STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE CONFERENCE
January 26-28, 2015 - Istanbul, Turkey

WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR PEACE & FREEDOM
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Author:
Cover photo: The photo is taken by photographer Riccardo Cuppini and dedicated the “people that from a kick of sand have the creativity and the ability to built a new peaceful future.”
Photo: Riccardo Cuppini/ Flickr
I. INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY

Advancing human rights through enabling the work of women’s rights activists is an essential driver for sustainable peace. In the context of conflict, women’s grassroots activists work to empower civil society to participate in decision-making. They also are first responders to grave human rights violations, particularly those inflicted with impunity upon women and girls. Yet social and legal barriers that limit their full participation in legal mechanisms, government institutions, and peace negotiations hinder women’s contribution to peace. Women’s rights activists also face violence, including sexual and gender-based violence by state actors, militias, and other extremist armed groups. Despite these obstacles, women continue organizing for their human rights and for a voice in the decisions that will directly impact their lives.

In January, 2015, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and MADRE, with support from the United Kingdom’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office, held the Strategies for Change conference. The conference convened members of grassroots women’s groups from across Iraq and Syria for three days in Istanbul, Turkey to share their experiences. These human rights defenders discussed the root causes of violence against women and identified patterns of violence perpetrated not only by ISIL but also by other militias and government forces. They identified strategies for defending women’s rights in conflict and responding to systematic sexual violence and other human rights violations. Participants travelling from areas controlled by ISIL risked their safety to attend and attest to the range of organizing being done to defend women’s rights in Iraq and Syria. The solutions these grassroots groups have already managed to put in place are saving lives daily. They include shelters and emergency escape routes for women in danger, and humanitarian aid distributions guided by local knowledge of people’s needs and vulnerabilities. Women have brokered local ceasefires, created early-warning systems for armed conflict and organized health care for refugees and displaced people.

Women also hold the solutions with the greatest promise of creating lasting peace and securing human rights in the long-term. In both Iraq and Syria, women have mobilized on the basis of the international human rights framework, demanding national policy change and international action to protect women and families. They have insisted that women’s rights activists and civil society activists be represented in decision-making. They have done all this, even as war rages on. They have proven false the notion that no human rights organizing work can happen in areas controlled by ISIL.

The convening ended with participants identifying existing gaps in responses to threats they face in the conflict. The women produced a set of practical solutions for collaboration and recommendations for the international community to remedy the human rights crisis that Iraqi and Syrian women are facing. These recommendations can be found in the final section of this report.
Structure of the Strategies for Change Conference

The Strategies for Change Conference took place from January 26 to 28, 2015 in Istanbul, Turkey. Discussions were held in Arabic, English and Kurdish, with simultaneous translation provided throughout the three-day gathering. Thirty-three women’s rights activists from 22 different organisations working to support women and girls in Iraq and Syria attended. These activists represented grassroots organisations working to strengthen women’s rights through a range of modalities, including, but not limited to, legal assistance and advocacy organisations, human rights and awareness raising organisations, development focused groups, and organisations providing medical assistance and support for survivors of SGBV. Representatives from Medica Mondiale also attended in order to offer a workshop to help participants, in particular those working with survivors of SGBV, better cope with stressful work conditions. This workshop drew on the organization’s support for various women’s rights organisations worldwide in addressing conflict-related trauma.

The collaborative structure of the conference, which was achieved through a combination of breakout groups and joint sessions, allowed participants to share their local experiences while hearing a number of best practices tailored to various specific conditions. Despite significant differences between the situations in Iraq and Syria, participants recognized that women’s rights organisations in both countries can learn from each other’s experiences and build on each other’s strategies. Participants repeatedly stressed the value of networking and further developing connections among organisations nationally and across borders. Participants identified specific recommendations for furthering action on women’s rights and responding to SGBV in Iraq and Syria. Workshops aimed to collectivize women’s knowledge of patterns of SGBV and the strategies for addressing it. Workshops were as follows:

**Challenges Facing Women**

Participants began by articulating the impact that structures of power have on women in Iraq, Syria, and neighbouring countries that host a significant number of Syrian refugees. Discriminatory social and legal practices along with a lack of health care provision were identified as the main challenges that women face in the region.

**Frameworks of Violence**

Participants identified patterns of violence against women by determining the areas where women are targeted through acts of SGBV. In this analysis, the women’s rights activists present concentrated their assessment on how different armed groups (state regimes, ISIL, and militias) target women.

**Medical Care in Iraq and Syria**

Dr. Roula Hallam from Hand in Hand for Syria led a discussion on the current state of healthcare services for victims of SGBV inside Syria. This session was meant to determine the challenges to delivering healthcare services and then identify the current unmet needs of victims of SGBV.

**Documentation: Workshop on the International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict**

Led by Sara Ferro Ribeiro from the United Kingdom’s Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative, Lisa Davis and Camille Massey from MADRE and the Sorensen Center for International Peace and Justice at CUNY Law School, this session focused on the challenges of documenting sexual and gender-based human rights abuses. Participants applied the Protocol to case studies in order to explore best practices in documentation.
Aziza, aged 24, is a teacher from Homs, Syria. When the conflict started her school had to close as it was not safe. She taught students in her home for a while but eventually that became unsafe too.
II. SHARING PRACTICES BETWEEN PEACEMAKERS

WILPF and MADRE are committed to recognising the contribution of women who strive for peace and gender justice during conflict and in transitional and peacemaking periods. Supporting such activists helps to preserve and strengthen women’s strategies for peace and for human rights everywhere. WILPF and MADRE have initiated multiple projects that connect women’s rights activists across national borders in order to share their experiences with armed conflict. These projects are grounded in the real experiences of women who have sought social, economic and political justice amid conflict and in post-conflict recovery. By connecting women and sharing regional experiences, WILPF hopes to disseminate grassroots women’s advocates’ best practices for addressing gender-based human rights violations in the context of conflict.

A. Women Organising for Change in Bosnia and Syria project

WILPF initiated “Women Organising for Change in Syria and Bosnia” in 2013. The project seeks to share experiences and the empirical knowledge of women who lived through the armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina with women experiencing ongoing conflict in Syria. WILPF believes that through sharing experiences, women working in human rights can learn from past experiences and organise effectively for gender justice in war-affected societies.

WILPF convened a conference from 10 to 14 February 2014 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The conference brought together 20 participants from women’s and human rights activists’ organisations from Syria and 42 activists and representatives of women’s rights groups and civil society organisations from Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the conference, Bosnian participants highlighted the reality of continuing conflicts in society as a result of women being excluded from peace talks and from other strategic decision-making during the post-conflict recovery period. The experience of women’s rights organisations from Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as a useful lesson for Syrian participants, considering their exclusion from high-level peace negotiations.

B. WILPF MENA Agenda 1325 project

Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom’s MENA Agenda 1325 project has been working since 2011 to advance women’s rights and women’s participation in peace and security issues in the MENA region. The project seeks to draw attention to discrimination against women and to support the efforts of women’s rights activists in reinforcing peace and security.

The MENA Agenda 1325 project is active across eight countries in the MENA region: Iraq, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen and Morocco. National civil society partner organisations and human rights activists have designed their work to address their local conditions, but together the project identifies obstacles to, and opportunities for, the advancement of women’s rights and their influence on peace and security policy-making in the region.

