Rethinking transition in Syria, gender equality, and constitution

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There would be no Syrian revolution without the brave and defiant Syrian women who founded it. Women activists, women human rights leaders, women lawyers, mothers, daughters, sisters; Syrian women have been at the forefront of the Syrian revolution since day one, and they have continued to lead their communities throughout the ensuing bloodshed.

Gender equality remains at the heart of the Syrian revolution as it approaches its sixth year. Without it, the revolution will not achieve its ultimate goals of freedom, dignity, justice, and democracy for Syria’s future. However, to achieve gender equality in a future Syria, we must coordinate at every level of decision-making and establish a constitution that institutionalizes a political space in which the equal rights and responsibilities of all Syrian men and women are protected and respected.

Until there is a legal space created to protect women’s rights, Syrian women’s voices will not be accounted for. The voices of Syrian women who work tirelessly, having maintained an essential role in the revolution since before it began, will go unheard. Women’s ability to influence political decisions will be minimal – if not non-existent.

Over the past several years and months, we have seen the international community renew its focus on involving Syrian women in the political process. Too often, our role has been reduced to tokens espousing apolitical positions in favor of peace, but devoid of any stake in this conflict. The reality is that Syrian

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women are inherently political. We were at the forefront of the revolution and our goals remain those of the revolution: we want a free, democratic Syria, free of Assad’s tyranny and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria’s (ISIS) terror. And we will not rest until this is the Syria we have achieved.

While various diplomatic bodies debate Syrian policy, it is vital that the debate provides a clear space for women in Syria’s future, including the brave Syrian women who have played a vital role in the Syrian opposition from day one. These women should not be muted. Our political aspirations should not be reduced to sound bites that deny our opposition to a dictator that has killed half a million of our people, gassed our children, and besieged our cities.

Equal inclusion of women in the future of Syria’s constitution is critical to achieving a true democratic, pluralistic, and civic state. In a future Syria, equality can only be achieved by institutionalizing a political space for women, enshrining gender parity in the foundation of any political solution to the conflict, and throughout the process of rebuilding. With a gendered constitution in place, Syrian women will have a concrete mechanism they can use to protect their rights.

From the beginning of the revolution, women actively participated in peaceful protests and civil organizing. Subject to less surveillance and scrutiny, women were able to subversively circulate flyers and information. Once the revolution became complicated by the regime’s brutal indiscriminate violence against civilians, the revolution was co-opted by men and effectively became a man’s domain. Somewhere along the way, women lost the role they had during peaceful uprising, which put them side by side with the men. Despite this, women found ways to continue their work and find their space within a war zone dominated by men. Syrian women are often successful within the realm of negotiations within Syria, having successfully brokered ceasefires, organized deliveries of supplies, and established safe spaces for women and children. Women are often at the forefront of efforts to continue children’s education, particularly when they cannot attend school. They are crucial to organizing nonviolent protests, documenting human rights violations, and are often the foundation of
civil society. At every level of the Syrian conflict, women play a distinct and constructive role.

Despite this, women are blocked from positions of power in decision-making processes within the Syrian opposition, which remains dominated by men. Although progress has been made to raise awareness and to advocate for greater female participation, without an institutionalized mechanism for political inclusion, we have seen little progress. Women are active in all aspects of the revolution and in fact, broader Syrian society as a whole, yet they are still far from enjoying equal representation and participation in politics, both internally and within the Syrian opposition. Women constitute five percent or less in all recognized Syrian opposition groups, regardless of papers produced stating otherwise. When attempts are made to remedy the lack of women, they are often flawed and do not lead to actual results. Syrian women deserve a say in crafting the decisions that affect them.

On the other hand, the internationally sponsored Syrian political peace processes lack meaningful inclusion of women. The United Nations Special Envoy established a ‘Women’s Advisory Board’ which seems to be its solution for not including women at a decision making level. This does not help women get to a decision making position. On the contrary, it camouflages the issue by suggesting women’s presence when in fact they do not have a meaningful seat at the table. The Syrian opposition has responded by creating the ‘Women’s Consultative Committee’. In both instances the meaningful participation of women in the negotiations will not take place unless women are sitting at the table with men making decisions for the future of the country together. Women’s presence at the margins only perpetuates their marginalized status.

Without their inclusion and the guarantee for women’s rights, which are human rights, the revolution cannot achieve its goals. There are a number of ways to do so. Creative campaigns to amplify the voices of women who work tirelessly to raise awareness are vital to ensuring that the message is delivered. Syrian women’s organizations have organized themselves to lobby political efforts, including a push for a quota and enforcing existing quotas for women’s political
participation in the Syrian opposition political bodies. However, more must change in order for this shift to fully take place.

One way to achieve this shift is by demonstrating the value of women’s political participation. One of the many values in increasing the presence of women is that it diversifies the dialog around a political solution, providing an influx of nuanced outlooks and skills. Women are a huge, relatively untapped resource for information from on the ground in Syria, which would enrich any decision-making or policy. Women are able to effectively connect with others across ethnic and religious lines, enhancing their ability to provide a variety of outlooks on issues.

This ongoing movement for greater political participation espouses equal opportunities for men and women in employment, education, and decision-making. It also advocates for equality in gender roles and personal statuses in the eyes of the state. The goal is to enhance the national unity of Syria and to undertake concrete efforts to ensure legal, constitutional, and social equality for all Syrians, regardless of gender. Enhancing the role of women ensures equality and protects the national unity, which is essential for Syria’s future.

This must be approached at three levels: internationally, locally, and socially. At the international level, women must be made responsible for proposing and implementing political solutions. This includes an increase of women’s membership in negotiating bodies, political committees, and civil society leadership positions. At a local level, it is essential to work with all elements within Syria to conceptualize and implement action plans for ending the violence. Women must continue to be integrated in local councils, ceasefires, and civil society groups. Lastly, at a social level, the idea of women as leaders must be normalized across spectrums, both on the ground in Syria and in the negotiating rooms of Geneva. To normalize the position of women as leaders is to increase their physical presence in politics and have the agency for their own fate, which is a vital aspect of achieving gender parity in the future.

Finally, I cannot stress enough how difficult it is to make my fellow Syrians prioritize issues like a constitution and gender equality, while our people are
being decimated with total impunity. Across Syria, women and men are being starved, tortured, and bombed to death at record rates while the world watches and people like myself discuss the virtues of ending a patriarchal system. Syrian women are being annihilated – tens of thousands have been killed. It is difficult for Syrian women to comprehend that we here in the West can talk seriously about their rights, when we won’t take basic steps to protect their lives. Syrian women want and need civilian protection. They are dying without it, and everyday that the world fails to take the action needed to protect Syrian women and men, extremists grow stronger – which as we all know, will hurt Syrian women in the long run. If the world truly wants a free Syria, in which women’s rights are protected, then it must stand prepared to protect Syrian civilians by taking the steps to stop the number one killer in Syria: indiscriminate aerial bombardment.