

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA
GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ARRIA FORMULA MEETING
ON PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN UN-LED PEACE PROCESSES
8 March 2021

Thank you so much Geraldine. And allow me first to thank you for inviting me for participate, and also for the interventions from Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo and now for what we just now heard – a moving testament from the challenges in Yemen from Rasha [Jarhum].

1. Allow me to start by reminding all of us of the intensity of the conflict in Syria. Next week we will be commemorating the tenth anniversary of the start of this terrible crisis, and the lack of progress in the political process is high on our collective mind.
2. No country would emerge unchanged from a tragedy of this magnitude. Ten years into this war, the Syrian society has been altered in ways that no one could have foreseen when it started. And the impact on Syrian women in all regions and communities has of course been considerable.
3. From my contacts with women's groups and visits to Syrian communities, I learned firsthand about this impact. And let me say a few words about it. For instance, against the backdrop of all the tragedies of death and displacement that have happened, we are probably close now to 20 per cent of female-led households in Syria – 20 per cent of female-led households. Female interlocutors have emphasised a number of predicaments impacting them in specific ways. They tell us about the detained, abducted and missing which has left no family unscarred.... They describe the toll taken by the loss of loved ones in previous combat operations.... They speak of the aggravating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the harsh winter conditions on the internally displaced and they remind us of the dramatic impact of the economic crisis on women across the country.... We understand from them also the scale of conflict-related sexual violence, including at checkpoints and in detention.... We also learn from them on gender-based violence, all over Syria.... We hear how negative coping mechanisms like early and forced marriages are now happening – even increasing.... They tell us how girls' school attendance in such settings has plummeted even further with the global spread of the COVID-19.... And they remind us of the plight of women activists – many of them survivors of arbitrary detention and abuse, or relatives of the forcibly disappeared....
4. But friends, what strikes me about Syrian women across the board is their determination to be actors of their own future, not the victims of decisions made by others. Their experience through these years of conflict means they will not accept to revert to previous ways of doing things – as was emphasised to me in unmistakable terms by women I had the privilege of meeting in refugee camps.
5. The direct and meaningful participation of Syrian women in the political process will of course not happen by itself – as we also just now heard from the experience in Yemen. It requires political will – of course first and foremost from the Syrian parties themselves, but

supported by all of us. It was one step in the right direction when the Syrian government and opposition, facilitated by my predecessor, agreed that women should make up at least 30 per cent in any new institution. And of course, Security Council resolution 2254, my mandate, encourages the meaningful participation of women in the political process.

6. It was crucial for me that as we were striving to establish the Constitutional Committee, as Rosemary [DiCarlo] just mentioned, we would insist on a 30 per cent representation for women. The advocacy of women's groups was critical to our efforts to secure this important milestone. Women comprise approximately 28% of the 150 Constitutional Committee members. But of the civil society group – the 50 members in which the United Nations had the most direct role in facilitating the composition of -- nearly half are women. This is a landmark achievement -- but should be seen as a floor and not as a ceiling.
7. In a week from now, I will be briefing the Council on our efforts to overcome the challenges facing the work of Constitutional Committee, which has so far met five times. During these meetings, women members have constantly made important contributions across all dimensions. And the agreed Terms of Reference commit the Co-Chairs to promote gender mainstreaming.
8. To further inform my work as Special Envoy, I continue to draw on available **platforms** to ensure that Syrian women from across the political, socio-economic and geographic spectrum are meaningfully engaged in the political process.
9. The Syrian Women's Advisory Board – the **WAB**, as Rosemary [DiCarlo] also mentioned, for short – has functioned since 2016, also with the support of UN Women, as an independent source of expertise and advice for my office across a range of policy concerns, including on bringing women's perspectives and gender lens to bear on all topics under discussion. The WAB comprises 17 Syrian women from all walks of life, points of view and political persuasions. The diversity within the WAB makes it a unique forum. While they of course not always agree, they use their different backgrounds to identify options and possible pathways to overcome difficulties in my efforts to find common ground between the parties. They have shown themselves dedicated to the hard work of forging confidence and trust. It is an example of the commitment to negotiated peace that I would like to see reflected in the formal process.
10. My Deputy Khawla Matar and I confer regularly with the members of the WAB. Over the past year, owing to the pandemic we have shifted our interactions entirely to a virtual format. While this has allowed for regular interaction, we must also recognise the challenges posed by purely virtual work. We will reconvene the WAB in person as soon as conditions allow.
11. WAB members have articulated the importance of legislative reform in Syria. Syrian women share that an urgent priority is reform of laws and legislation that are discriminatory in nature and perpetuate gender inequality. And they continue of course to call clearly for women's full and meaningful participation in the political process.

12. In addition to the WAB, we also have the Civil Society Support Room (**CSSR**), our consultative platform with over 700 members, 40 per cent of them women, that represent Syrian civil society that also gives us access to the voices of diverse Syrian women from different geographic areas and professional backgrounds – many of whom operating at the forefront of humanitarian efforts to meet the needs of Syrians.

Dear co-chairs, in closing,

13. The plight of Syrian women must be heard. But let us not lose from sight that their main demand is for them to be fully part of the political deliberations about Syria. The UN acts as the facilitator of an immensely challenging and difficult political process in line with Security Council resolution 2254 that is to be fully inclusive, to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, and to respect and restore Syria's sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and independence. To this end, we count on the **support of Member States**, to promote confidence between the parties and bring them closer to a negotiated political settlement of the conflict, and while doing so, ensure that women are at the table at each and every juncture so that they remain empowered to shape their own future and the future of their country.

Thank you so much.