

PEACE AND SECURITY

EU FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY ON SYRIA

How a holistic perspective can
inform EU policymaking on Syria

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The EU should develop a new perspective to respond to Syria's multidimensional crises. So far, its approach toward Syria has tended to be gender blind and state instead of human centered.



Feminist foreign policy provides a three-dimensional framework to comprehensively analyze the EU's approach toward Syria. It broadens the definition of security, decodes power relations, and recognizes diverse agency in policymaking.



The EU should promote gender-aware human security for all Syrians, reduce power imbalances at all levels of engagement, and ensure inclusive and diverse feminist and civil society participation in EU policymaking.

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1

IN NEED OF A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON SYRIA'S MULTIDIMENSIONAL CRISES

What started as an uprising against the autocratic regime of Bashar al-Assad has turned into an internationalized civil war, which moved into its eleventh year in March 2021. Today, the regime is still in power, backed by Russia and Iran, and Syria is divided into four different areas.¹ The internationalization of the conflict and the consolidated power of the regime render a Syrian-owned political solution of the conflict highly unlikely. That said, the current standoff is far from tenable in the medium to long term.

Syria has become the worst humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time (UNHCR 2018; EEAS 2017). More than 511,000 people have died (HRW 2019). A total of 5.6 million women, men, girls, and boys have fled Syria, most of them to neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, and another 6.2 million Syrians have been internally displaced (UNHCR 2021a; UNHCR 2021b). The human rights situation, a major reason for the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, continues to deteriorate (HRW 2021). The economy was already shaped by corruption and nepotism before the war, and is now continuing its downward spiral² (World Bank 2021; Daher 2019). The Syrian economy has been replaced by a war economy, which only benefits a small minority (Yazigi 2014). The costs of rebuilding the country have been estimated at between 250 and 1,000 billion USD (Asseburg 2020: 18). A total of 83 per cent of Syrians live below the poverty line (UN OCHA 2019); 13.5 million depend on humanitarian aid (UNHCR 2018). On top of all these crises, Covid-19 has hit Syria particularly hard, with its destroyed health care system, lack of medical personal and equipment, and high numbers of internally displaced persons in densely populated camps and towns (Said 2020).

In all this, the conflict in Syria has disproportionately affected women and marginalized groups, while their role in conflict resolution is sidelined. Conflicts reinforce preexisting patterns of discrimination against women and girls, making them more likely to be subjected to human rights violations (UN OHCHR 2021). During a conflict, the bodies of women and girls can become politicized through sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and are even used as divisive tools (Makar 2019). This is also the case in the Syrian context where women and girls are not only affected by trafficking, detention, and forced disappearance, but also by the gendered impacts of these developments, exacerbated by the war (Khattab 2017; Mehrez 2020). To prevent the physical and economic insecurity affecting women and girls, other harmful practices have increased, which undermine the rights of Syrian women's and girls' even further, such as withdrawal from education and an increase in forced or child marriage (UN Security Council 2020). At the same time, the conflict has contributed to a shift in socioeconomic gender roles in Syrian households – in Syria and neighboring countries – disproportionately burdening women, who, at the same time, are among the most economically vulnerable groups. Many women had to take on the economic responsibility for themselves and their family members. At the same time, they lack resources, access to or equality of work opportunities, while being exposed to an increased risk of violence (Care 2020; Haddad 2014; Saba and Kapilashrami 2016; UN Security Council 2020). Unfortunately, the gendered dynamics and effects of the Syrian conflict, such as violence, forced displacement, living in displacement settings, or the effects of the war economy, have not yet been sufficiently analyzed (El Bakry and Schneider 2021; Staszewska 2017).

Although Syrian women have played a marginalized role in formal peace processes, they are nevertheless important agents for peace. In a range of networks, as individuals, or through feminist and women's organizations (FWOs), Syrian women have contributed to peace and security for all Syrians – by broadening the (international) agenda, negotiating local cease-fires, substituting local government structures, or documenting women's and human rights violations (CFR 2020; Jouejati 2017).

¹ The regime controls the biggest part of the country, including Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo. Although having a symbolic regime presence, a US-backed, Kurdish-led force controls Syria's north east, including 80 per cent of Syria's natural resources. Turkish forces control north-west Syria. Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) controls the fourth area, which is Idlib (Atwood, Khalifa, and Modirzadeh 2021).

² In 2020, Transparency International ranked Syria 178th out of 180 countries, compared to 134th out of 178 before the war in 2010 (Transparency International 2010, 2020).

The conflict in Syria is of the utmost importance to the European Union (EU) and its Member States. While the EU has not played an active military role in the conflict itself, it has been strongly engaged in Syria. On a political level, it supports the UN-led peace process and the Syrian opposition, both financially and diplomatically. Also, since 2011, the European Council has imposed sanctions on Syrian individuals involved in the violent repression of Syria's civil population. When it comes to humanitarian assistance to Syria and the region, the EU is the largest donor (European Council 2020). However, in view of the challenges on the ground, its current approach does not offer a way out of the impasse. Political transition, which the EU made conditional for funding any reconstruction in Syria, is beyond reach. Developing a new approach is therefore a necessity, not only to support all Syrians, but also in the EU's own interests.³

This paper looks at the EU's foreign policy toward Syria through a feminist foreign policy lens. Feminist foreign policy is based on a broad definition of security, critically examines international power structures, and focuses on diversity in policymaking. It places the rights and needs of all groups at the center of the discussion. In light of its entirely different perspective on peace and security, it is worth exploring the possibilities it offers for adjusting the EU's approach towards Syria. The EU needs a strategy that takes the gendered impacts of the war, as well as the needs and rights of all Syrians into account. The present analysis highlights new ways of thinking and acting to achieve a more inclusive, equal, and comprehensive EU foreign policy approach.⁴

3 The EU's main interests – to stabilize the country and the whole region, to stop the influx of refugees and to offer them voluntary and safe return, and to counter terrorist groups such as ISIS, as well as to prevent a further erosion of the international order, e.g. through grave violations of basic human rights – are not being met by its current approach (Asseburg 2020).

4 It is not the objective of this paper to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role of gender in the Syrian peace process or of the situation of Syrian women as a whole. Nor does it represent an in-depth feminist analysis of all multilayered dimensions, actors, and policies. What it does seek to do, however, is to point to research gaps and the necessity of further feminist analyses on the matter.

