syrian women activists and organizations to participate meaningfully in peace talks and political transition discussions.³

Adapted to support the particular context of Syria, the objective of this focus group study was to understand how to foster the development of coalitions of women and men to advocate for more inclusive political processes.

Specifically, the focus group discussions helped to understand the following:

1. How men at the institutional level understand gender equality and how they may (or may not) be working to or willing to work to develop coalitions/alliances with women to lead peacebuilding and political transition efforts;
2. How men within households are, or can be, supportive to their female family members as leaders, and how they can be change agents for gender equality within their families and communities; and,
3. The challenges women have faced as leaders, women’s approaches to engaging men, and the type of support needed to build coalitions and alliances with men for peace and political transition efforts.

Professional and Household views of Gender Equality & Women’s Leadership in Syria

The Current Situation for Women in Syria

The conflict in Syria has been devastating for everyone and the role of women in the midst of this devastation is ever worsening. One participant in the IFES focus group discussion summed it up by saying, “The situation for women inside Syria is the same no matter how educated she is. Whether she is enlightened or illiterate she is unable to do anything.” Inside Syria, men have disappeared into battle and the women have been left to scrape together a living with very little economic opportunity, usually menial tasks or work related to distributing humanitarian relief with increasingly limited freedom of movement. The issues that traditionally challenge women have been compounded by conflict. With increasingly conservative militants dominating the liberated areas of Syria, hijab coverings and the restrictions that go along with them are no longer optional. One woman interviewed wondered if the space for women to

³ Williams, Kristin “10 Ways Syrian Women are Building Peace and Democracy,” February 21, 2014, www.conflict Perspectives.imtd.org.

meet and greet each other in public is disappearing, because women can no longer recognize each other. Early and forced marriage, which is on the rise, removes a generation of girls from education and therefore from becoming leaders in their communities. Single women, including those who are older, widows or divorced women, find that their options for self-determination are severely limited. Depression and trauma are understandably widespread for women who remain the lingering anchors in the communities with no outlets for them to cope. Pervasive sexual and gender-based violence is entangled in conservative taboos that severely limit access to services. For example, women who have been arrested and taken prisoner are doubly traumatized, because once they are released they are shunned by their communities. It is assumed they have been sexually assaulted and are no longer pure.

In places inside Syria that are under aerial bombardment, people are frequently displaced from their homes. One woman has no support for her 11-year old son with autism. As a woman we met said, “when we hear the airplanes coming, we don’t have time to think. We grab our children and run.” Another woman said that they tell their children: “do not worry, because God is almighty and it is the will of God if we die.”

“When we hear the airplanes coming, we don’t have time to think. We grab our children and run.”

Women’s Leadership

A dichotomy emerged from the conversations with women about leadership. On one hand, there was an insistence from nearly all of the women IFES spoke with that equality and leadership for women is vital for Syria. This was especially true for those who are activists and working on political transition. But it was even true at the grassroots level, where many women talked of the need to participate despite the precarious security conditions. On the other hand, it was clear that the toll of the conflict has left women feeling that it is increasingly impossible to prioritize political participation above the responsibilities of survival and the challenges of a growing conservative culture.

Women’s participation in national dialogues for peace and political transition. Many women insisted that the women of Syria are capable of and interested in leadership in their communities and in the political transition and stability of Syria. The number of highly educated women in Syrian society positions them well to be involved.

Various women underscored the importance of not allowing the discussion of equality to be sidelined by the priority of peacebuilding and political transition. This is a common concern echoed around the world where there is conflict and political transition. Those who make the deals make the decisions, and usually they are men. This is the case in the Syrian conflict and there was repeated insistence from women we spoke with that they are fully aware of this tactic and unwilling to accept it: “We don’t believe this later

on thing.” Indeed, because of this urgent agenda women said it was critical that their voices are added to efforts to find solutions. In fact, many tied gender equality to the peace process: “women cannot wait for a permanent peace to have equality,” one woman said and another agreed: “There is no ‘maybe later.’”

Women make up around 12 percent of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and the Etilaf (the Syrian Opposition Coalition). Numerous women IFES spoke with challenged the SIG and Etilaf on their treatment of women and felt that women were not considered strategic to the cause of peace and transition, but rather “decorations” (a term used by several women interviewed) to appease the international community in particular. Many women mentioned that they actually turned down opportunities to officially engage with the institutions, because they knew they would have limited power as women. “It would kill our reputation [as activists],” one woman noted. Women we spoke with who had had former roles with the interim government left because of the closed space, the nasty politics and the relegation of women to positions with low levels of responsibilities. Indeed, even the high level roles they have held are typical for women in government, such as Minister for Culture and Family Affairs.

