

Breaking the Continuing Denial of Syrian Feminist Existence

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Introduction

The protracted conflict in Syria has produced a space of no “safe zone” for feminist work. Following the fall of the Assad regime, under the de facto authorities, the situation has effectively not changed as women continue to navigate compounded systems of surveillance, smear campaigns, intimidation, killings and kidnappings and patriarchal repression. What is often labelled as shrinking civic space is in reality a war on feminist existence.

Syria has not adopted an official WPS-NAP to date and feminist activists did not wait around for one, as any state-endorsed process would have been shaped by the Assad regime. Instead, they produced their own shadow NAP to ensure it adequately reflects the aspirations, ethos and struggles of the Syrian feminist movement that has survived multiple matrices of suppression.

Background

Before the 2011 uprising, feminist civic organizing in Syria was elite-driven, tightly surveilled, and rarely disruptive. Legal reforms were the limit, and systemic exclusion was rarely questioned due to the high cost of challenging the system, which can cost WHRDs their freedom or lives. The revolution cracked open civic space. Forced displacement out of regime-held areas, driven by the Assad regime's systematic war crimes, including indiscriminate bombardment, mass detention, and siege warfare, created new centers of feminist organizing, across cities, camps, and the diaspora. Class, geography, and generational hierarchies were unsettled.

The armed turn of the revolution institutionalized women's political erasure. Armed groups (whether regime-affiliated, HTS, opposition factors, or others), entrenched gendered control over space, speech, language, mobility, and identity. Militant ideologies resurrected ‘virtue’ narratives widely to justify women's exclusion and killings. In the absence of formal protections and a complete abandonment from the international community, WHRDs became disposable. The illusion of safety created by donor training or UN briefings collapsed against the reality of activists with no secure housing, no legal recourse, and no protection mechanisms whatsoever. In Northeast Syria, WHRDs have operated in a radically different

environment where the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has actively promoted women's liberation by establishing institutional structures that enable women's participation in both political life and armed forces. However, multiple tensions exist between top-down ideological commitments and deep-rooted patriarchal norms.

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, retaliatory violence occurred sporadically along former conflict contact lines in areas where severe violence or war crimes were committed by the Assad regime and its local and regional paramilitary groups. In March 2025, while responding to attacks by armed groups aligned with the regime, militias affiliated to the transitional government were suspected of committing atrocities including summary executions, lootings and acts of humiliation targeting Alawite communities in coastal areas. Similar events were reported in Sweida in July 2025 where clashes erupted between Druze and Bedouin community groups. The armed forces of the transitional government, joined by tribal militias, were also implicated in comparable acts of violence.

These events exposed deep fractures and were deeply gendered, with CRSV committed at large scale and particularly women tortured. Some activists denied the violence, distorted facts or remained silent. Trust broke. Value-based organizing was replaced with defensive positioning, driven by fear rather than principles. Feminist coalition-building suffered a dilemma of keeping their constituencies who suffered decades of the Assad regime engaged and supportive of their work, as opposed to taking a public stand against those atrocities with the risk of losing a critical audience of women who is in need of continued support to reach justice for the war crimes and violations they suffered over the past 14 years.

Despite donor affirmations to support WPS, feminist activists report exhaustion from performative engagement. Attempts from feminists to institutionalize structures, like civil-society-led shadow 1325 NAPs, exist in a vacuum of political applicability. Any engagement on the issue with the de-facto authorities means compromising safety. Furthermore, recent iterations of the interim constitutional declaration have only added layers of centralized power and legal erasure. The gender-blindness of these texts consolidates patriarchal rule under the guise of national unity.

What is happening right now?

- Forced displacement from regime-held areas - driven by systematic war crimes, indiscriminate bombardments and siege warfare – and the lasting impact of this violence compounded by new challenges faced by WHRDs in their areas of resettlement have posed significant barriers to feminist organizing. The COVID-19 pandemic inadvertently dismantled these long-standing geographic and political barriers, enabling women from across regime-held and opposition-controlled territories to meet, mobilise, and strategize in transnational digital forums that continue to thrive today.
- Women-led organizations, such as Badael, Women Now for Development, Dawlaty and the Syrian Feminist Lobby, became central feminist platforms providing strategic research, emergency protection support, and financial tools that anchor many national feminist actions, including oral history archiving, WHRD safety planning, and women and youth political training.

- Investments in youth, through mentorship, paid internships, and political education, have created a new generation of feminist organisers and knowledge producers equipped to carry forward and redefine post-revolution feminist priorities.
- Oral history documentation, particularly through digital platforms like Women Behind the Siege, plays a vital role in preserving the political memory of siege, detention, forced disappearance, and displacement. It also captures the gendered impact of crimes against humanity, reclaiming narrative power and contributing to international legal accountability structures.
- Syrian feminist actors have consistently intervened in rushed and exclusionary formal political processes (e.g. the National Dialogue Conference), often producing ad-hoc but politically significant recommendations and counterproposals, even under duress and surveillance.
- The Syrian feminist movement's willingness to "fail forward" has led to radical experimentation, including new frameworks for protection, accountability, and community solidarity, often created outside traditional donor paradigms and rooted in lived experience. An example is the creation of Syria's shadow NAP which redefined security as a feminist relational infrastructure, where emotional, physical and political safety are co-produced through networks of trust, community-based care and documentation practices. Rather than reinforcing state-centric protection narratives, the shadow NAP became a structural critique of both the authoritarian state and the international donor complex, illustrating how policy-making can become a mechanism of resistance. Now feminist organisers are drawing from previous generations' legal reform efforts to build on their foundations as Syria enters a phase of potential reconstitution.

We need to act now

Recommendations to diplomatic actors

1. **Facilitate a genuinely inclusive political process in Syria** by ensuring the meaningful participation of all segments of Syrian society, including Syria's diverse communities and women. The lack of inclusive participation enabling broader engagement of all Syrians will fuel future unrest. A long-term transitional process should pave the way for a democratic and representative government.
2. **Support the establishment of a robust, independent and inclusive transitional justice process** that addresses atrocities and human rights violations committed in Syria since December 2024. Accountability is essential to break the cycle of impunity and to build sustainable peace and justice. Efforts should include supporting independent investigations and guarantee the participation and protection of WHRDs.

Recommendations to donors

1. **Consider lessons learned and best practices to support Syrian Civil Society:** Civil Society has played a crucial role in documenting war crimes, exposing human rights abuses and supporting local communities. However, inconsistent funding, restrictive financial conditions and short-term project cycles have undermined its long-term effectiveness in contributing to build sustainable peace. To ensure that Syrian Civil Society, especially feminist and women's rights organizations remain independent and impactful, it is essential to provide flexible and long-term funding that support both institutional development and sustainability of organizations.
2. **Adopt flexible frameworks to support and work together with Syrian WHRDs and Women's Rights Organizations:** Regime change in Syria occurred through a military operation rather than a political transition leading to widespread chaos across the country. This instability has created new threats to civil society, particularly to WHRDs. Feminist and Women's Rights Organizations need tailored support in this critical time to expand their networks across Syria and revise strategies which is time-consuming. They should be given appropriate timeframes to organize and strategize before resuming operations. In addition, as many WROs and feminist civil society organizations are currently operating low profile without legal registration in country to avoid being scrutinized by surveillance mechanisms, donors should offer funding mechanisms that do not require mandatory registration in Syria.

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