2

FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY AS A POLITICAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist foreign policy is rooted in the recognition that peace and security are shaped by the same gendered dynamics that form our societies. Gender equality benefits societies as a whole. It contributes to more comprehensive and sustainable peace agreements, the economic and social development of a country, the strengthening of democratic institutions, and the advancement of international peace (Bigio and Vogelstein 2020; Krause et al. 2018; Hudson 2012). Although gender equality as well as women's and human rights are the backbone of the approach, feminist foreign policy is not purely normative. It aims to comprehensively take the realities of peace and conflict into account. Traditional approaches to foreign and security policy often dismiss these realities and fail to consider gender-specific differences on any real scale, remaining mostly gender blind (Hudson 2020).

Feminist foreign policy is a concept that provides a political as well as an analytical framework. On the political level, in 2014, Sweden was the first country to declare its government to be feminist. Since then, the concept has been gaining momentum and several governments have announced they are taking a feminist approach to their foreign or development policies, albeit to varying degrees (Bigio and Vogelstein 2020; Thompson and Clement 2019). Still, the Swedish approach remains the most comprehensive so far, extending to all domains of external relations. It is based on the »four R's«: (1) Women's Rights, equipped with (2) Resources, meaningful (3) Representation, and taking into account women's (4) Realities (Government Offices of Sweden 2019; Bernarding and Lunz 2020).

Civil society actors all over the world have played a pivotal role in the development of feminist foreign policy as a political concept and in highlighting the role of gender in conflict (Anderlini 2019). They refined political concepts and developed a common standard of what constitutes a feminist foreign policy (Thompson 2020). At the same time, feminist scholars and activists have highlighted the challenges posed by and shortcomings of these existing feminist political frameworks. Existing policies are often based on narrowly framed binary conceptions of gender. Not all apply a cross-cutting feminist approach to all forms of external actions, often only to some extent addressing the underlying gendered dynamics of foreign policy (Scheyer and Kumskova 2019: 60).

Looking at security from a different perspective, as an analytical framework feminist foreign policy provides a comprehensive view on the role of gender in peace and security. This analytical framework is based on three pillars: First, a broad and gender-aware understanding of (human) security; second, reflection on and decoding of power relations at individual, national, regional, and international levels; and third, the necessity of diversity in policymaking at all levels.⁵

- Broadening the definition of security: Feminist foreign policy is based on a broad conception of human security and a positive definition of peace beyond the mere absence of conflict (Tickner 2019; UN Trust Fund for Human Security). It deemphasizes military means, refrains from a securitized foreign policy environment, and stresses the importance of sustainable development, human rights, and gender analysis.
- Decoding power relations: Feminist analysis critically examines international power structures and decodes power relations regarding gender (in)equalities. It expands its perspective to the structural dynamics of hegemonic masculinity shaping our understanding of national and foreign policy on a global scale. It also identifies patriarchal normative frameworks and intersectional inequalities in order to better identify and address root causes rather than symptoms (Scheyer and Kumskova 2019: 60; Donaldson 1993; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).
- Diverse agency in policymaking: Feminist foreign policy focuses on inclusivity and diversity in policymaking, centering on marginalized voices, as well as strengthening women's political participation and the inclusion of civil society. Doing so, it goes beyond the protection and integration of women in existing institutional settings. Instead it aims to transform policymaking by acknowledging the inherent gendered dynamics of international peace and security, and stresses the importance of civil society actors as stakeholders in international affairs (Scheyer and Kumskova 2019: 60; Anderlini 2019).

⁵ This framework was first applied in Adebahr and Mittelhammer (2020).

The present analysis takes the abovementioned approach to examine the EU's foreign policy toward Syria. Taking the EU as the point of departure, this paper refers to the following definition by Bernarding/Lunz of an EU feminist foreign policy as »the external action of the EU that defines its interactions vis-à-vis states, supranational organisations, multilateral forums, civil society, and movements in a manner that prioritises gender equality, enshrines the human rights of women and other politically marginalized groups and wholeheartedly pursues feminist peace« (Bernarding and Lunz 2020: 41).⁶

⁶ This definition includes Lyric Thompson and Rachel Clement's broader understanding of feminism as a means »to disrupt patriarchal and male-dominated power structures across all of its levers of influence (aid, trade, defense and diplomacy), informed by the voices of feminist activists, groups and movements« (Thompson and Clement 2019).

3

A THREE-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE EU'S APPROACH TOWARD SYRIA

3.1 BROADENING THE DEFINITION OF SECURITY

Feminist foreign policy broadens the perspective taken by traditional approaches to foreign policy. It introduces a positive definition of security beyond the absence of armed conflict, deemphasizes military means, and prevents a securitized foreign policy environment. It places human security at the center, identifies the gender-specific needs of women, girls, boys, and men, and responds to them.

Although gender equality and human rights are fundamental EU values, the EU falls short of its own ambitions to pursue gender-aware foreign policymaking (EU 2008). It aimed to incorporate human security, but its overall security conception remains deeply gendered, and its foreign policy approaches remain largely gender blind.⁷ The newly adopted *EU Gender Action Plan III* (GAP III) suggests that some progress has been made. However, a key challenge now lies in mainstreaming this ambition into topical and regional strategies and programming (EU 2020).

3.1.1 The EU's strategic approach to Syria

The EU's strategic framework⁸ vis-à-vis Syria consists of the *EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh threat* (European Council 2016; European Council 2015) and the Syria-specific *EU Strategy on Syria* adopted in 2017 (European Council 2017).⁹ Neither include a gender-aware

perspective, nor are they gender mainstreamed. Overall, the EU's strategic framework on Syria is largely gender blind.

STABILITY- AND STATE-CENTERED INSTEAD OF GENDER-AWARE HUMAN SECURITY

The EU's strategic framework stresses the necessity of a political transition to end the war in Syria and to achieve sustainable peace, reiterating both *UNSCR 2254* and the *Geneva Communiqué*. Nevertheless, it emphasizes stability and a state-centric rather than a human-centered approach.¹⁰ Safety and security are presented as something that states achieve through stability, and not as something created by and for citizens.¹¹ The framework does not mention gender and socioeconomic inequalities as a root cause for violence and conflict in Syria.¹²

Human security and civilian needs are rarely at the heart, and nor are measures to identify and address those needs. There are also no suggestions on how to support civil society organizations doing this in Syria and the region. Only in isolated instances and to varying extents do the aforementioned documents focus on human needs, socioeconomic measures, and civil society.¹³ The strategic framework at

⁷ For a general topical and regional feminist analysis of the EU's foreign policy, see Adebahr and Mittelhammer (2020), Bernarding and Lunz (2020), Davis (2018), and Stern (2011).