Unity among politically active women remains elusive at the more formal level. Within the SIG and Etilaf, attempts to caucus among women have thus far been unsuccessful. Women found it hard to derive a shared platform of concerns and there was tepid support and perhaps even disdain for the idea among male colleagues. There have also been nascent discussions about a women’s political party, but the general feeling of apathy or disappointment in politics by all Syrians leaves that idea on the backburner.

Uncertainty about gender quotas. The issue of gender quotas was repeatedly raised by many participants in discussions about a formal role for women in national and local level politics. Several men and women insisted that a temporary quota would be possible in the present circumstance of transition where most leaders are appointed, but when it came to a formal process of government development and elections, these quotas would need to end because “they are not equal.” This point was made by both men and women we spoke with, although from different angles. Men seemed concerned that equality meant the most qualified people were in place, while several women insisted that a gender quota is not needed because women should naturally be involved at 50 percent in creating future political and electoral frameworks. The issue of qualified women was a frequent point of discussion on a formal role for women. A woman IFES spoke with was quick to point out the double standard of zeroing in on qualifications as a prerequisite for women’s political participation, but not for men’s political participation. She said, “I told them, ‘you bring me 70 percent men who are qualified [for political office] and I will bring you 30 percent qualified women.’”

Politically active men IFES spoke with suggested that incentives rather than obligations would be a better tactic to include women. For instance, one spoke of evaluating local council offices and awarding extra points to an office with a staff of at least 10 percent women or support to civil society organizations (CSOs) that prioritized services to families who sent their girls to school. While some women agreed on this point, they also pointed out the need to continuously monitor these incentives in order for them to be effective.

Community level. Inside Syria, “women are now responsible by default.” This apparent clarion call for engagement is quickly tempered by the nearly universal insistence that women do not have the luxury to consider the bigger picture of political transition. The immediate crisis levels the burden of survival squarely on the shoulders of women who run the households, seeking economic opportunity amid indiscriminate violence that destabilizes and displaces them frequently. Women simply do not have time to think beyond the immediate needs of their family.

There is an inkling of hope among such devastation. As with other Arab Spring countries, women were very involved with the start of the revolution. They were out in the streets; they provided logistics and organization to the protests, such as smuggling contraband like the Syrian Revolution Flag through regime checkpoints. It was the very fact that women and men worked together that made the revolution itself so impactful. “Conflict can break the taboos of culture,” one person we spoke with said.

Yet, another person pointed out that this enthusiasm and engagement has already started to regress. Women who left their homes suffered when they returned, with the enlightenment of political activity clashing with societal norms of household responsibilities. Several of the most active women spoken to were divorced as a result of their political engagement. There has also been a noticeable backing off in women’s engagement as the situation in Syria has shifted from revolution to a political transition process. The usual stigmas, articulated by both men and women, included seeing politics as a man’s game and a dirty business not suitable for women.

But equally important is the lack of a vision of a female leader among women: “We are not used to seeing women as leaders in Syria. We don’t even think of it. We don’t have that ambition. We don’t even dream of it.” Several women and men mentioned a lack of willingness and confidence on the part of women to step into a leadership role, and naturally tied to that is the invisibility of women in such roles.

“We are not used to seeing women as leaders in Syria. We don’t even think of it. We don’t have that ambition. We don’t even dream of it.”

Despite these challenges, women are organizing and active inside Syria’s emerging and active civil society. Many women lead CSOs and are working to create space for women inside Syria to learn again. For example, skills development programs offered by some CSOs to support economic opportunities for women, such as sewing, are coupled with Arabic and computer lessons. The message implicit in this approach is that women can and must continue to be educated. This will lead to enlightenment and empowerment, which, in turn, will lead to women’s engagement in Syria’s future.

Engaging Men

There was universal agreement by the women and men IFES spoke with that men must be a part of efforts to empower women and support them to lead the transition to peace for Syria. Perceptions of women's empowerment, however, challenged this enthusiasm.

