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SYRIA PROGRAMME PHASE II EVALUATION

APRIL 2024

UN WOMEN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Independent Evaluation and Audit Services of UN Women (IEAS) led this evaluation under the supervision of Chaitali Chattopadhyay (Regional Evaluation Specialist for the Arab States region) together with International Consultant, Rosie Aubrey.

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ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organization
IEAS	Independent Evaluation and Audit Services
IES	Independent Evaluation Service
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
ISIS	Islamic State
LEAP	LEAP programming to strengthen women's access to livelihoods and protection
OSE	Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria
SDF	The Syrian Democratic Forces
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Fund for Children
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WAB	Women's Advisory Board
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

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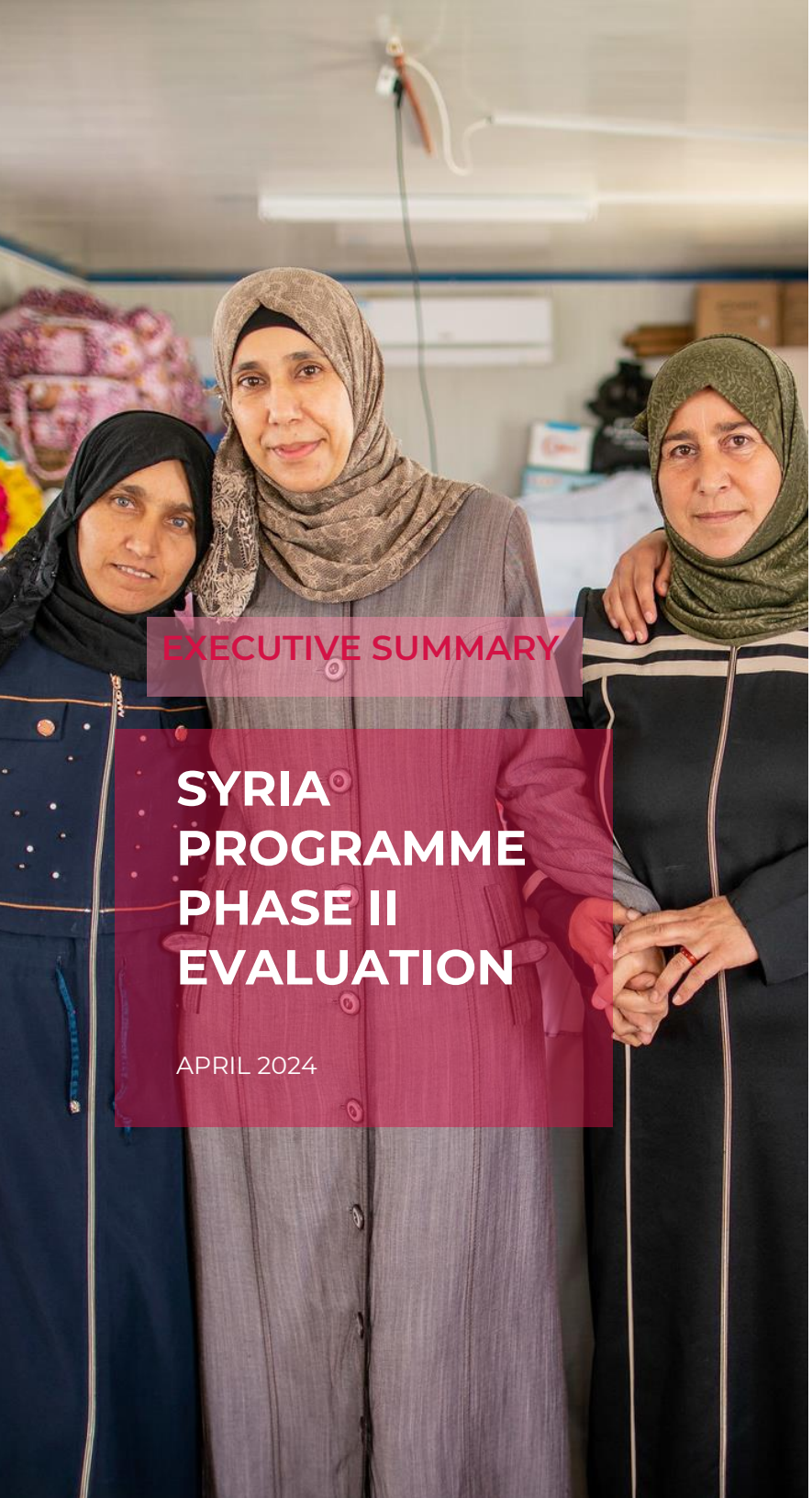