⁸ Specifically, the authors analyzed: *Council Conclusions on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat* (European Council 2015); *Council Conclusions on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh threat* (European Council 2016); *EU Strategy on Syria 2017* (European Council 2017); *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council 2017* (EEAS 2017); *Council Conclusions on Syria 2018* (European Council 2018a).

⁹ These three documents represent the core of the EU's strategic framework toward Syria. They are complemented by further Council conclusions. Beyond the Syria-specific strategic documents, EU topical frameworks such as the *EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda* also guide the EU's actions vis-à-vis Syria and the region. A comprehensive feminist analysis of the December 2020 *EU Counter-Terrorism Agenda* should be conducted, as the preceding strategy was entirely gender blind (Davis 2018; Stern 2011).

¹⁰ The link between peace, stability, and security as key objectives (European Council 2015; European Council 2016; European Council 2017) points to a national security perspective rather than a feminist definition of positive peace. Further quotes: »The Council recalls that the conflict in Syria affects directly the EU [...]« / »Only a credible political solution, [...] will ensure the stability of Syria and enable a decisive defeat of Da'esh and other UN-designated terrorist groups in Syria« (European Council 2017). »The EU remains committed to achieving lasting peace, stability and security in Syria, Iraq and the wider region, as well as to countering the ISIL/Da'esh threat« (European Council 2015).

¹¹ The security of the country or the region are the focal point: »[...] security challenges that the crises pose to the region [...]« (European Council 2015). »The EU remains committed to achieving lasting peace, stability and security in Syria, Iraq and the wider region« (European Council 2015/2016). »[...] deepening security and counter-terrorism cooperation [...]« (European Council 2016).

¹² On the effects of gender inequality as cause for conflict and instability, see Hudson (2012). On gender inequality in Syria, see: TDA (2017).

¹³ In the three core documents, needs are generally mentioned in relation to humanitarian needs and assistance. Other human needs (e.g. political security and religious freedom, environmental security) are rarely mentioned.

least highlights the response to humanitarian needs as a core element, to which the EU's substantial financial commitment corresponds.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION BUT NO GENDER MAINSTREAMING

Individual paragraphs of the EU's strategic framework focus on supporting women's political participation and the protection of women, but taking an »add women and stir« approach.¹⁴ Women are presented as unanimous entity, instead of taking into account their diverse backgrounds and political positions. If such an approach is reflected in political processes, this could lead to the depoliticization of women and failure to acknowledge their diverse voices and opinions.

Moreover, the impact of violence and war on Syrian women and girls, which exacerbates already existing gender inequalities, is neither addressed as a root cause, nor taken into account in terms of relief and support. The EU's approach is completely gender blind in this regard, thus failing to identify or address gender-specific security needs.

The EU emphasizes the participation of women in all matters related to peace and security.¹⁵ The role of women's political participation and the need to strengthen platforms such as the Women's Advisory Board (WAB)¹⁶ are mentioned in the strategic documents. However, the approach fails to systematically dismantle the barriers to women's participation in EU policymaking.

MARGINALIZED AND VULNERABLE GROUPS

A feminist approach puts the needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups center stage. The EU's strategic framework, however, never addresses the elderly, people with disabilities, or the LGBTQI community. Children are mentioned only in the context of »women and children« with no more specific discussion, despite the fact that boys and girls have different needs.¹⁷

REFUGEES

Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons represent half of Syria's prewar population. Although the EU's strategic documents recognize the »humanitarian disaster«, they do not make the needs of all Syrians – whether in Syria or the neighboring countries – the focus. The EU is providing substantial financial and programmatic support

to refugees and refugee-hosting countries,¹⁸ but the prevailing perception on stability in the strategic documents sees refugees as a risk rather than addressing the needs of vulnerable groups of people. They lack a gender perspective on the living conditions that exacerbate vulnerabilities.

ACCOUNTABILITY

The EU's strategic framework addresses accountability, which is fundamental for political transition and transitional justice. However, it does not provide details on how that accountability should be achieved. Furthermore, the strategic documents do not highlight the role of civil society, especially those organizations that document and monitor atrocities. SGBV is not mentioned at all in the context of accountability, only being mentioned in the *EU Regional Strategy* in reference to terrorism and violent extremism. Such a narrow perception of gender-specific needs for protection creates an accountability gap vis-à-vis the regime, which has systematically perpetrated SGBV against women, girls, boys, and men, thus committing both crimes against humanity and war crimes (WILPF 2020; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic 2018).

3.1.2 A feminist implementation?

The EU implements its strategic framework in a multilayered system of financial and programmatic instruments, supporting, for example, refugees and refugee-hosting countries, peace negotiations, and civil society. Through its annual Brussels conferences, it keeps Syria high on donors' agendas and, thus, helps to mobilize substantial funds (European Commission 2021). However, in-depth feminist analyses of these programmatic and financial instruments would be required to ascertain the extent to which they are gender aware or adopt a feminist approach.

In addition to financial and programmatic instruments, the EU has also pursued a diplomatic approach. It has underlined that any solution in Syria cannot be built on military actions. However, responding to the severity of the repression of civilians and the grave human rights violations carried out by the Syrian regime, since 2011, the EU has reverted to means of coercive diplomacy, imposing sanctions on individuals, specific sectors, and entities. The goal of these measures is to pressure the regime to stop its violent repression and to engage in serious negotiations. They include humanitarian exceptions and aim to avoid negative impacts on the Syrian population.

From a feminist perspective, the use of sanctions is highly disputed and, if applied, should closely monitor gender-specific impacts on the ground. A feminist approach requires an analysis of the effects of sanctions on all parts of society, especially on (1) socioeconomically vulnerable groups, such as single-headed households (often by women), (2) indirect repercussions such as overcompliance in banking

¹⁴ For further information on why simply adding more women does not address the problem, see: Brechenmacher, Mann, and Meadows (2021).

¹⁵ This is the case, for example, in *GAP III*, and echoed throughout the interviews conducted with three EU representatives on February 24, 2021 and March 2, 2021, regarding Syria.

¹⁶ For more detailed information on the role of the Women's Advisory Board and political participation of women, see Section 3.2.3 on A Gender perspective on peace negotiations and Syrian women's participation.

¹⁷ The language used in the *EU Council Conclusions on Syria* from 2018 places more emphasis on the needs of the most vulnerable groups across the country, without, however, specifying who is meant concretely (European Council 2018a).