C. Gender Conflict Response in Ukraine

WILPF has organised meetings of women from Bosnia with women in Ukraine, in Geneva and in Odessa, specifically on early diagnosis of Sexual violence and responses, organising during the...
crisis and the necessity of participation in peace processes. Women from Ukraine also attended a meeting with Syrian women in October 2014 in Istanbul, on their de brief for their CEDAW report and use of international humanitarian law in the context of protection of civilians.

D. A Persistent Peace: Holistic Transitional Justice Programs with Grassroots Women in Guatemala and Colombia

With local and international partners, MADRE co-initiated the project “A Persistent Peace: Creating Holistic Transitional Justice Programs Informed and Led by Grassroots Women in Guatemala and Colombia,” in 2013. The project brings together representatives of grassroots women’s groups from Guatemala and Colombia for a series of interactive workshops, advocacy trainings, and network-building activities aimed at developing their capacity to mount effective local programs promoting justice and peace. The project aimed to facilitate spaces where participants can share lessons from the various transitional justice processes in their home countries. Participants also analyze current peace and justice efforts from the perspective of redressing gender-based human rights violations. This enables them to develop initiatives and recommend practices for addressing human rights violations and restoring positive relationships between citizens and the state in each country.

E. Palestinian and Israeli Midwives for Peace

MADRE supports a grassroots group of 24 Palestinian and Israeli midwives who have come together, across boundaries of identity and war, to act on their commitment to their profession and to peace. MADRE helps sustain joint professional trainings and workshops for these Palestinian and Israeli midwives. These meetings not only allow the midwives to share expertise and learn concrete skills; they also build bonds of friendship. Despite the ongoing conflict, Palestinian and Israeli midwives are able to work cooperatively, acting as role models for peaceful coexistence.
III. SEXUAL AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

A. Background on Conflicts in Iraq and Syria

After years of crippling sanctions in Iraq, Iraqis were subject to a second major U.S.-led military invasion beginning in March 2003, involving extensive aerial bombing campaigns and around 150,000 troops. Tens of thousands were killed in the first couple years following the invasion. The downfall of Saddam Hussein’s regime led to a security vacuum in which intense civil war and fighting emerged, alongside years of U.S. military occupation. Armed sectarian militias have amassed lengthy records of grave human rights violations, as have Iraqi government forces and the U.S. military coalition. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died from direct violence and other war-related causes since 2003, and millions have been displaced. The rise of sectarian militias into unchecked power continues.

In Syria, on March 15, 2011 mass numbers of people took to the streets in peaceful protests against President Bashar Al-Assad, drawing inspiration from a wave of uprisings against repressive regimes throughout North Africa and the Middle East, popularly called the Arab Spring. As it began, the Syrian revolution was marked by solidarity across religion, sect, and ethnicity, and included significant participation from Syria’s minority populations. As demonstrations continued to be met with violent government repression, a peaceful pro-democracy uprising became a protracted war between the Assad regime and opposition forces. Over 220,000 Syrians have died, and the death toll is rising. Nearly four million Syrians have been displaced into neighboring countries. Three-quarters of Syrian refugees are women and children. Superimposed on the conflict in Syria has been a global battle for influence, with weapons pouring in from multiple countries to the Syrian military and to various armed opposition groups within Syria.

Emergence of ISIL

What began as another militia operating under Al-Qaeda in Syria, ISIL1 splintered off in April 2013 and became the most powerful militia group in Syria, moving into much of northern and eastern Syria. In January 2014, ISIL launched an offensive into northern Iraq, and by June controlled multiple cities and large swathes of both states, and many lucrative oil fields. The Islamic State has engaged in mass killings, ethnic cleansing, systematic violence against women and girls, and other war crimes against both women and religious minorities. Syria’s refugee crisis, already the largest in the world, has been severely exacerbated by ISIL’s rise. In Iraq, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis fled Anbar province after ISIL took control of that province. Today, ISIL controls a large territory spanning across northern Syria and Northwest Iraq. The response to ISIL by Iraqi security forces and militias has resulted in more atrocities, furthering a cycle of deadly violence and perpetuating an environment of impunity. Renewed U.S.-led military action to confront ISIL is another contributing factor to ongoing violence and displacement.

1 ISIL is also known as IS, or ISIS. ISIL is the acronym used by most states.
**ISIL in context**

Despite the scope of the crimes committed by ISIL and the escalating crisis caused by displacement and violence, women activist participants at the Strategies for Change conference urged international parties not to limit their attention solely to ISIL and ignore the broader realities of the ongoing conflicts and the state of women’s rights in Iraq and Syria. In their observations and recommendations, they pointed to systematic violations of women’s rights occurring across Iraq and Syria both in state-controlled and ISIL-controlled areas, as well as in areas controlled by other fighting groups.

The presence of armed groups such as ISIL is not an excuse for the international community, or the Iraqi or Syrian governments to ignore their responsibilities. One of the most significant challenges is the framework that governs the prevention of terrorism financing through the non-profit sector, preventing access to funding resources for civil society organisation operating in areas controlled by armed groups classified as terrorist groups. The international community must find appropriate ways of providing access to necessary resources, hold the governments of Iraq and Syria accountable for upholding women’s rights; for providing adequate services, including healthcare, to women and girls; and for protecting their populations from the dangers of conflict and acts of SGBV. Grassroots women’s groups throughout both countries continue working to address women’s human rights violations every day, no matter who the perpetrators of those violations are. Their strategies and best practices for addressing sexual and gender-based violence in the ongoing conflicts are invaluable and must be supported and strengthened.

**B. Challenges Women and Girls Face**

Women and girls in Iraq and Syria have endured gender-based discrimination and social inequalities as a result of social norms and discriminatory laws and legal practices. Armed conflict in both countries has worsened conditions for them. Conference participants identified the following major challenges women and girls face in Iraqi and Syrian communities:

**Lack of Health Care**

There is a dire need for adequate healthcare services for women and girls across both Iraq and Syria. The pre-existing shortage of healthcare services, including reproductive healthcare services, has been exacerbated by ongoing conflict. Medical facilities have been attacked and destroyed, and the presence of armed checkpoints and other dangers prevents women and others from accessing even the most urgently needed healthcare. Specific medical needs of survivors of SGBV are often unmet and women’s reproductive healthcare services are minimal to non-existent. This has impacted women and girls in all conflict-affected areas. In ISIL-controlled territory, services for women have been significantly reduced with prohibitions against doctors treating patients of the opposite sex. In addition, ISIL has forcibly removed, punished, and sometimes executed female doctors and medical specialists. International donors have also cut funding to organisations that are in ISIL-controlled territory leaving many lifesaving programmes without any support.

**Discriminatory Laws and Legal System Practices**

Iraqi and Syrian legal codes contain unjust and discriminatory provisions that limit the rights of women. For example, in both countries, women require a permit from their husband in
order to obtain identity documents for their children, but men are not required such a permit. Where non-discriminatory provisions exist, there is a lack of implementation. For example in Iraq, for such provisions to be implemented, the Iraqi government’s executive branch must adopt procedures to implement laws that do bolster women’s rights, but continuously fails to do so.