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SYRIA PROGRAMME PHASE II EVALUATION

APRIL 2024

THIS REPORT PRESENTS THE MAIN FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF A FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF UN WOMEN'S SYRIA PROGRAMME CONDUCTED BY UN WOMEN'S INDEPENDENT EVALUATION SERVICE (IES) OF THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION AND AUDIT SERVICES (IEAS). THE EVALUATION COVERED THE PHASE II PROGRAMME PERIOD FROM JANUARY 2020 TO OCTOBER 2023. THE EVALUATION WAS CONDUCTED BETWEEN JUNE AND DECEMBER 2023

The UN Women Syria Programme

UN Women started implementing a Syria Programme in 2014 to support Syrian women to meaningfully participate in and influence decision-making and political processes.

The programme aimed to support Syria's political process under Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), and in line with the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which enshrines the essential role of women in securing and maintaining peace. UN Women has supported Syrian women's leadership in peace-making through logistical and substantive support to the work of the Women's Advisory Board (WAB) in close collaboration with the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria (OSE), support to Syrian civil society; research and advocacy on gender equality and women's rights; as well as coordination activities on women, peace and security issues in the context of Syria.

Implementation of Phase II of the Syria Programme began as a 48-month long programme in January 2020 to December 2023. The total programme budget was US$ 5,297,177, funded by the following key donors: European Union, Government of Finland, Government of the Netherlands and Government of Norway.

Evaluation purpose, objectives and approach

The purpose of the evaluation was twofold: (a) accountability, assessing the contributions made by UN Women during Phase II of the programme in achievement and performance of outcome level results; and (b) learning and forward-looking in scope to support the Syria Programme and its stakeholders' strategic learning and decision-making for future programme design, implementation and scale-up. Therefore, the evaluation was primarily formative, in particular reflecting upon the gender-responsive nature of the programme's achievements.

The objectives of the evaluation were to:

(a) Assess the relevance of the UN Women Syria Programme at international and local levels and its alignment with international agreements and conventions on gender equality and women's empowerment, particularly related to Women, Peace and Security.

(b) Assess effectiveness, efficiency and coherence in progressing towards achievement of the programmatic results as defined in the programme results framework.

(c) Enable the UN Women Syria Programme to improve its strategic positioning to better support Syrian women and women's organizations to lead, participate and advocate effectively in the Syrian political processes from a gender and women's rights perspective, and build a women's movement in the context of Syria.

(d) Analyse how a human rights approach and gender equality are integrated in the design and implementation of the Syria Programme.

(e) Identify and validate lessons learned, good practices and examples of innovation that can be scaled up and replicated to support gender equality and human rights.

(f) Provide insights into the extent to which UN Women has realized synergies between its three mandates (normative, UN system coordination and operations).

(g) Provide actionable recommendations with respect to the Syria Programme's strategic direction and programmatic interventions.

Evaluation scope

The evaluation covered the programme Phase II period from January 2020 to October 2023 and all aspect of programme implementation. It included activities delivered both inside and outside of Syria in Lebanon and Turkey and initiatives taking place at a regional and international level. The evaluation was conducted between June and December 2023.