¹⁸ For an overview on the EU's support to Syria, including assistance to refugees and refugee-hosting countries, please refer to European Commission (2021).

sectors, as well as (3) humanitarian or social implications (e.g. access to livelihoods and medicine), or (4) impact on civil society. What is more, if a sanctions regime is in place, SGBV should be included as a criterion for being sanctioned (Government Offices of Sweden 2017). The EU's sanctions regime does not consider the above, which could potentially lead to harming the Syrians that the EU aims to protect and support. Respective Council decisions imply constant review, without specifying monitoring mechanisms.

3.1.3 Feminist principles for reconstruction

Then EU High Representative Federica Mogherini developed the so-called »More for More« approach in 2017 to allow the EU to act quickly on reconstruction, as soon as this is possible. The approach suggests that the EU take a step-by-step approach to engaging in reconstruction, doing so only once the Syrian regime has proven measurable progress toward political transition (EEAS 2017). All the Syrian feminist activists interviewed for this paper agreed that the EU should by no means engage in reconstruction if this would require collaboration with the regime.

Fundamental women's and human rights are the backbone of a feminist approach. Looking at the reality in Syria, ensuring a rights-based approach under the Assad regime seems impossible. This raises two main concerns regarding reconstruction: First, for the Assad regime, an end to the war is about seeking to retain power through continued repression, exclusion, and marginalization of those who oppose it (Heydemann 2018). As long as the Syrian regime is in place, stabilization of the country and the region is unlikely. There will be no peace for all Syrians, no respect for human rights and basic freedoms. Nor will Syria become a safe destination for returning refugees. A gender equal future, protecting the rights of and providing security for all Syrians will be impossible as long as the Assad regime remains in place. The EU cannot meet its core interests while collaborating with the regime. Second, if the EU decides to develop a strategic approach toward reconstruction, it should be in line with feminist principles and, at the very least, be gender aware. However, the EU's current approach toward reconstruction does not include a gender perspective at all.¹⁹ Even if the underlying motivation remains preparedness for quick reconstruction, the EU needs to conceptualize every single step based on a gender-mainstreamed and human-centered approach.

3.2 DECODING POWER RELATIONS AT INTERNATIONAL, REGIONAL, AND LOCAL LEVEL

A feminist foreign policy approach recognizes the gendered dynamics of international peace and security. It detects patriarchal normative frameworks and focuses on systemic inequalities and imbalances of power. This highlights actor-specific and structural power relations in the wider context.

National interests dominate the discourse on Syria. The prevalent narrative is centered on stability and national security; it marginalizes the aspirations of Syrians and Syrian civil society. This holds especially true for a gender perspective on and women's political participation in the political process. In this context, how does the EU position itself from a feminist foreign policy perspective?

3.2.1 National interests and global power games²⁰

The inner-Syrian struggle for democratic reforms, basic freedoms, and the protection of human rights has turned into an internationalized armed conflict involving numerous local, national, regional, and international actors. Five countries are pursuing a military strategy defined by their own national security agendas: Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and Israel. Through direct military or indirect financial support, they have strengthened players acting in their interests on the ground (Asseburg 2019; Asseburg 2020). Furthermore, neighboring countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq, host large numbers of Syrian refugees. Moreover, Gulf countries, specifically Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have supported actors in the conflict throughout.

These actors do not share a common vision for Syria, but rather pursue their own divergent national interests. The demands of Syrian women and men voiced in the streets during the 2011 demonstrations, have taken a back seat. The five main military actors, in particular, do not seem to perceive the protection of civilians and a sustainable conflict resolution process along the lines of *UNSCR 2254* and the *Geneva Communiqué* as their priorities. In the words of Syrian feminist activist Sabiha Khalil, »there will be no success for any Syrian self-initiative that brings together the internal and external Syrian parties, unless the international and regional conflict parties agree« (Khalil 2020). The marginalization of the aspirations, rights, and interests of Syrians is mirrored in two aspects: first, their being sidelined in the peace process, and second, the blocking of UN Security Council resolutions by veto powers, especially Russia (Risch 2020; Nichols, 2019). These systemic imbalances highlight the gendered dimensions of the international peace and security architecture, shaped by hegemonic masculinities and dominated by power games (Davies and True 2018).

¹⁹ The current approach focuses on EU support in the following sectors: »security«, »governance, reforms and service delivery«, »social cohesion, peace-building and reconciliation«, »human capital«, and »economic recovery« (EEAS 2017).

²⁰ Such a feminist context analysis should be complemented by in-depth analyses of power relations at the respective national levels to identify gendered dynamics and patriarchal modes of policymaking reproduced at the international level.

In addition to the international dynamics, it is just as important to look at power structures at the national level. The primary interest of the Syrian regime is to consolidate its power even further. It also uses reconstruction as means to strengthen its hold on power in a sociopolitically altered society. This approach strongly contradicts what the international community has outlined in the *Geneva Communiqué* and *UNSCR 2254* (Heydemann 2018).

3.2.2 The EU's ambition versus its limited impact

The EU has limited influence on the situation in Syria and has distanced itself from the power struggles on the ground. However, an ability to influence should not be equated with an ability to act militarily, which would imply gendered portrayals as »soft« power (EU) and »hard« power (military actors).²¹ Being the largest donor, supporting the peace process, and making use of its convening power, the EU certainly has the ability to develop and shape policies on Syria. And, indeed, it has achieved tangible and positive results.

From the beginning, the EU has supported the UN-led peace process on Track I, Track II, and Track III negotiations. It funds the Syrian opposition, following the principle that there needs to be an opposition if political transition in Syria is to be achieved. In addition, the EU has tried to make use of its diplomatic leverage and convening power in order to bridge the interests of the regional actors involved (HR/VP Federica Mogherini 2016). This shows that regional power plays are acknowledged as one of the root causes of the war. However, overall, the EU's role in finding a political solution has remained limited. It has not done enough to shift the discourse away from a state-centric approach, whether because it lacked political will in light of its own interests, or the means to do so. To achieve sustainable peace in Syria, it should be in the interests of all actors to shift toward a more human-centered approach. A zero-sum pursuit of national interests has failed to achieve mutually beneficial results.

When reflecting on the EU's ability to act, a deconstructing power analysis differentiates between »the EU« and its Member States with their potentially different interests. »Speaking with one voice« can be a challenge for the EU's foreign policy. Beyond political symbolism, in many cases, the EU is only able to act only if and when EU Member States take unanimous decisions at Council level. Since 2011, the EU Member States have annually and unanimously agreed on individual sanctions targeting Syrian regime members and perpetrators of grave human rights violations. Technically, one single member state could veto the renewal of sanctions.²² However, there is still a broad consensus on keeping sanctions in place (ICG 2019).

²¹ For further analyses, see: Adebahr and Mittelhammer (2020); Davis (2018); Stern (2011).