In Syria when the uprisings first emerged in 2011, courts were destroyed, causing complete failure of the legal system. Due to discriminatory laws and practices, women have been severely affected by this destruction, since in the absence of a male relative, they must rely on a judge’s decisions in order to carry out necessary activities in many parts of their daily lives. For example, a woman requires a judge’s or male relative’s approval to move her child if she cannot obtain the child’s father’s approval. In the absence of a legal system, women outside the regime-controlled areas in Syria lack even this narrow interpretation of self-autonomy that access to a judge may permit. While inside the regime-controlled areas, women continue to face discriminatory laws, impunity for perpetrators of violations against them, and the use of the legal system as a tool of oppression.

In both Iraq and Syria, discriminatory attitudes and social norms pervade legal systems and impede access to justice for women and girls throughout the entire legal system. Police forces are unlikely to assist women seeking assistance after a gender-based crime and will often further victimise females. Police forces also carry out unethical and unlawful practices and take advantage of women seeking assistance. There are also rarely detention centres or prisons designated for women, meaning that female suspects are placed in prisons with male prisoners, where they are vulnerable to victimization by male guards.

Discriminatory Social Norms

Discriminatory social and cultural norms limit women’s full participation in society and hinder their integration into local and national institutions. This discrimination is promoted and reified by religious leaders and institutions as well as by tribal leaders. Women and girls face limits and strictures in their movements, dress, and social opportunities. Participants stressed the need to separate religion from the state, and some also called for establishing effective accountability mechanisms for holding tribe leaders responsible for gender-based crimes committed against women. In this respect, Iraqi participants warned against a proposed law that would put personal status laws – mainly inheritance, marriage, and divorce – under the jurisdiction of clerics. Participants also underscored the need to undo patriarchal mindsets that permeate society by disseminating concepts of gender equality among women and men.

Increased Harmful Traditional Practices

Violence against women in the form of so-called honour crimes, and in the form of early and coerced marriages, happen with almost complete impunity across much of Iraq and Syria. Undergirding these practices are legal structures that allow impunity for these violations, along with discriminatory cultural stereotypes. Participants explained that so-called honour crimes can be triggered by the barest suspicions of what is deemed sexual impropriety, such as if a woman has a mobile phone or is overhead contacting a male colleague. It is common practice for some families and tribes to commit honour crimes as a way to reassert their family honour. Women and girls who have been raped or presumed to have been raped are also targets
for killing and brutality in the name of “honour,” as their victimization is seen as an assault on their family’s honour. There is a common presumption that women or girls who have been detained by armed actors have also been raped, thus making them vulnerable to honour killing upon their release.

Enforced child marriages are also a common crime perpetuated against Iraqi and Syrian girls. Poverty and instability stemming from conflicts can add pressure to families that are displaced or that are living in conflict areas to “marry off” girls, with the presumption that this will alleviate economic desperation.

*Increased Vulnerability to Trafficking*

Displacement due to conflict has led to increases in the trafficking of women. Iraqi participants noted that levels of slavery in Iraq have never been higher than now, mainly because of ISIL’s atrocious sexual slavery crimes, committed in particular against women belonging to ethnic and religious minorities. In Syria the situation of trafficking in persons was highlighted as a problem before the conflict but has severely deteriorated both in terms of the modalities and the increased risks to Syrian women and children directly. There is evidence of early and forced marriage leading to the transportation of children to third countries. Of trafficking through Egypt for multiple purposes including sexual exploitation; forced prostitution in both Lebanon and Jordan and “sex for food” in many areas of displacement. Insufficient research has been done to establish the perpetrators, the patterns and the areas of intervention needed.

*Areas for Further Work to Overcome the Challenges Women Face*

Having highlighted the challenges women face in Iraq and Syria, organisations identified key areas for affecting change. Participants continued to raise the following needs throughout the conference discussions:

- Economic empowerment for women and survivors of SGBV
- Psychosocial services for survivors of SGBV
- Educational outreach on human rights and transitional justice
- Documentation of SGBV and channelling of this information to key actors in the international community
- Utilisation of media in a positive way to strengthen women’s rights and combat SGBV
- Elimination of laws that are discriminatory to women
- Engagement of men in transforming patriarchal mindsets, and overcoming militarisation
- Effective presentation strategies to help the international community know where to prioritise their support
- Construction of an effective women’s lobby for full participation of women in addressing humanitarian concerns and in peace-building
- Strategies to address female politicians’ and community leaders’ reluctance to take up women’s human rights issues
A group of Syrian women are knitting fishnets as part of an economic empowerment program for Syrian women refugees in neighboring countries, supported by UK aid funding. Such activities do not only provide the opportunity for Syrian women refugees to generate income amidst increasing unemployment rates, but also enable them to build solid social networks.

Credit: Russell Watkins/Department for International Development
IV. FRAMEWORKS OF VIOLENCE

In addition to the challenges of systematic discrimination, women are also particularly targeted for acts sexual and gender-based violence. Participants identified some of the most prevalent acts of SGBV in Iraq and Syria.

Rape and Torture

ISIL’s rise comes against a backdrop of long running armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq in which gender-based violence has been continuously present. The threats to civilians, including women and girls, posed by ISIL and other militia groups should be understood as a continuing outgrowth of the deterioration of women’s human rights over recent decades. Women have faced rape and torture in prisons of the Syrian regime, and at the hands of other armed actors. Norms of “family honour” recognized in Syria and Iraq’s penal codes, which permit such considerations to mitigate sentences, are a grave threat to women and girls who have been detained or abused by ISIL fighters, as community members presume that detained women have been raped, and therefore represent a stain on their families “honour.”

Iraqi service providers report high rates of suicide among such women, who face being ostracized and targeted with killing by their family or community in the name of “honour.” In fact, some Iraqis have called on their Government to bomb the ISIL-controlled makeshift prisons where women are being held, sold and raped, in order to erase the perceived affront to the honour of those communities.

Detention

In addition to the violence of arbitrary or unlawful detentions, violence is inflicted on women in detention centres as a means to humiliate, terrorize, and punish activism or humanitarian work. Tactics include rape, enforced nudity and other acts of degradation; denial of women’s reproductive health care needs, including feminine sanitary products.

20 participants from women’s and human rights activists’ organisations from Syria and 42 activists and representatives of women’s rights groups and civil society organisations from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At the conference, Bosnian participants highlighted the reality of continuing conflicts in society as a result of women being excluded from peace talks and from other strategic decision-making during the post-conflict recovery period. The experience of women’s rights organisations from Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as a useful lesson for Syrian participants, considering their exclusion from high-level peace negotiations.

Which Women Are Targeted by Armed Actors

Conference participants noted that women are targeted both because of their gender and because of other specific identities they hold. In this respect, women may be targeted because of their political connections (such as a family link to opposition figures or being a female politician), or for being a member of an ethnic or religious minority. Women face violence at the hands of various armed actors, including government and government-supported actors, as well as opposition militias and ISIL.

In the course of discussions, participants found that while women and girls from all groups can be harmed by ISIL and other armed groups, armed actors particularly target women who fall into certain categories:
• Women rebelling against ISIL (such as women’s human rights activists or individuals refusing to abide by ISIL decrees)

• Female members of ethnic or religious minorities

• Professional or highly educated women (including doctors, journalists, politicians)

• Women having strong connection with males belonging to groups opposing ISIL (which can include civil society activists, the free Syrian army, members of the opposition among others)

• Women who oppose the Assad regime

• Family members of opposition figures

Participants noted that a lack of notoriety can increase the probability of women being attacked by government and some militias. While not the case with regard to capture by ISIL, it appears that women activists who are internationally recognised are often less likely to be physically targeted or tortured by armed actors, compared to unknown activists.