Male perspectives on professional gender dynamics. There was a repeated insistence from many of the professional men that women can be a part of the political transition, but two major obstacles are in their way:

1. Women need the skills and confidence to participate as leaders in Syria's transition.
2. The security situation severely hinders women's ability to participate safely in politics, especially in leadership positions.

Most men agreed that now was a difficult moment to include women and that the future would offer more opportunities. By their own admission, some local leaders mentioned that many women had applied to work on local political activities, but were excluded due to lack of qualifications. Security came up again and again as a deterrent to including women. One local leader stated during a focus group discussion that "if a female family member were to seek my support to run for office, I would not support that decision because the current situation doesn't make it safe for her. Also, women will suffer a lot from exhaustion and don't need to take that on. Traveling inside Syria is also dangerous." Certainly security during the conflict is a concern, but for all Syrians. As one woman put it, "this is a polite way of marginalizing women. It is an excuse." Essentially, men did not have a problem with women being excluded.

This was a pervasive sentiment, but not exclusive. Indeed, some male professionals were more open to the idea of women's leadership and gender equality, and could cite many examples of where women lead, especially in civil society. They described the opportunities women could represent in the future of Syria by lending characteristics unique to women, such as their capacity for dialogue. Indeed, this could be critical in Syria's transition and even catalytic for efforts to implement a ceasefire, according to one man we spoke with. Yet, even as they expressed support, most men prescribed leadership roles typically associated with women, such as roles focused on humanitarian issues, women's affairs, working with children, culture and education.

Male perspectives on personal gender dynamics. On a more personal and community-based level, men agreed with the concept of gender equality, but discussed how the challenges of the conflict and a conservative society make women's leadership difficult. The masculinization of these issues are very much a foil to the challenges women discussed in their empowerment efforts. "I have a problem with my wife becoming a leader and controlling all of the people around her. It would change her," one young man said during a focus group discussion. Several male and female participants highlighted culture and society, above even armed groups and religious extremists, as a primary hindrance to women's political participation. "[Increasing conservatism] is not coming from jihadis, it is coming from Syrian society," one woman mentioned. Furthermore, traditionally masculine roles tied to economic control and

household decision-making are being eclipsed by the conflict, which in turn strains shifting gender dynamics as men may seek targets for resentment.

A special note on young boys. The trauma and violence of Syria has taken its toll on men and women, and girls and boys, and the immediate need to address the psycho-social aspects of violent conflict were underscored by everyone we spoke with. There was, however, repeated concern for boys in particular. A school teacher IFES spoke with talked about a shift in young boys' psyches at a school in a refugee camp. War games and physical fights have replaced football and laughter. A father said it plainly: "there is a revolution inside of young boys." He went on to describe his attempts not to deny his son to join the fight, but to distract him with delaying tactics. Several mothers expressed this same concern too. One mother said that boys now want to run back to Syria and fight the Russians given the recent airstrikes. Parents and community leaders struggle to support their spirits while protecting their futures.

"There is a revolution inside of young boys"

Recommendations for Women's Leadership in Syria

While the outlook in Syria's immediate future remains grim, participants in the discussions and interviews had clear short- and long-term ideas for immediately increasing the understanding and support for gender equality and women's empowerment in Syria.

Women's Empowerment Support for Professionals

In a nascent civic and political environment, there is a scramble to understand and harness power for Syria's political transition. Women working on the transition must engage in this process and develop effective levers to further cement their participation, such as developing a women's caucus, developing a women's political party, convening women's groups with local councils on a regular basis and convening women's civil society groups with the interim government. An important complement to these activities is focusing on individual women's skills on political transition, governance and human rights, negotiation and mediation, and confidence and communications through trainings and trainings of trainers.

Women's Empowerment Support at the Community Level

While the situation inside Syria is bleak and dangerous, there are many willing women who have ideas to engage on leadership and empowerment now, including by introducing women to actions and activities beyond the household that focus on themselves such as social gatherings and opportunities simply to meet with other women and share stories. Many spoke of identifying and championing female role models so that women see other women like them in positions of power. Seeing more women local councilors, as well as participating in local government activities would send an important message to

men and women in local communities inside Syria. Formal education opportunities are largely interrupted because of the conflict. Finding opportunities to empower women who seek basic economic assistance in many of the humanitarian centers inside and outside of Syria could keep leadership and learning present in the minds of young women who are presently focused on survival. For example, one woman said that her organization provides Arabic and mathematics for young women who come to their centers for sewing and tailoring classes, “so that they are not lost.”