²² Internal discussions on the unanimity of decision-making or introducing a qualified majority voting mechanism are still ongoing (European Parliament Think Tank 2021).

Nevertheless, the bilateral approaches of the individual Member States toward the regime differ and might become increasingly difficult to streamline.²³ To paint a complete picture of the power dynamics, it is crucial to also reflect divergent interests at the level of the Member States.

3.2.3 A gender perspective on peace negotiations and Syrian women's participation

The abovementioned power dynamics and imbalances, shaped by national interests, culminate in the lack of inclusion and equal participation of Syrians, particularly Syrian women, in political transition processes. Although the EU is funding the opposition and its delegation, it has shown limited ability to increase the participation of women and civil society participation.²⁴

In *GAP III*, the EU defines the objective to push for »at least 33 per cent of women participating in all EU activities and projects related to peace processes« (EU 2020). In the UN-led peace talks in Geneva, largely funded by different EU instruments, the participation of Syrian women remains marginalized, although both the *Geneva Communiqué*²⁵ and the *UNSCR 2254*²⁶ call to involve women in peace processes. Looking at the Constitutional Committee, for example, women and civil society are not equally represented, nor do they have the same access to decision-making. The Committee is composed of a regime, an opposition, and a civil society delegation. The composition of the civil society delegation was highly disputed and has also been influenced by the national interests of external actors (Hauch 2020). Moreover, only the regime and the opposition delegations have agenda-setting powers. The overall quorum of 27.3 per cent. Three per cent women negotiators is only achieved due to the virtually equal gender participation in the civil society delegation (23/50). The number of women participating in the regime (11/50) and opposition delegations (7/50) is very limited and their substantial participation further marginalized in the power center of the Committee, the so-called small group²⁷ (Dasouki and Shaar 2021).

²³ Some Member States closed their embassies in Syria (Germany, France), others did not (Czech Republic), some maintained local staff with an ambassador (Austria, Poland, Romania), or a chargé residing in Beirut (Italy, Spain, EU) (ICG 2019). Today, Poland, Hungary, and Austria, for example, are considering reengaging with the Syrian authorities. Moreover, Italy seems to be shifting its position toward normalization with the regime (Vohra 2019).

²⁴ In-depth power analyses of the gendered dynamics between and within the negotiating formats in Geneva, Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana), and Sochi are required; especially regarding the impact of external national agendas undermining Syrian-owned initiatives.

²⁵ »Women must be fully represented in all aspects of the transition« (UN 2012).

²⁶ »Encouraging the meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated political process for Syria« (UN Security Council 2015).

²⁷ The number of women in the Committee's small body is as follows: regime delegation (4/15), opposition delegation (2/15), and civil society delegation (7/15).

An EU representative acknowledged this low participation rate and underlined that the EU has been trying for years to increase women's participation with no significant progress.²⁸ A Syrian feminist activist suggested the following: »As the EU funds the opposition, it should make its funding conditional in a way that cuts funds when women are not equally represented in the delegation.«²⁹ Low participation of women especially in the opposition delegation is further exacerbated by the strong influence of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt on the delegation's staffing, countries which are not known for their progressive women rights policies (Moubayed 2019). Making funds conditional on the equal participation of women poses a conundrum for the EU, as this could increase the influence of conservative forces on the opposition.

The WAB, established in 2016 by the UN Special Envoy for Syria, represents another attempt to strengthen women's participation (UN OSES 2016). The EU also supports the WAB and even mentions it in its 2017 Syria Strategy. Since its installment, there has been an ongoing controversy among Syrians about the WAB's impact on including women and a gender perspective in the negotiations, its general setup and operation (Syria Justice and Accountability Centre 2016), as well as specific disputed decisions (Kannout 2016: 101). The diversity of the body and the ability of its members to overcome cleavages have been perceived positively by some (CFR 2020). Others, however, have criticized that, in general, women are marginalized in the peace process. So, forming an external body without genuinely responding to the diversity represented, while portraying the decisions and statements of the board as those of »the Syrian women« has a depoliticizing effect on Syrian women overall.³⁰

3.2.4 Prevailing gender inequalities in Syria

If the EU wants to meaningfully support Syrian women's political participation at the international level, it needs to support Syrian girls, men, boys, and women in their struggle for democratic transition and in dismantling barriers to civic and women's participation (TDA 2017: 64). When looking at these barriers, the local context needs to be taken into consideration. From before the war to this day, Syria's society has been characterized by high levels of gender inequalities.³¹

The countless barriers Syrian women face include community pressure and discriminatory social norms forcing them to retreat into the private and domestic realm, as well discriminatory laws, especially personal status laws. All too often, women depend financially on their families and lack

equal access to tools, resources, or basic rights to achieve economic independence. Syria's policies do not empower women and fail to invest in women's leadership (Staszewska 2017). In addition, women's participation in political processes challenges the hierarchical authoritarian system of a patriarchal society. (Kannout 2016). This is further complicated by the shifting socioeconomic gender roles in Syrian households due to the war. Nevertheless, the momentum of the 2011 uprisings expanded the space for civic engagement and political activism of both women and men in Syria. Today, despite significant repression and armed conflict, Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs) as well as FWOs cover a broad range of issues including humanitarian needs, human rights, and participation in political processes.

3.3 DIVERSE AGENCY: THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN EU POLICYMAKING

Feminist foreign policy stresses the role of women as political actors. It recognizes the need for diversity in policymaking and builds on the inclusion of civil society as well as marginalized voices. Translated into political action, this requires more than merely increasing the number of women involved. It means achieving accountable and transparent policymaking and allowing equal influence on all political levels (Adebahr and Mittelhammer 2020). For a feminist analysis of the agency dimension of the EU's foreign policy toward Syria, this chapter looks at the EU itself. Despite its efforts to include Syrian women and civil society in policymaking, the EU has not managed to overcome the structural barriers to equal participation and substantial civil society input.

3.3.1 Gender equality in EU foreign policymaking

The EU calls for »women's leadership and agency in all areas of policy and programming related to peace and security« in the Council conclusions adopted in December 2018, which codify the *EU Strategic Approach to Women, Peace and Security* (European Council 2018b). The *GAP III* also stresses that the EU aims to »boost its level of engagement« toward gender equality in all internal and external policy areas (EU 2020). That said, EU foreign policy still remains a male-dominated sphere, characterized by structural imbalances (De la Baume 2021) and a lack of gender equality at all decision-making levels (Neumann and Hopgood 2020). Although women still account for only 31.3 per cent of middle management and 26 per cent of senior management positions in the European External Action Service (EEAS), a Commission report noted a »close to equal« gender balance³² (EEAS 2020; European Commission 2019). The fact that the position of the EEAS Principal Advisor on Gender has remained vacant since the incumbent's term ended in December 2020, has sparked a debate on the lack of awareness and commitment within

²⁸ Interview with EU representative on 2.3.2021.