Government, ISIL, and Militias Abuses

Conference participants found that there are specific patterns of violence perpetrated against women by different armed groups. While acts of SGBV can be committed by civilians and military forces alike, the participants concentrated their assessment on dissecting the forms of violence committed against women by three specific armed groups active in Iraq and Syria: the state regime or government, ISIL, and militias.

Regime or Government

The Syrian regime is notorious for using enforced disappearances and arbitrary detention as a means of silencing women human rights activists. The lack of adequate security provisions and services within state-run detention centres also leads to conditions that violate women’s human rights. The failure of both Syrian and Iraqi state institutions to deal properly with enforcing the rights of women and responding to their needs should also be understood as gender-based abuse. Acts of rape and other forms of sexual violence is also used to target individual women or entire groups such as a village or a religious sect.

State regimes target women primarily for being members of a certain family or belonging to a certain community. Often, the state is targeting a specific sect or ethnicity and women provide an easy target to harm such communities. States will use SGBV such as rape or the threat of rape to attack women from these targeted groups and as a means of humiliating the women and harming the targeted community. Syrian participants also noted that the regime’s use of women to seduce Free Syrian Army commanders should be recognised as a gender-based abuse.

Loyalists, women who live in highly secure areas, and those with bodyguards have some protection against certain forms of abuses by the state. In addition, women with international connections, women who are widely recognised, or women who are from governing classes may enjoy some protection.

ISIL

ISIL enforces a strict interpretation of Sharia law. As a result, women and girls face harsh restrictions in dress, activities, and movement in ISIL-controlled areas, where they can only move with a male family member. Women are prohibited from working except as teachers or in medicine; yet, regardless of their occupation, no
woman may perform any of her duties in a gender mixed environment. Additionally, travel bans, forcible transfers, enforced dress codes, forced religious conversions, bans on women’s and girls’ education, and the separation of mothers and children are all common forms of violence that ISIL commits.

The punishments ISIL inflicts on women who disregard the prohibitions include execution and torture. ISIL has executed women on suspicion of adultery. ISIL is also responsible for enforced early marriages, typically forcing young girls to marry ISIL fighters. Family members themselves often offer up girls to ISIL fighters as a means of ensuring protection for the family as a whole. ISIL also actively targets ethnic minorities such as Yazidi women in Iraq, of whom some were forced into sexual slavery and trafficked.

*Militias*

Participants were careful to note that militias across Iraq and Syria are far from uniform. Militias in Iraq and Syria nonetheless share similar styles of attack and inflict similar forms of SGBV. Militias target women who are members of any group that is considered hostile to their cause. This could be a religious sect, an ideology grouping, or an ethnic divide. Women who express disagreement with militias are also routinely targeted. This includes activists, women working in human rights advocacy, and lawyers. Militants have also actively targeted those that seek to document the violent crimes of militias. Women working in human rights advocacy, and lawyers. Militants have also actively targeted those that seek to document the violent crimes of militias.
V. SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES IN COUNTERING SGBV

Throughout various sessions, participants highlighted successful strategies they implement in order to advance their work in the face of challenges women face as a result of the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Women in Iraq and Syria have utilized these tactics in order to continue advocating for women’s rights in spite of restrictive social spaces and threats of SGBV. Activists living and working specifically in ISIL-controlled territory also shared strategies for continuing their work despite restrictive ISIL prohibitions.

Responding to SGBV through Women’s Groups

Participants described successes responding to the needs of survivors of SGBV through women’s groups or informal networks of activists. Having safe and secure networks composed primarily of women makes it easier for activists to approach survivors of SGBV. Rather than have survivors attempt to report SGBV directly through state institutions, a network of women’s contacts can serve as a more secure means for survivors to report their experiences and seek assistance. In many cases, women’s groups are the entities that are best suited to reach out to survivors and can also be the best means to document SGBV. These networks can then advocate for survivors of SGBV who may be reluctant to come forward. Participants stressed the importance of keeping strict confidentiality for survivors in these processes, and some suggested the use of aliases for survivors in order to protect their identity.

Women’s Shelters Respond to SGBV and Offer Services that Survivors Need

Offering secure shelters for survivors of SGBV is a vital strategy for responding to SGBV and ensuring survivors have access to services. In addition to providing shelter, these institutions arrange for access to healthcare services, and help secure legal assistance for survivors. Most importantly, they provide secure environments for survivors to heal. Establishing effective shelters requires time as they are based on reputation and trust among their contacts. Shelters can advise survivors on how to access economic empowerment services, and—in the case of Iraq—assist survivors in securing identity documents. Shelters are most effective when they can create links with psychosocial services, women’s empowerment programmes, or outreach centres. By utilising their networks, shelters provide safe referrals for women to seek such services even in socially repressive or conflict-affected areas.

Strategies for Continuing to Work in ISIL Territory

Several activists shared advice on strategies for working in territories under ISIL control. They advise that women’s rights activists follow ISIL prohibitions in order to continue their work in ISIL territories without raising suspicions. In particular, participants suggested activists use ISIL language and adhere to Sharia and ISIL-enforced laws. Laying out the groundwork for activism in cities before ISIL secures control of an area was also highlighted as an effective way to limit some forms of gender discrimination and to plant the seeds for greater women’s rights in a post-conflict or transitional context.

Using ISIL Language and Rhetoric

Some activists said they have found that they can continue their work in ISIL-controlled areas provided they are able to dialogue with ISIL forces using the latter’s rhetoric and reasoning. Participants reported that if they can make an argument based on Islamic traditions or Koran verses, then they may be able to effectively challenge certain forms of repression. This is a
means of securing space for women to negotiate solutions to conflicts in daily life arising from severe ISIL prohibitions. In one successful example, a group of women in Syria convinced ISIL leaders to re-open schools by citing verses from the Koran that encourage education.

Participants further suggested that activists take ISIL-mandated Sharia courses and get certifications in those courses as an additional layer of protection. Activists can also benefit from better understanding ISIL and Sharia prohibitions. In doing so, women’s rights activists can strengthen their legal awareness and be equipped to use existing legal systems to their advantage where possible. For example, one Syrian activist reported being able to use regulations in Sharia courts protecting Muslim women from harassment to demand response to verbal humiliation she received.

**Being Proactive in Advance of Armed Militias and ISIL**

Activists reported they are attempting to effectively prepare for surviving in ISIL territory by being proactive about the ISIL threat before it assumes control of an area. This involves holding workshops and trainings sessions in cities in advance of invasion in order to prepare for surviving in ISIL-controlled territory. Laying the groundwork for continued activism in advance of ISIL strengthens the capacity of civil society and activists on the ground, ideally allowing them to be organised and resilient without raising suspicion.
VI. RESPONSE: MEDICAL PROVISIONS AND DOCUMENTATION

Having identified the major challenges facing women and the threats women experience, participants discussed the needs for responding to SGBV in Iraq and Syria. Participants were unified in emphasizing the need for adequate health care services and better documentation of abuses. In order to understand specific needs on the ground, sessions during the conference were dedicated to the topics of medical services and documentation of abuses. In the course of each session, participants elaborated on the state of health care services in Iraq and Syria and considered practical challenges in documenting SGBV.