Engaging Men at the Political Transition Level

Efforts to directly challenge the lack of women in decision-making roles in Syria’s political transition that are tethered to concerns for women’s security and their lack of qualifications must be made through deliberate gender equality activities. This can include basic gender equality awareness raising and training of interim government members, political parties and local council officials, cultivating and supporting male champions for gender and convening sessions between male champions and their colleagues. Policies, such as gender quotas will also be important to work on together with women leaders to determine content and timing. Incentives for equal participation discussed by some participants could be meaningful if applied consistently and monitored well so that women are leading efforts in areas other than those expected of them, such as family affairs. Women are engineers, doctors and lawyers, as well as teachers and housewives, and all these roles should be highlighted and lauded.

Engaging Men at the Household and Community Level

Critical to the success in awakening a woman’s interest and support for her empowerment can be engaging the men in her life and in her community. As a way to create space for women leaders in Syrian society, one participant listed criteria for Syrian husbands (and their wives) to accept women as leaders:

1. Husbands must intellectually accept the idea of women’s empowerment.
2. Husbands must be willing to accept some of the household responsibilities.
3. There must be dialogue and interaction between wife and husband. Women who lead can’t ignore their husbands.
4. Women need material support and resources to become leaders.
5. Men need to tell other men about the merits of their wives being leaders.

Therefore activities are needed that focus specifically on men. Role modeling among men is a priority, because it gives male allies for gender equality an opportunity to act as mentors to other men. Peer support for action toward gender equality is key for men, according to several male discussants. Creating opportunities for men who gather together to socialize to discuss positive examples and outcomes of women in leadership positions or supportive collaboration between men and women is a good way to begin the conversation. Similarly, mothers have a strong influence on their sons. Various behavior change communication techniques could be used to teach mothers to use that influence to impart messages of gender equality directly to their sons. Gender activities will also have lasting impact when they create occasions not only to strengthen women’s skills, but to include their husbands and other male family

members to join in discussions about gender equality and women's empowerment at community centers, humanitarian distribution sites, trainings and events happening in camps or cities like Gaziantep.

Finally, it is clear that psycho-social support must be integrated in all of these activities for men, women, boys and girls. It will be particularly important to address the needs and issues of young men and boys whose natures are tied to the current conflict and the expectations of their roles in direct combat. Efforts to build an alternative masculinity for boys and young men must be carefully constructed to draw them into peaceful governance action rather than drive them toward the fighting.

Conclusion

Culture and crisis challenge gender equality and women's empowerment for Syrians living inside and outside Syria. The goal of this mission was to address this concern directly with men and women as they seek solutions to the crisis. The women IFES spoke with embraced this exercise as relevant and especially important for tackling gender inequality alongside the colossal peacebuilding and political challenges faced by Syria. The men IFES spoke with were quick to support gender equality, but many were also quick to explain it away through concerns about control and power, cloaked in explanations of "safety" and "qualifications." The true concern it seemed, which is often true when engaging men in any context around the world, is the zero-sum assumptions that it is "us" or "them" in discussions about gender equality. Responding to and finding ways to alleviate this concern will be critical to the success of alliances between men and women in the resolution of Syria's conflict by showing them that gender equality is important for everyone and important for peace.

Indeed, it was clear from those who participated in IFES' Male Allies for Leadership Equality key informant interviews and focus group discussions that there are many possible actions that can be taken right away to involve everyone in improving the gender gap. This is true at the governmental and civil society levels where there are intense efforts to address the national and international crisis of the conflict, as well as at the household level where women and men struggle to keep their families and their communities going despite excessive violence and displacement.

This feedback is extremely helpful to both IFES' gender and Syria programs. As IFES' Syria team works to open pathways to sustainable peace and good governance through Syria's political transition, it has a blueprint for leadership equality in transition activities and programs designed directly with suggestions made by likely program participants. IFES Syria is already working with local partners to implement programs based on many of the suggested next steps.

The IFES gender team will build its Male Allies for Leadership Equality curriculum, which will complement its existing women's leadership curriculum, with direct contributions from the Syrian participants in this mission. The breadth of participants was such that IFES' gender team now has critical feedback to enhance its global efforts to deliver a systematic approach to increasing opportunities for women's roles in peace and transition processes, and as important, ensuring support from men in their homes, communities and nations.



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