²⁹ Interview with Syrian activist on 26.2.2021.

³⁰ Syrian feminist activists, in particular, raised this issue in the interviews conducted for this analysis on 19.2.2021 and 25.2.2021.

³¹ Syria signed the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) in 2003. However, in the *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*, it ranks 150th out of 153 countries (WEF 2019).

³² For further in-depth analyses on gender equality in EU foreign policymaking, see: Lazarou and Zamfir (2021); Bernarding and Lunz (2020); Neumann and Hopgood (2020).

EU institutions, which contribute to ongoing gender inequalities.³³ Given that the EU has not managed to achieve gender equality in its own ranks, it is questionable how it could implement a diverse and gendered conception of agency in its policymaking on Syria.

3.3.2 Civil society inclusion

Civil society inclusion is a key element of feminist foreign policy, which requires strengthening feminist and civil society actors and substantially including them in policymaking.

Regarding Syria, the EU recognizes the importance of strengthening civil society, but only includes it to a limited extent in its policymaking. In its Syria strategy, the EU stresses the importance of civil society for postwar Syria and political transition without addressing the issue of civil society input in its own policymaking. At the same time, there are a number of mechanisms at the EU level that aim to provide a platform for civil society voices (European Council 2017). A core element in this regard are the »Days of Dialogue«, the civil society component of the EU's Brussels Conferences »Supporting the future of Syria and the region« (EEAS 2021b).³⁴ Although the EU has made an effort to give due consideration to civilian voices, the role of civil society in the Brussels Conferences seems to be limited to experts providing input. As it remains unclear whether there are mechanisms in place to follow up on recommendations made by civil society or to monitor progress on issues voiced during past conferences, the »Days of Dialogue« seem to lack accountability. »We are well listened to, but we don't know if this will make any difference. We hope to receive feedback from decision-makers one day.«, voiced a Syrian feminist activist in an interview.³⁵ It is questionable whether the EU takes the priorities of Syrian CSOs or FWOs fully into account. »I am very hesitant to participate in these consultations. So many people raise so many issues. At the end, the EU can pick any topic and say: ›This was selected by the Syrians!‹ The EU does not conduct deep consultations and research to better understand the very complex situation« one interviewee plainly stated.³⁶

Any further inclusion of civil society in EU policymaking should be gender mainstreamed. To assess the current situation, there should be in-depth analyses on how the EU's platforms and programs take this into account. The same applies to the topics discussed at the Brussels Conferences and the speakers attending them.

³³ The post of EU/EEAS Principal Advisor on Gender and on UNSCR 1325/WPS has been vacant since Mara Marinaki's term ended on 31 December 2020. Following calls from the European Parliament to the HR/VP, the EU has started the official recruitment process for a position with a different name, »Principal Adviser on Gender and Diversity«. This has been criticized as a downgrading, adding to the portfolio without further elevating the position or providing additional resources (Neumann 2020; Barigazzi 2020).

³⁴ Taking place for the fifth time in March 2021 (EEAS 2021a).

³⁵ Interview with a Syrian feminist activist on 25.2.2021.

³⁶ Interview with a Syrian feminist activist on 19.3.2021.

3.3.3 Supporting access and engagement of all Syrian women

When seeking to strengthen civil society, specific attention needs to be paid to women's participation. The EU supports the participation of Syrian women³⁷ through the WAB and other Syrian civil society organizations by means of capacity building, training, regular exchange with EU officials, and funding (EEAS 2019). However, it does not mention FWOs explicitly.

There are concerns about the lack of connection between Syrian FWOs on the ground and international actors (Altawil 2020). Several Syrian feminist activists have criticized the EU for mainly interacting with a select group of Syrian women who are visibly active at the international level. »We find always the same names in agendas and on panels. The EU only invites a specific set of women. All others lack information and access; grassroots leaders are excluded. The whole system reproduces itself«, laments one of our interviewees.³⁸ This seems to have created an elite within civil society, thus contributing to the gap between Syrian women working at the international level and those on the ground. One interviewee underlined this by saying: »The loudest voices, especially from inside Syria, are elite people that have access to the international community. So, women (and men) that participate in these processes are the privileged ones.«³⁹

To some extent, the EU is aware of this issue. »Women from the ground were not connected to women in the political process and there was a lot of mistrust. We wanted to bridge the gap and link the groups«, said an EU representative in an interview for this paper. The Gaziantep Women Platform is an EU initiative that links grassroots activists with the political process through capacity building and international exposure. The gap between an internationalized elite and grassroots organizations is, however, not solely due to a lack of interaction between FWOs and activists. The EU's structural weaknesses seem to have contributed to this gap and would therefore also need to be taken into account. Thus, while the positive impact of this platform is to be welcomed, the EU would need to transform its system in a way that allows for more systematic, diverse, and inclusive engagement of FWOs and CSOs. Syrian ownership needs to be strengthened overall.

3.3.4 Addressing Syrian priorities

Syrian CSOs, especially FWOs, face numerous challenges, such as security threats, socioeconomic barriers, and other constraints, including gender stereotypes, sociocultural divides, shrinking spaces, oppressive conditions, lack of resources, as well as administrative burdens that do not allow for official registration (Altawil 2020). A core part of strengthening Syrian civil society in the region falls back on

³⁷ In this context, the EU needs to recognize that the term »Syrian women« refers to »[...] very heterogeneous, diverse and multilayered social, economic, cultural, ethnic, religious and political realities and experiences« (Ali 2019).

³⁸ Interview with a Syrian feminist activist on 4.3.2021.

³⁹ Interview with a Syrian feminist activist on 26.2.2021.

EU funding. In principle, this support is positive. However, it is especially important that the EU is aware of the complex and sensitive circumstances in which CSOs and FWOs interact to be able to respond appropriately to their needs. Interviews conducted with Syrian activists echoed the challenge of access to resources, in particular, hinting that EU funding mechanisms did not reach the smaller Syrian FWOs and those working on the ground: »It's extremely difficult to be eligible for EU funding. Part of the problem is that women and youth organizations are not registered in Syria. But also many registered organizations cannot receive funds. EU compliance is just a nightmare«. ⁴⁰ Moreover, the strong dependence on international donors risks creating a hierarchical dynamic between them and local actors, fostering compliance with preset agendas (Altawil 2020). Further in-depth feminist analyses on Syrian ownership are required to identify opportunities for Syrian CSOs and FWOs to set the agenda according to local needs.