A. Medical Care in Iraq and Syria

In Iraq, health care services are inadequate for the entire Iraqi population. Conference participants described areas of tens of kilometres where there are no hospitals. When medical services are offered, they may still exclude women’s specific health needs. Legal restrictions prevent women’s access to safe abortion. An Iraqi participant noted that abortions still cannot be legally performed in hospitals, thereby forcing women to resort to either life-threatening abortion performances carried out by non-medical personnel or to otherwise illegal abortions that could lead to imprisonment.

Since July 2014 and the advance of ISIL into Iraqi territory, women’s access to healthcare has diminished even further. Participants working and living in ISIL-controlled areas reported that ISIL or militias have occupied hospitals. As a result, medical centres staff are required to work under the command of ISIL. The government has stopped sending medical supplies to hospitals in ISIL territory. As a result, in most hospitals, supplies have been exhausted and all vaccinations have already expired. The number of available doctors has steadily diminished because armed actors have killed them or because doctors have attempted to flee the area to avoid being targeted further. Limited hospital supplies and prioritising the needs of ISIL soldiers over those of civilians implies that survivors of sexual violence are given limited care and often denied surgery services.

In Syria, the healthcare system has been systematically destroyed. Health facilities have been decimated by conflict and healthcare providers have suffered abductions and attacks by armed forces. The lack of health care specialists and essential medical supplies turn regular medical conditions into life-threatening and even deadly maladies. As a result of its destroyed health care systems, Syria is now a repository for preventable diseases that were not present before the conflict, such as polio.

B. Gaps and Challenges

Lack of Sustained Funding

International organisations and non-governmental organisations have proven reluctant to offer the continued funding necessary for supporting medical centres in Iraq and Syria. This makes it almost impossible for medical centres to pay for human resource costs or meet demand for services. For example, Hand in Hand for Syria reported being forced to close down a hospital in Aleppo because no donor or organisation would pay for the staff salaries (approximately $70,000 per month). Participants noted that international donors are more concerned with sensational jihadist attacks and beheadings than they are with the entrenched humanitarian crisis facing Iraqis and Syrians.

Lack of Medical Care for Women

The absence or diminished access of medical services in Iraq and Syria present real health challenges to women and girls. The lack of health services has been exacerbated even further under ISIL. This need is particularly pronounced in areas controlled by ISIL, in which medical
and non-governmental organisations are permitted to continuing working but women and men are prohibited from treating either gender. A major challenge lies in the fact that there are not enough female doctors to meet demand, and those who are present face strictures on their dress and movement that inhibit their work. For instance, in Raqqa, female nurses are prohibited from lifting their veils when treating patients and female doctors must be accompanied by a mahram (male guardian).

As a result, women in Mosul suffered for several months from relatively treatable conditions and, due to the lack of female doctors, many did not survive. It was only when non-governmental organisations interfered in order to bring in a female doctor that medical care for women in Mosul could continue. Additionally, most specialised doctors have left due to harassment from ISIL leaving many areas without access to necessary specialists such as gynecologists or pediatricians.

**Lack of Training**

Existing medical providers would benefit greatly from training, and gender and SGBV sensitization. For example, survivors often experience double victimisation through insensitive questioning or the use of virginity tests at medical centres. The act of testing the virginity of a survivor is an element of systematic violence against women. It is both psychologically damaging and can threaten the physical security of survivors as they may be killed by family members for not being found virgins through these flawed exams after they leave the medical centres.

**Stigma Associated with Sexual Violence**

Social stigmatisation and family rejection hinders the rehabilitation of survivors of SGBV. In addition to coping with trauma from the sexual violence they suffered, survivors can experience severe feelings of shame as a result of social stigma.

**Discrimination Against Women in Health Provision**

Both Iraqi and Syrian laws are discriminatory against women by hindering their reproductive healthcare access. For example, Syrian law prohibits abortion, except to save the life of a woman. Likewise in Iraq, abortion is considered a crime for pregnant women and for those who assist pregnant women in obtaining an abortion. It is only permitted in Iraq to save the life of the pregnant woman or where the foetus in unviable, and in those cases women must have both spousal permission and permission from physicians. In Syria, contraceptives are prohibited according to the Syrian criminal law, but enforced so they can be found in pharmacies. However acquiring them, including emergency contraceptives, are difficult and very expensive.

**Lack of Services**

In many regions of Iraq and Syria, medical centers are completely lacking. There is no centre that cares for women in the rural eastern area of Iraq. In the Kurdish region of Iraq, participants noted the limited capacity of medical centres means they are not able to take all referral cases. The centers also suffer a severe lack of trained medical staff. Those medical staff and personnel that are present are often psychologically tired, which can undermine their ability to provide adequate and sensitive services to survivors.

**Lack of Security**

Survivors of sexual violence lack safe environments to receive treatment, seek shelter, and heal from their experiences. Security needs are exacerbated by a lack of trust among survivors themselves who come from varied backgrounds. Recurrent displacements and ongoing violence make nearly all settings unstable. In Iraq, the state or militias also can interfere with medical services by exerting pressure on doctors to report on medical cases in a certain way.
Difficulty Accessing Existing Services

Women and girls often do not have transportation means to reach existing services. They may also be unaware of where services are offered or how to receive them. Stronger referral networks are needed in order to connect women to existing medical, psychosocial, outreach or social empowerment services.

Medical Service Provision

Iraqi and Syrian participants divided into breakout groups to consider how best to increase access to health services for survivors of SGBV. The groups identified the immediate needs of existing organisations and made several recommendations. They underscored the overall need for increased provision of medical and psychosocial services, and for greater access to services in difficult to reach areas or territories under conflict. They also wanted to see better networking and communication among organisations. Participants highlighted the following specific areas of need with regard to improving provision of health care services:

Image by the Syrian art collective Alshaab Alsouri Aref Tariqoh (The Syrian People Know Their Way)
i. Immediate Needs- Iraq

- **Improving Existing Health Care Services to Meet the Needs of Women and Survivors of SGBV**

Existing health care services need to be expanded in order to better meet the needs of women, and in particular, their reproductive health access. Amongst many needed changes, improving women’s reproductive healthcare access would entail legal reform to allow abortion. In addition, medical staff need sensitization training for interacting with survivors of sexual violence. For example, some medical centres have a policy of issuing patients a stamp upon intake that mark them as a rape survivor. Such a system humiliates the survivor even as they are seeking treatment, and may prevent other survivors from seeking help.

- **Meeting the Needs of Displaced Women**

Women living in refugee camps or otherwise displaced need increased access to medical and psychosocial care, including reproductive healthcare and treatment for survivors of SGBV. Iraqi organisations emphasized the importance of beginning to network with international organisations working in refugee camps including the United Nations and Medicines Sans Frontier. Outside of refugee camps, participants stated that there should be mobile medical teams that can provide services in inaccessible areas.

- **Documentation of SGBV**

Iraqi participants called for the creation of a specialised network for documentation of sexual and gender-based violence. This network would increase knowledge of best practices of documentation while also improving the means to keep accurate records and statistics on SGBV. Such a network should include organisations from different fields in order to benefit from varied expertise across sectors.