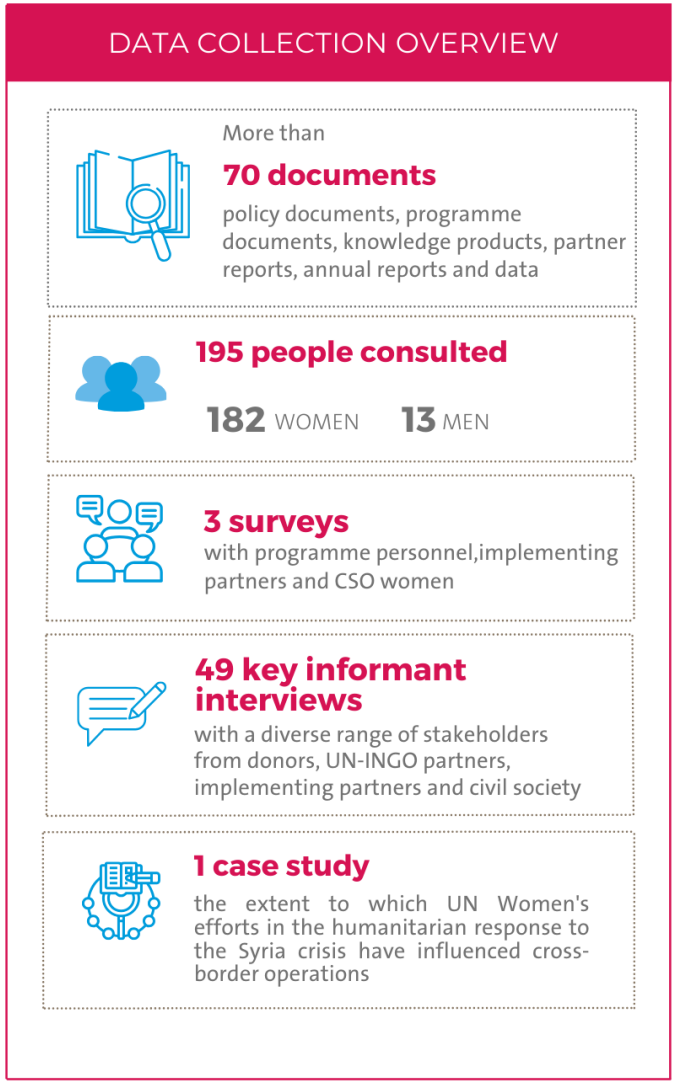
Evaluation design

The evaluation employed a participatory, theory-based approach and applied a feminist gender analytical framework that incorporated the principles of gender-responsive evaluation into the evaluation questions and analysis approaches.

Context

As the Syrian conflict enters its twelfth year, the Government of Syria retains control over most of the territory it had lost to opposition groups, though large parts of the north of the country are still under the control of opposition Kurdish groups, terrorist armed groups and other political bodies. Syrians from all walks of life are facing unprecedented struggles in security, political, humanitarian and human rights realms. In many ways, the conflict has disproportionately affected women and girls who are subject to discriminatory social norms which shape all of their interactions in the social, political, cultural and economic sphere. Sexual and gender-based violence has been a pervasive feature of the conflict. Despite these challenges, the conflict has also enabled some women to become active in the workforce, as humanitarians, in civil society or in influencing the political process.

Figure 1: Evaluation data collection approach, prepared by the evaluation team



Conclusions and Recommendations

CONCLUSION 1: The Syria Programme is well aligned to the national context and international normative frameworks and strategies for promoting women's participation and gender equality. The programme demonstrated agility in responding to the changing contextual challenges including the stalled political process, the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent earthquake and used the opportunity to reiterate UN Women's gender mainstreaming mandate. Its theory of change and intervention logic is valid in terms of identifying and addressing the structural causes of inequality and barriers to women's meaningful participation in the political process. However, the intervention logic needs to reflect an intentional approach to systematically strengthen the involvement of men, communities and other key institutions and consideration of women's livelihoods and economic empowerment priorities as key barriers to women's political participation.

Recommendation 1: Reconstruct the Syria Programme's theory of change for Phase III to reflect an intentional approach to systematically strengthen the involvement of men, communities and other key institutions to transform deep-rooted gender roles and biases using a social relations approach. This should also reflect an intentional consideration of women's livelihoods and economic empowerment priorities as key barriers to women's political participation.