The Syrian feminist activists interviewed also mentioned the lack of manageable funds for smaller short-term projects that can be accessed more quickly. This phenomenon points to a systemic challenge highlighted by a 2017 study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The study shows that major donors fund women's groups in fragile contexts only to a very limited extent. This was attributed to an incomplete or insufficient understanding of the role of gender equality in conflict settings (Lazarou and Zamfir 2021; OECD 2017). The structural setup of funding mechanisms, accessibility, transparency, and feasibility for smaller organizations might exacerbate this problem. Further studies are required to be able to make a conclusive assessment.

In conclusion, empowering women must go hand in hand with reducing the barriers to their genuine agency. An EU feminist approach demands that the EU critically reflect on the aspects of its own institutional dynamics that might reproduce inequalities.

⁴⁰ Interview with a Syrian feminist activist on 19.2.2021.

4

TOWARD A FEMINIST EU FOREIGN POLICY ON SYRIA

The Syrian conflict is highly complex and involves countless local, national, regional, and international actors and interests. Feminist foreign policy can contribute to a more comprehensive and effective EU response to the crisis, although the political setting is far from a normative feminist ideal. Based on the feminist foreign policy analytical framework, this chapter presents specific recommendations for how the EU could change its policymaking toward Syria.

There are three fundamental principles that need to be taken into consideration to achieve the full transformative potential of feminist foreign policy:⁴¹ First, a feminist foreign policy is a rights-based approach. Its contribution to better policymaking should not be regarded as instrumental. It serves to create space for all voices and the rights of all individuals in the political process. Second, any approach that consists in merely adding women to an inherently gendered system without acknowledging systemic inequalities will fail to meet expectations. Third, feminist foreign policy requires the EU to reflect on its own paradigms more generally, including its narrow conception of gender as a binary dichotomy between men and women limited to women's issues. It also requires critically taking stock of the EU and its Member States' stance on securitization or militarization of foreign policy.⁴² Furthermore, the EU needs to ensure that all Syrian refugees on the way to Europe or within European borders are treated with respect and dignity, are given future prospects, and are not denied their human rights.

4.1 GENDER-AWARE HUMAN SECURITY FOR ALL SYRIANS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE SYRIA

The EU's current strategic approach toward Syria is not gender aware. It consists of adding women to the system rather than rethinking along the lines of a feminist approach. The EU needs to close the gender information gap and broaden its strategic framework.

CLOSE GENDER INFORMATION GAP

In order to develop comprehensive policies and ensure inclusive policymaking, the EU needs to:

- Analyze the gender-specific impacts of the war along safety and security, economic development, as well as human and socioeconomic dimensions, for all Syrians – inside and outside of the country. Moreover, it is crucial to identify the devastating long-term effects of forced displacement and a changed social fabric of postwar Syria. This includes the protection of the civic, land, and property rights of Syrians inside and outside Syria.
- Continue to monitor women's and human rights violations in Syria with the aim of denouncing such violations and to allow for the preparation of trials, also based on universal jurisdiction. The EU should devote particular attention to women and girl detainees. It should support local CSOs and FWOs that collect information on human rights violations. This includes information on disappearances and their socioeconomic impact on wives, daughters, and mothers at home.
- Support research on the effects of militarization and the proliferation of arms on women and girls in Syria. Counting the victims is not enough. The use of weapons has numerous side effects, such as the destruction of basic infrastructure, forced displacement, or a lack of access to basic services, including medical care. Research on the gendered impact of the use of chemical weapons and cluster ammunition is particularly important, also from the perspective of humanitarian aid and barriers to reconstruction.
- Identify the needs of Syrian boys, girls, women, and men separately to be able to adequately respond to them in any EU-funded project or program.
- Support research on violence against Syrian women and girls, such as domestic violence, forced marriage, detention, trafficking, forced disappearance, and SGBV. Violence executed by all parties must be addressed: this includes the Syrian regime and its allies, the opposition, radical groups, ISIS, etc.
- Train Arabic-speaking women as information officers with the aim of collecting data and experiences, specifically of women and girls that became victims of human

⁴¹ For an extensive outlook on a ›Feminist Foreign Policy for the European Union‹, see: Bernarding and Lunz (2020).

⁴² A recent example is the much disputed *European Peace Facility*. (Laghai and Kordes 2021).

rights violations and war crimes.⁴³ Training in other languages such as Kurdish, Assyrian, and Circassian should also be considered in order to respond to the diversity of all Syrian women.

UPDATE THE EU'S STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOLLOWING A FEMINIST SECURITY APPROACH

The EU should adapt its Syria strategy based on a gender-aware provision of human security, integrating an intersectional approach, and including marginalized and particularly vulnerable groups. Overall, the strategy should:

- Rigorously address gender as a cross-cutting issue and pursue gender mainstreaming. This means going beyond perceiving gender as a women's issue, instead addressing the needs of Syrian men, women, girls, and boys, both inside and outside Syria.
- Integrate a gender-aware perspective on safety and security, economic development, as well as human, economic, and social rights for all Syrians.
- Include mechanisms to identify the needs of all Syrians, as well as instruments to monitor and evaluate how policies respond to these needs.
- Strengthen women's political roles further, paying careful attention not to depoliticize women, for example, by portraying them as one single entity.
- Continue to present accountability as a core objective, including for war crimes, gross human rights violations, and crimes against humanity. The EU should specifically address SGBV and its gender-specific effects on Syrian society as a whole. It should also strengthen the principle of universal jurisdiction by supporting Member States to hold perpetrators of crimes against humanity and war crimes accountable. It should take gender-specific impediments and barriers to access to the judiciary system into account and support civil society initiatives that encourage women victims to testify as witnesses in these trials.
- Include SGBV as a criterion for individual sanctions. Integrate specific measures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the sanctions on civilians, especially vulnerable groups.
- Draw on feminist expertise in refining strategies for countering violent extremism and terrorism, by embedding human and women's rights approaches in policies and programs. This includes addressing the political and socioeconomic root causes of violent extremism and terrorism, as well as strategies for the repatriation of foreign fighters and their families.
- Set strategic goals and targets that allow for gender-aware programming, monitoring, evaluation, and distribution of funds and programs in accordance with the EU's overall strategies and instruments to achieve gender equality.
- Further define the EU's red lines regarding reconstruction in Syria. It is essential to be aware that, for the regime, an end of the war will mean seeking to retain power through continued repression, exclusion, and

marginalization of those who oppose it. Any approach to reconstruction should include a gender-aware and intersectional human security perspective.