- **Challenging Legal Restrictions that Limit Shelters and Service Provision**

There is a need to amend the legal prohibitions that require government approval to set up and operate shelters. This would allow Iraqi organisations to open a greater number of shelters in order to provide adequate services for women fleeing sexual and gender-based violence. Legal identity requirements must also be amended to account for the fact that survivors who seek shelter and other services often no longer possess identity cards. These cards are necessary to access state services such as medical care, making it imperative that alternatives be created for those without identification. Iraqi organisations should also advocate for the right to follow up on cases that state institutions take on, including by securing access to prisons.
• **Security Training**

Iraqi participants noted the need for security training for staff working with survivors of SGBV and women and girls fleeing SGBV. Such training would better inform activists on best practices to increase the security of those they work with and help them better protect themselves.

ii. **Immediate Needs- Syria**

• **Ensuring Sustained Support from International Organisations**

International organisations should adopt long-term support programmes for local Syrian organizations. Since ISIL has been allowing medical organisations to continue working, international organisations should continue to fund non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations at work in ISIL-controlled territory. Funding should prioritize humanitarian relief for refugees, psychosocial support, medical centre support, and an increased number of shelters.

• **SGBV Programming**

Medical services must include programming that adequately responds to the needs of women and girls, including survivors of SGBV. There must be training and funding for specialist medical professionals. In particular, medical specialists who are sufficiently trained to treat survivors of SGBV are greatly needed.
Collecting information on systematic SGBV can provide a tool for holding the state and other perpetrators accountable for gender-based human rights violations. Documentation is also important for creating informed advocacy campaigns to respond properly to SGBV and mobilize adequate resources for survivors.

“The International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict” sets out basic principles and best practices for documenting sexual violence. The protocol is designed to equip people with general knowledge of how to collect basic evidence in order to better document gender-based human rights abuses and violations.

A. International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict

The Protocol sets out the definition of sexual violence as an international crime. This includes detailing what sexual violence is, which acts constitute sexual violence crimes, and what are the requirements to prosecute sexual violence as a crime under international law. The Protocol also describes how to do effective documentation. It describes best practices for research, setting up an investigation, and conducting safe and effective interviews. It also sets out the minimum requirements of evidence standards. The Protocol is worth in-depth consideration and is a valuable resource for all women’s rights activists who are working to document evidence of human rights abuses and violations.

B. Information Sources for Documentation

Participants brainstormed potential sources for information on SGBV. These include the following:

Survivors

Testimony from survivors is crucial to documenting crimes of SGBV but the needs of survivors should be balanced with the pursuit of information. Collecting survivors’ testimony can pose dangers to both interviewers and interviewees. One of the various methods for creating greater security that activists suggested was smuggling survivors or eyewitnesses out of the country into neutral nations so that their testimony can be taken safely and according to international standards.
Eye Witnesses to SGBV Crimes

This may include bystanders, former detainees from prison systems, or other survivors of SGBV. In some cases, bystanders to SGBV crimes may be convinced to come forward with their testimony. Using hotlines or dedicated phone lines for anonymous information is a specific strategy to solicit such information.

Media

Investigative journalism and media can serve as useful sources of information. Participants noted that the media can be used in both positive and negative ways, depending on who has control over it. It can be a means of information, or it can be a way to attack women and others.

Evidence from Perpetrators

Perpetrators of SGBV may publicise information themselves about their crimes. Perpetrators often record evidence of SGBV on mobile phones or recording equipment. This may be done as a means of spreading terror or humiliating their targets. Perpetrators may even post such evidence publically on social media sites.

State or Institutional Records

Information on the prevalence of SGBV can be found in the records of institutions dealing with medical and legal outcomes of such violence. For example, such information can come from medical professionals or the records of healthcare centres. Iraqi participants noted that police station reports can also potentially be useful.

International Human Rights Mechanisms

The reports of international human rights bodies are useful as records. This may include reports by entities such as UN monitoring organizations or UNHCR.

C. Best Practices in Documentation

In the course of discussions, participants highlighted best practices for documentation, focusing primarily on how to treat survivors. The need to avoid further harming survivors was stressed as a necessary guiding principle and the most important factor to consider in conducting interviews and working on documentation. The workshop also emphasised the need to ensure documentation is accurate and well recorded.

Do No Harm

Those involved in documentation should be guided by the principle of “do no harm.” If there is any potential for damage to the survivor then documenters should stop the process. Survivors’ needs take priority over documentation even if the purpose behind documentation is noble. This means that throughout the interview process, interviewers should be conscious of points where it is necessary to stop and take breaks or even refer the survivor to psychological support.

Types of Questions to Ask

Questions to survivors should be designed to gather information while balancing the needs of survivors. An interview is not meant to be an interrogation. However, to be effective, interviewers should seek details where possible (i.e., clothing, accents, conversations, length of the experience) that can help substantiate cases. Questions related to “why” the crime was committed can be good sources of information. It is such details that can help authorities or activists understand why a person or a village was targeted. Questions should be framed non aggressively (i.e. “Do you have any ideas on motivated the attack? Has your village been attacked already?”).
Selecting Information

It is important for interviewers to understand what they are seeking to document. It is not always necessary to gather all information. In many cases, it is not advisable to collect too many identifying details as it can put the interviewer or the survivor at risk. Information solicited during documentation will depend on the purpose of documentation. For example, gathering information for a trial requires obtaining a more specific detail than would be needed if one were gathering data in order to offer better humanitarian service provisions.

Documentation Notes

It is good practice to take written notes during an interview with the survivor. However, the interviewer should ensure that the survivor understands that written documentation is a necessary part of an established process. By seeking consent and ensuring the victim is comfortable during interviews, the interviewer can better facilitate what can often be a traumatic experience. It is also best practice to read the information back straightaway to confirm the information is correct as this will serve as the first pieces of information in an investigation. However, security needs always precede information retention and so in situations where documentation can endanger people it is better not to take written notes.
VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Information in this report derives from the expertise of a diverse group of women’s rights activists working in the context of ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Many of the strategies for change that Iraqi and Syrian participants identified are tested practices developed amidst severe challenges and active threats to the physical security of activists. Their recommendations are based on their direct observations of the interplay of the armed conflict with longstanding cultural and political gender-based repression in Iraq and Syria. This report is therefore a crucial source of knowledge for the international community for how best to strengthen women’s rights and respond to human rights violations in these contexts.

Several themes emerged repeatedly throughout discussions at the Strategies for Change conference. Women’s rights activists stressed the importance of ensuring available medical services to all women and girls impacted by ongoing conflict and mass displacement. Participants also underscored the need to economically empower women, as part of supporting survivors of SGBV and as a means to enable all women to be active and full members of society. Combating the repressive influence of religious institutions by separating religion from the state was also an important theme for participants, who saw this as an important part of campaigns to change discriminatory laws and legal practices.

Throughout discussions, Iraqi and Syrian women’s right advocates recognised the need to effectively present their recommendations so as to inform international partners where they need to prioritise their support. Participants demonstrated a strong interest in being able to properly document abuses in order to channel information through international human rights mechanisms, increase global attention to such abuses, and end impunity. They recognised that accurately documenting gender-based human rights violations is necessary for ensuring this information can be used in international courts, tribunals and human rights mechanisms. The women’s rights activists also sought to create reporting mechanisms that will assist in monitoring violations, ensure better means of communicating with international partners to report abuses, and facilitate working with media channels to increase monitoring.