CONCLUSION 2: The programme's coordination approach and investment in key strategic partnerships have been instrumental in achieving results. The programme has maintained a fruitful strategic partnership with the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria to strengthen Syrian women's voices and participation in the political process. Its technical knowledge and expertise were valued by donors, UN entities, International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and Civil Society Organization (CSO) partners. However, UN Women's absence from the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) has affected its ability to strengthen coordination synergies on gender equality and women's empowerment in Syria. Partners expect UN Women to support better coherence on gender mainstreaming in Syria, but there is also a pressing need for a strategic decision on whether and how to establish a presence in Syria as UN Women's current position remains unclear and has inadvertently impacted the perception of its neutrality. Therefore, UN Women should look to refine its corporate strategy on engagement with the UNCT in Syria to facilitate greater access to UN partners and communities inside Syria to achieve the desired scale and impact.

Recommendation 2: UN Women should take a strategic decision about membership of the Syria UNCT and whether and how to establish a presence in Syria. This should include development of a forward-looking engagement strategy with a view to becoming a member of the Syria UNCT to improve the programme's strategic

position and to support greater engagement inside Syria across both non-government and government-held areas of the country. UN Women should widely communicate its position vis-à-vis Syria UNCT membership and its presence to the stakeholders concerned.

Recommendation 3: Clarify a vision and strategy on the Syria Programme's coordination work, exploring the possibility of establishing a formal "whole of Syria" women, peace and security coordination mechanism, as well as the possibility of extending its policy influence for stronger gender mainstreaming in Syria.

CONCLUSION 3: The Syria Programme's comparative advantage is its ability to act as a critical bridge between international stakeholders and Syrian women activists and CSOs. The programme has consolidated gains, for example in establishing the legitimacy of including women's perspectives in the political peace process through the Syrian WAB. The WAB as a gender-inclusion mechanism remains a credible and effective modality in the Syrian political process, with the ability to leverage political will; engage in high-level political dialogue; and provide technical expertise despite the stalled political peace process. The WAB has successfully engaged with the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, but it would benefit from broader engagement with the Astana guarantors and Arab League member states. UN Women's technical and logistical support has contributed to maintaining the WAB's high profile as the most visible mechanism to realizing the meaningful participation of women in Syria. The Syria Programme's success and credibility lie in its ability to meaningfully bring together diverse women's voices, including the perspectives of younger women, women living with disability, women from low socioeconomic backgrounds as well as from certain geographies such as government-controlled areas. The upcoming rotation process of WAB members is an opportunity to strengthen the diverse representation of the board. The programme's civil society interventions have begun to yield results at an individual and organizational level. The Syria Programme has increased access to financial and technical resources for 120 women leaders across 64 local women's CSOs supporting over 2,000 civil society women. Capacity strengthening has increased CSOs' awareness of key gender and political concepts related to the future of Syria. However, lack of coordination across civil society is impacting the scalability of results and Syrian women's movement building. The programme needs to further strengthen its partnerships with CSOs by developing a long-term strategy and shared vision for civil society engagement and by facilitating or convening a platform for CSOs to share and coordinate efforts for gender equality in Syria.

Recommendation 4: The programme should build on the success and profile of the WAB, ensuring that the rotation of members broadens representation, strengthens connections with the civil society strand through formalized mechanisms and continues to increase engagement with the Astana guarantor and Arab League member states.

Recommendation 5: The programme should continue to strengthen a shared vision for civil society engagement and facilitate or convene a platform for CSOs to share and coordinate efforts for gender equality in Syria. The programme should further strengthen systematic engagement with and representation of diverse women's voices, including the perspectives of younger women, women living with disability, women from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as from certain geographies.

CONCLUSION 4: Evidence-based and credible knowledge is central to UN Women's work. The formalization of a knowledge management pillar has been a key step of Phase II. The Syria Programme's contribution to creating knowledge and awareness around gender equality in Syria is valued across stakeholders as central to supporting better outcomes for Syrian women. The evaluation found that the programme did not have a clear knowledge and learning strategy, or dissemination plan. In some cases, stakeholders were not aware of the evidence and knowledge products and the evaluation noted that knowledge-sharing was largely undertaken informally on the basis of information needs. The evaluation also noted the absence of human resource capacity within the programme team to support such functions. Making the best use of UN Women's resources requires a more systematic approach to knowledge management and learning, including identifying the evidence gaps collectively with other stakeholders through a participatory approach. The programme's communication portfolio took a rather risk-averse approach and was quite minimalistic due to political sensitivities around programme interventions. Internal and external communications need more attention and improvement to ensure programme stakeholders are systematically kept informed and engaged. The programme's monitoring systems could also be strengthened to capture impact and transformative changes.

