

**Security Council**

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Letter dated 6 April 2020 from the representatives of the Dominican Republic, Germany and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Germany and the Dominican Republic, as Co-Chairs of the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security of the Security Council, and the United Kingdom, which worked in close cooperation with them, would like to share the summary of the meeting on the Syrian Arab Republic held by the Group on 26 February 2020 (see annex).

We should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

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Permanent Representative of Germany to the United Nations

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Summary of the meeting on the Syrian Arab Republic held by the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security on 26 February 2020

On 26 February 2020, the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security convened a meeting on the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. The participants received a briefing from the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen, who provided a comprehensive overview of recent developments and progress and challenges in implementing commitments with regard to women and peace and security.

Members of the Security Council asked questions about the participation of women in the peace process and specifically on plans to develop context-specific approaches for their participation, as requested by the Council in its resolution [2493 \(2019\)](#), as well as the impact of the engagement with the Syrian Women's Advisory Board. Council members also raised the particular protection concerns that women faced in the context of the military offensive in Idlib, especially the destruction of civilian infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, and the resulting negative consequences for access to health care and education. Council members fully supported calls by the United Nations for an immediate ceasefire. They further asked about obstacles to the participation of women in elections and other political processes in the future, such as the lack of the required civil documentation owing to the death or disappearance of male relatives. Other questions centred on threats against women human rights defenders and women who were active in politics, accountability for violence against women, the prevalence of child and forced marriages, and the situation of women living under the rule of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The main points raised during the meeting are summarized below:

- The conflict had had a specific impact on the lives of women and girls and would have implications for gender relations in the future. Four out of five persons who had been displaced by the increased violence in Idlib since December 2019 were women and children. Owing to the death and detention of many men, there were more women than men in the working age group and there was an increasing number of female-headed households, with a high number of them lacking an income. Those households were in a highly vulnerable situation, which was exacerbated by the deepening economic crisis.
- The 12 essential principles that had emerged from the intra-Syrian talks facilitated by the United Nations in 2017 set out a minimum quota of 30 per cent for the representation and participation of women in institutions and decision-making structures. The quota was later embodied in the final statement adopted at the meeting held in Sochi, Russian Federation, in 2018, which was circulated as a document of the Security Council ([S/2018/121](#)) at the request of the Russian Federation. The terms of reference of the Constitutional Committee stressed the obligation to promote gender mainstreaming, and gender had featured in the discussions of the Committee meetings thus far. The participation of women in the Committee had reached over 28 per cent, with 42 out of the 150 members being women. There were 12 women among the 50 members of the government delegation, and 7 of the 50 participating opposition members were women.

Thanks to the active efforts of the United Nations and the prioritization of the issue by the Special Envoy, the civil society bloc was close to parity, with 23 out of the 50 nominees being women. In the drafting committee, the participation of women was also at 28 per cent. A total of 13 out of the 45 members were women, with 4 out of 15 in the government bloc, 2 out of 15 in the opposition bloc and 7 out of 15 in the civil society bloc.

- The Office of the Special Envoy was in regular consultation with women's civil society organizations and received advice from the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) on how to further improve the participation of women in the political process. Since 2016, the Special Envoy's Gender Adviser had closely collaborated with the Syrian Women's Advisory Board to ensure that it functioned as an independent source of expertise and advice for the Special Envoy and brought women's perspectives and a gender lens to the discussions. It consisted of 17 women from civil society whose diverse backgrounds helped to identify options and possible pathways to find common ground between the parties. The Office consulted with a wide range of women's civil society organizations, including through the Civil Society Support Room, which was a consultative platform within the Office.
- Conflict-related sexual violence had been documented extensively in every governorate in the Syrian Arab Republic, including at checkpoints and in places of detention. Rape, child and forced marriage, sexual exploitation, trafficking and other forms of sexual violence had been particularly prevalent in government detention settings, displacement contexts, at checkpoints and roadblocks, during house raids and searches, and in areas controlled by armed groups. Women and girls in detention had been subjected to sexual torture to extract information or the forced surrender of male relatives. Sexual violence was also systematically used against men and boys as a tactic of torture. Desperation over the physical and economic security of girls had led to an increase in harmful and negative coping mechanisms, particularly in displacement settings, including withdrawal from education, an increase in forced marriage and a decrease in bridal age.
- Syrian women continued to press for information about arbitrarily detained or abducted persons and for their release. Women whose male relatives were in detention or deceased were particularly affected by discriminatory laws. For example, if a woman who was the head of her household did not receive her husband's death certificate, she faced many limitations that affected her daily life. The Special Envoy continued to prioritize the immediate release of women, children and other vulnerable groups, such as sick and older persons, in addition to the disclosure of information about the fate of missing persons.

As the secretariat of the Informal Expert Group on Women and Peace and Security, UN-Women emphasized that, before April 2019, the Security Council had not invited any women representing civil society to brief the Council during its meetings on the Syrian Arab Republic. However, since then, six Syrian women from civil society had briefed the Council in only 10 months. They had provided the Council with information and recommendations and expected the Council to follow up thereon. UN-Women urged Council members to ensure the protection of those women before, during and after their briefings. It also made further recommendations, including:

- In any upcoming statements or resolutions, the Council should welcome efforts to ensure the participation of women in the Constitutional Committee and urge the full, equal and meaningful participation of diverse women, using the 30 per

cent threshold as a minimum, in any peace negotiations, broader political dialogues and national consultations about the future of the Syrian Arab Republic.

- The Council should urge the international community to fully fund the Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, including activities to address all forms of gender-based violence and to mainstream gender equality throughout the entire humanitarian response.
- Council members should reiterate that parties must release any arbitrarily detained or abducted persons, particularly women and children, as well as sick and older persons, and cooperate to identify any missing women and girls and facilitate their return to their families. UN-Women recommended that the Co-Chairs liaise with other relevant parties and the Special Envoy to engage in joint advocacy efforts on the issue.

The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict expressed deep concern about the discrepancy between the extensive documentation of conflict-related sexual violence and the lack of accountability for perpetrators of such crimes. Conflict-related sexual violence remained undebated and unaddressed, despite having been widely documented as a tactic of war, torture and terrorism, and a major driver of forced displacement. Following the territorial defeat of ISIL, many of its former captives and survivors of sexual violence had reached the Hawl camp in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, together with children conceived in the context of sexual slavery. Some 39 Yazidi children who had been born in that context had been abandoned in orphanages because they had not been accepted by their community. Many women had had to face a choice between keeping their children or returning to their communities. The Office reiterated its call to recognize the victims of sexual violence perpetrated by terrorist groups as victims of terrorism who were entitled to reparations and redress, as well as the importance of civil documentation to avoid statelessness. The Office commended Germany for the recent apprehension and indictment of a former Syrian official on counts of crimes against humanity involving torture and aggravated rape and sexual assault, which served as a reminder that third countries could also be avenues for accountability.

In addition, the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate emphasized the urgency of the situation in the Hawl camp, noting the need for a greater focus on the specific needs of women in repatriation processes. Women were returning to their places of origin in lower numbers than men, whether through individual or supported repatriation. The Directorate stressed that the question of reintegration concerned not only foreign women but also local women and referred to the briefing of the human rights activist, Mona Freij, to the Security Council in February 2020, in which she had emphasized the important role that women played in the efforts for community reconciliation and reintegration. The Directorate recalled that the Council, in its resolutions, had specifically asked that victims of sexual violence and trafficking in persons perpetrated by terrorist groups be recognized as victims of terrorism.

The Co-Chairs, in closing the meeting, thanked the Special Envoy for his participation and committed themselves to following up on the important issues raised.