Participants recognized the value of sharing their experiences and promoting knowledge amongst women’s organizations in order to strengthen women’s rights. Both Iraqi and Syrian participants repeatedly stressed the importance of facilitating means for women’s rights activists to communicate with each other and share best practices. They called for developing networks for this purpose nationally and regionally between Iraq and Syria. Participants also demonstrated a strong belief in the value of using technology as they advocated for increasing their use of media in order to facilitate their work, improve monitoring of crimes, and challenge stereotypical presentations of women or depictions of violence against women.

Implementation of effective strategies to address and prevent gender-based crimes and discrimination against women begins with grassroots women’s rights activists active in the region. Advancing women’s rights and ensuring women’s involvement in peace and security processes cannot be done without recognising the experiences and insight of these women. The recommendations women’s rights activists distilled at the conference are clear. Information in this report derives from the expertise of a diverse group of women’s rights activists working in the context of ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Many of the strategies for change that Iraqi and Syrian participants identified are tested practices developed amidst severe challenges and active threats to the physical security of activists. Their recommendations are based on their direct observations of the interplay of the armed conflict with longstanding cultural and political gender-based repression in Iraq and
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Implementation of effective strategies to address and prevent gender-based crimes and discrimination against women begins with grassroots women’s rights activists active in the region. Advancing women’s rights and ensuring women’s involvement in peace and security processes cannot be done without recognising the experiences and insight of these women. The recommendations women’s rights activists distilled at the conference are clear proposals to empower the work of women’s rights activists. The strategies reflect both the challenges Iraqi and Syrian women’s rights activists are facing and their most urgent needs. WILPF and MADRE urge the international community to make use of this grassroots expertise and these experiences implementing the recommendations from the Strategies for Change Conference.

**Recommendations**

Iraqi and Syrian women at the Strategies for Change conference developed specific recommendations for responding to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). These recommendations reflect the analysis participants conducted throughout the conference by identifying threats, and considering the major gaps and immediate needs in the region. The recommendations are tailored to meet the realities of Iraqi and Syrian women and girls.

Participants called for greater healthcare provision, including greater training to improve capacity, and sustained funding for health services, particularly for SGBV survivors. Participants also emphasized the need to improve documentation of SGBV through information networks and capacity building. They recognized the need for capacity building, including through training and by sharing expertise amongst networks. Participants made the following recommendations, directed at the international community:

**Healthcare Provision**

Increase access to medical and psychosocial services for civilians, particularly women and survivors of SGBV. This entails ensuring continued support for existing services and connecting survivors with these services through safe referral networks and programmes. In Syria there is an urgent need to ensure funding for salaries of medical professionals and staff in order to prevent the closure of operating hospitals. Such closures leave civilian populations with no access to healthcare, with a disproportionate impact on women. In Iraq, there is an urgent need for greater medical and psychological treatment centres to address the needs of displaced women and survivors of armed attacks.

**Funding for Civil Society Organisations Operating in ISIL-Controlled Areas**

Provide sustained funding for civil society organisations in ISIL-controlled territory. Participants stressed that civil society organisations continue to work in ISIL-controlled areas as they have worked under other repressive powers before. However, most international partners have suspended funding to groups in ISIL-controlled areas. Ensuring sustained funding from international donors will allow these organisations to provide much needed services to civilians most directly affected by conflict.
Capacity Building

Conduct training for activists and organisations on best practices for documenting SGBV and on proper service provision to survivors. This should include training on psychosocial and healthcare support for survivors of SGBV, interviewing procedures, and campaigns to educate medical personnel and other relevant professionals on best practices for interacting with survivors of SGBV. Syrian participants proposed establishing a virtual learning site for civil society organisations that specialises in training and education related to women’s rights. Training in documentation could be complemented with development of a documentation network that facilitates information sharing among local organisations and ensures that documentation from the local level is connected to international entities such as tribunals and the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

Networking

Establish connections and support the development of networks among organisations addressing women’s needs at the local level and regionally. Conference participants noted that they lack information on the activities of other organisations working across related fields. Further networking to exchange experiences, promote documentation of SGBV, and improve the ability of organisations to share cases studies will strengthen the work of civil society organisations. A concrete first step would be to establish a database for the networks represented at the Strategies for Change conference before then developing a network that connects Iraqi and Syrian women’s organizations.

Legal Support

Provide technical support to bridge the gaps between national laws and international human rights standards. Such support could include: awareness programmes to educate all stakeholders on existing laws, including the law of armed conflicts. Train and involve grassroots women activists and allied stakeholders in identifying existing gaps in national legislation and drafting laws to bring national legislation in line with international human rights standards, drafting adequate legal schemes to reform current legal systems that discriminate against women, and working to implement existing laws that are inadequately applied. In Iraq, there is also an urgent need to reform the legal system regulating shelters in order to secure the right for women’s rights organisations to open shelters and to supervise their functioning.

Empowerment

Put in place two-fold empowerment strategies to support survivors of SGBV through economic, psychosocial, and other programming; and to strengthen the ability of women’s rights groups to advocate gender justice, including the needs of survivors. Establish clear, feasible and budgeted implementation frameworks to achieve the desired outcomes in such programmes.

Media Reform

Provide technical, financial and logistical support for programmes targeted to media reform. One priority should be support for informative programmes to improve media coverage of gender issues. This can include educational training for media makers on SGBV other gender-based human rights violations (particularly by armed groups). Training should be directed at ending stigmatization of victims and eliminating the incitement of violence against women. This can be accomplished through workshops for media professionals on reporting on SGBV. Additionally, advocacy initiatives for laws to prohibit satellite channels from depicting violence against women should be implemented.
Additional Country-Specific Recommendations Include

In Syria:


Women and civil society representatives must be recognized as a third independent bloc at the negotiating table. Despite their exclusion thus far from formal peace processes, Syrian women continue to organize across sectarian lines to address immediate humanitarian concerns and strategize ways to deescalate the conflict. Women have developed a series of demands of the armed actors and the international community, and these demands must be forwarded to prevent the further deterioration of the human rights situation in Syria and the continued spread of conflict.

The international community must work towards the implementation of four primary concerns to mitigate and deescalate the current conflict: an immediate ceasefire, gender-sensitive early warning mechanisms to prevent the spread of conflict, unfettered humanitarian aid to besieged populations and refugee communities, and immediate release of prisoners by all sides of the conflict.

2. Implement the CEDAW Recommendations to Advance Syrian Women’s Advocacy Priorities and Human Rights Protections

In July 2014, MADRE, WILPF, CUNY Law School and several of our Syrian partner groups, submitted two separate reports containing shared concerns and demands to the CEDAW Committee for its review of Syria. The reports submitted to CEDAW serve two critical purposes. In the short-term, the information contained in these reports raises attention to the need for Syrian women to be equal and meaningful participants in peace negotiations, transitional justice processes, and peace-building efforts. In the long-term, they create a historical record of abuse committed against Syrian women and uphold the long-standing demands of the Syrian women’s movement. Preserving these demands ensures that they are not derailed by the conflict and that reconstruction processes in Syria prioritize women’s rights, thereby generating genuine and sustainable peace. The recommendations included the following:

1. The Government of Syria should uphold its obligation under international law to implement Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106, 2122, regarding the status of women in armed conflict. Syrian women’s organizations also call on the international community and on the negotiating parties to guarantee the effective participation of women on all negotiating teams and committees in a proportion of no less than 30% for the duration of the negotiation process.