4.2 IDENTIFY POWER IMBALANCES AND DISMANTLE BARRIERS

Gendered dynamics often shape systemic inequalities and imbalances of power at all levels that can cause conflicts. The EU needs to identify these imbalances and dismantle the barriers to the participation of women and marginalized groups. Overall, the EU should:

DISMANTLE BARRIERS AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL BY:

- Applying an intersectional approach and considering socioeconomic barriers to the participation of Syrian women and marginalized groups. This could include providing more financial support for women political activists. It is also important to increase opportunities for women who are not yet visible at the international level to participate in all training and capacity-building activities and to access EU funding.
- Leveraging even bigger funds for building the capacity of Syrian women with the objective of preparing them for active participation in peace negotiations, policy-making, political transition processes, etc. This should include specific training on leadership, public relations, and advocacy, as well as English language courses.
- Supporting Syrian FWOs and CSOs that conduct training and workshops on gender roles for Syrian men, women, boys, and girls to raise their awareness of gender-based needs, to increase their mutual understanding, and to address the gender stereotypes contributing to inequalities, particularly at the international level.
- Funding the translation of key reports, documents, and research on feminist approaches as well as feminist foreign policy to make these concepts more accessible to Syrians. The EU should also ensure all its public information on Syria is translated, at least into Arabic, and consider other languages such as Kurdish, as well.

MAKE THE EU MORE ACCESSIBLE BY:

- Making all information on strategies, funding, and programming more transparent and easily accessible.
- Equipping the Gender Focal Points of EU delegations with the necessary resources and capacity to actively support local Syrian FWOs in navigating the complex EU system, facilitating better access to information, especially on funding tools.
- Evaluating whether EU funding mechanisms meet the needs of FWOs and CSOs on the ground, both in terms of access and sustainability. The EU should pursue a twofold approach: First, it should increase the amount of smaller, and thus more easily accessible, funds for short-term projects. Second, it should maintain options of long-term funding, while making these options more flexible in order to respond to changed realities on the ground.

⁴³ This issue was also raised in the analysis by El Bakry/Schneider (2021).

INCREASE THE EU'S DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL BY:

- Using its leverage as Syria's largest humanitarian donor and an economic power to propagate its core values, such as gender equality and human rights. The EU should further strengthen its engagement in regional and international diplomatic initiatives.
- Taking the gendered dynamics of the peace process into account. The EU should enforce a fixed quota for women's participation in the opposition. Should the opposition not want to fill these seats, they should remain empty and not be filled by men.
- Fostering improved participation of Syrian women on all negotiation tracks. The EU should avoid making the Syrian women present at the international level into elites, thus creating new barriers for others. Instead, it should support Syrian-led feminist initiatives that aim at building a broader movement. Furthermore, the EU should continue its efforts to connect Syrian women from all tracks.

- Strengthening support programs that provide protection and funding to women's and human rights defenders in Syria and neighboring countries.

STRENGTHEN SYRIAN OWNERSHIP BY:

- Continuously mapping and analyzing which partner organizations the EU is engaging with in Syria, also through subgranting via implementing organizations. The EU should give priority to Syrian-led CSOs and FWOs, whenever possible.
- Focusing more on local and small CSOs and FWOs and less on well-established international NGOs. If local CSOs and FWOs lack the capacity to be eligible for EU funding, mechanisms should be developed to strengthen their capacity.
- Funding programs that are a priority for Syrian CSOs and FWOs. The EU needs to support Syrian priorities and should not only select programming based on its own agenda.

4.3 INCLUSIVE AND DIVERSE FEMINIST AND CIVIL SOCIETY INPUT IN POLICYMAKING

Inclusive and diverse policymaking involves the voices of women, civil society, and marginalized groups. The EU needs to redouble its efforts to include these actors in its policymaking toward Syria. It should:

BE MORE ACCOUNTABLE, TRANSPARENT, AND ACCESSIBLE IN POLICYMAKING BY:

- Installing transparent mechanisms to follow up on recommendations given by civil society, for example during the Brussels Conferences, and the implementation of those recommendations. Such mechanisms should show that funding and resources are distributed in line with these recommendations.
- Mainstreaming gender in civil society mechanisms, such as the «Days of Dialogue» by including a gender perspective in all topics discussed (e.g. health, agriculture, etc.), as well as by involving FWOs more fully. At the same time, the EU should ensure that Syrian women's participation is not only limited to the political sphere but extends to all other areas.

FURTHER SUPPORT SYRIAN FWOs AND THEIR NETWORKING BY:

- Providing funds to FWOs and their networks. This funding should include capacity building for FWOs in Syria and in the diaspora, especially on organizational development, leadership, and management.
- Supporting women's groups and amplifying women's voices through targeted funding. The EU should not only apply gender markers to beneficiaries, but also to better target the distribution of funds to feminist and women-led organizations. This should apply for implementing organizations, as well, especially those that give subgrants to local CSOs.

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EU FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY ON SYRIA

How a holistic perspective can inform EU policymaking on Syria



Syria is in its eleventh year of an internationalized civil war that has led to the worst humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time. A negotiated political solution to the conflict, responding to the needs and rights of all Syrians, seems out of reach. The conflict has disproportionately affected women and marginalized groups, while their role in conflict resolution is sidelined. Although the war in Syria is of the utmost importance to the EU, its current approach does not offer a way out of the political impasse. The EU needs new perspectives to respond to Syria's multidimensional crises, not only to support all Syrians, but also in the EU's own interests.



Feminist foreign policy adopts a different angle on peace and conflict. The concept is based on a broad definition of security, critically examines power relations at all levels, and focuses on diversity in policymaking. Although gender equality, women's and human rights are the backbone of feminist foreign policy, it is not a purely normative framework but takes the realities of peace and conflict into account. Thus, feminist foreign policy offers new ways of thinking and acting to achieve a more inclusive, equal, and comprehensive EU foreign policy approach.



The EU's strategic approach toward Syria is not gender aware and tends to add women to the system rather than to rethink along the lines of a feminist approach. National interests dominate the discourse and marginalize the aspirations of Syrians. These dynamics culminate in the lack of inclusion and equal participation of Syrians, particularly Syrian women, in political transition processes. Despite its efforts, the EU has not overcome the structural barriers to equal participation and substantial civil society input in its policymaking. It needs to close the gender information gap and broaden its strategic framework based on a gender-aware and intersectional provision of human security. The EU also needs to identify systemic inequalities and include the voices of women, civil society, and marginalized groups in its policymaking toward Syria.