2. Implement an immediate ceasefire as a first step towards the permanent cessation of military operations. This can be achieved by relying upon mutually reinforcing negotiation tracks at local, national and international levels, with the robust participation of Syrian civil society.

3. Lift the siege and allow for the timely provision of humanitarian and medical aid to all affected regions, under the supervision of an independent commission with international oversight.
In Iraq:

1. Lift the Ban on Local NGO-Run Shelters

In Iraq, the establishment and maintenance of private shelters by NGOs is against public policy. Only government-run shelters, managed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs are permissible, though none currently exist. Amending this shelter provision to allow NGOs to run private shelters for displaced families and individuals would greatly aid the local Iraqi women’s organizations already mobilizing an emergency response to protect at-risk individuals.

In the climate of the current conflict, there is an exponentially greater need for NGO-run shelters. Several localities have reported a critical need for support in meeting the needs of displaced persons and two have already come to agreements with local groups to help provide shelter. A lifting of the policy banning local NGOs from running shelters, coupled with increased funding from the international community to enable local Iraqi organizations to provide this service, is essential to helping those who are most vulnerable. Local organizations are best situated to access areas and persons at-risk beyond the reach of international organizations and UN agencies.

Addressing displacement issues now will reduce some of the social problems displacement often causes. In addition to shelter, local NGOs are in a critical position to provide health care, psycho-social support, reunification with other family members, and assistance enrolling children in school. These services help to reduce illiteracy, spread of disease, the number of women and children vulnerable to trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV), and the economic burdens placed on local governorates to address the crisis of displacement.

2. Create Access to Identification Cards

Women fleeing ISIS brutality, attempted honour killings, trafficking, forced prostitution or forced marriage cannot obtain legal identification in the absence of a male family member to verify her identity. The Civil Status Identification Document and Nationality Certificates are needed to access public services, including food assistance, healthcare, employment, education and housing, as well as to obtain a passport. Unwillingness on the part of authorities to provide these documents denies a large number of women and children basic services and may render women and marginalized populations stateless, increasing their vulnerability to violence and discrimination. Internally displaced women and children are particularly at risk of torture, rape, trafficking and other forms of sexual violence.

In the context of the current conflict, the Dohuk Governorate under the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has issued permanent identification cards to a number of displaced persons, including a large number of Yazidi women who have escaped ISIS-controlled territories and can prove their identities. New identification can be obtained by presenting food-assistance forms or another acceptable form of Iraqi identification (ID). If a person does not have ID, they can get a letter of support from the management department within a displacement camp. They may also bring a relative who lives in a camp and can verify their identity.

Other Governorates throughout Iraq should follow Dohuk’s model of reissuing identification. The Central government should adopt a policy of issuing temporary identification cards to displaced persons based on the same standards for proving identity that are used in Dohuk. These temporary identification cards should be issued for a period of three years. If after three years, the temporary identification card holder is not found or recognized by a family member, the Governorate should replace the temporary identification card with a permanent one. Identification card holder is not found or recognized by a family member, the Governorate should replace the temporary identification card with a permanent one.

2. Law of 2012, Trafficking in Persons, Article 11, paragraphs 7 & 8 (“Concerned State directorates shall commit (while taking into consideration the needs of the babies) to assisting the victims of human trafficking with special consideration to children’s needs, as follows: … Seven: Provide financial assistance and a temporary shelter based on gender and age classification; Eight: To provide social, psychological, and physical rehabilitation by establishing specialized rehabilitation centers or care houses based on special program to reintegrate the victims in society.”).


3. Promoting Access to Health Care for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence

In the context of the conflict, survivors of SGBV often lack access to healthcare services. When visiting a health clinic, women and men rape survivors have reported being ridiculed, blamed and turned away. Many survivors do not attempt to access medical treatment at all, deterred by the social stigma attached to sexual violence.

- Call on the Minister of Health, Majeed Hammad Ameen, to issue a decree calling on doctors to uphold the Hippocratic oath and provide services to sexual violence survivors.
- Collaborate with the Ministry of Health to provide trainings to medical professionals including doctors, nurses and medical technicians aimed at reducing stigmatization associated with sexual violence, gender-based violence, and violent masculinities. This includes training healthcare providers in Baghdad’s four main hospitals on treatment protocols for how to appropriately provide care for survivors of sexual violence. Provide referrals for sexual violence victims to local NGOs who provide long-term psychosocial supportive services.
- Create and staff the position of a liaison for hospital emergency rooms specifically tasked with meeting and assisting sexual violence survivors when they go to hospitals and seek care. While such a position may need to be funded by the international community, it would encourage long-term sustainability by providing access to critically needed treatment as well as connection to a supportive environment (through NGO referrals), and thus empowering sexual violence victims.

4. Lift the Ban on Locally Run Radio Stations

Last year, in response to anti-government demonstrations, the Iraqi Government, under the direction of the Communication and Media Commission, shut down over a dozen independently run radio stations, many of which were non-partisan and aimed at advocating for social equality and justice. One of the radio stations adversely impacted by this policy was the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq’s (OWFI) Al-Mousawaat (Equality) radio station. Like many of the radio stations that were shut down, Al-Mousawaat radio station is an integral mechanism for disseminating messages of peace, tolerance and respect for human rights and combating societal discrimination.

Currently, the independence and integrity of the CMC is being negotiated between Iraq’s political blocs and parties. Additionally, several state governments and international organizations have called for a more independent CMC, capable of providing a safe and stable platform for free speech, social justice and equality. CMC Commissioner, Safa Al-Din Rabe’a should immediately reverse the license suspensions and issue additional frequencies to allow stations to continue broadcasting.
The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) with National Sections covering every continent, an International Secretariat based in Geneva, and a New York office focused on the work of the United Nations (UN).

Since our establishment in 1915, we have brought together women from around the world who are united in working for peace by non-violent means and promoting political, economic and social justice for all.

Our approach is always non-violent, and we use existing international legal and political frameworks to achieve fundamental change in the way states conceptualise and address issues of gender, militarism, peace and security.

Our strength lies in our ability to link the international and local levels. We are very proud to be one of the first organisations to gain consultative status (category B) with the United Nations, and the only women’s anti-war organisation so recognised.

MADRE is an international women’s human rights organization. We partner with grassroots women’s groups worldwide in communities facing war and disaster to meet urgent needs and advocate for lasting change.

We towards a world in which all people enjoy the fullest range of individual and collective human rights; in which resources are shared equitably and sustainably; in which women participate effectively in all aspects of society; and in which people have a meaningful say in policies that affect their lives.

To advance women’s human rights, we partner with community-based women’s organizations to meet basic needs for food, clean water, healthcare and more. When local women provide these vital services to their community, they build new skills and step up as leaders. We also train and accompany grassroots women’s organizations to advocate for rights-based policies, locally, nationally and globally. Together, these two strategies - meeting urgent needs and advancing human rights - combine to create lasting change.