Recommendation 6: The Syria programme should develop a knowledge management and learning strategy, and institutionalize a system of identifying evidence gaps collectively with other stakeholders through a participatory approach to inform decisions about new research topics, prevent duplication and better understand where UN Women would like to invest its resources more strategically. It should also develop a communication strategy and action plan to strengthen its internal and external communication work.

Recommendation 7: The programme needs to strengthen its monitoring framework and tools to capture transformative changes. The monitoring system should also include systematic verification and validation of the data reported by implementing partners.

Photo ©UN Women

1 BACKGROUND

1.1 Syria context and key development indicators

Syria is located on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea in Southwestern Asia, bordered by Turkey to the North, Iraq to the East, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine to the Southeast. The estimated population of Syria in 2023 is 23 million.[1] Syria's Gross National Income has significantly decreased – by 28.6 per cent – since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011.[2] The Syrian Arab Republic crisis remains one of the largest displacement crises in the world with over 12 million Syrians forcibly displaced in the region, including almost 6.8 million within the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) and 5.4 million living as refugees in neighbouring countries as of 2022. [3] Syria's Human Development Index value for 2021 scored 0.577, ranking Syria 150 of 191 countries, a significant decline from a value of 0.644 and rank of 121 in 2010.[4]

As the Syrian conflict enters its twelfth year, the Government of Syria retains control over most of the territory it had lost to opposition groups, though large parts of the north of the country are still under the control of opposition Kurdish groups, terrorist armed groups and other political bodies. Notably, northern Syria is characterized by a complex web of competing factions controlling different territories. Among the dominant armed groups in northern Syria, one is Tahrir Al-Sham, also known as HTS (Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham). In addition to Tahrir Al-Sham, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic alliance of Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian and other groups have established control over significant areas in the northeastern Syria region. Moreover, Turkish-backed Syrian opposition groups have also been active in parts of northern Syria, especially along the border with Turkey.

Civilians continue to suffer from violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, including combat operations which have destroyed civilian infrastructure and have forced thousands to flee their homes. [5] According to the 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview for Syria, in 2023, 15.3 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance, including 2.1 million Internally Displaced People living in last-resort sites, with needs that keep increasing across all sectors.[6]

1.2 Gender equality in Syria

According to World Bank data from 2022, women in Syria constitute 49.9 per cent of Syria's population. [7] Women's labour-force participation rate was low, 16.8 per cent compared to 72.3 per cent for males in 2022.[8] Adult literacy was lower among women than men – 91.6 per cent for males compared to 80.9 per cent for females in 2014.[9] Only 11.2 per cent of seats in the national parliament were held by women in 2022.[10] There has been a massive growth in the number of women heads of households particularly as a result of the protracted conflict.[11] Sexual and gender-based violence has been reported as a pervasive feature of the conflict.[12]

Political life in Syria remains male dominated despite the introduction of universal suffrage in 1949. There are no mechanisms to ensure women's participation at the local level and the Syrian Law of General Elections does not allocate quotas beyond workers and farmers. [13] Although Syrian civil society, including women-led and women's rights organizations, is remarkably active, CSOs are male dominated and women's space for work is severely restricted.

Despite these challenges, the conflict has enabled some women to learn new skills and to become active in the workforce, as humanitarians, in civil society or in influencing the political process. [14] In the face of protracted conflict, women have exercised leadership roles, including in political movements; local council elections; search and rescue efforts; local ceasefire and humanitarian negotiations; monitoring and documenting human rights abuses; and as breadwinners in their families, sustaining the resilience of families.[15]

Women's organizations and leaders, including those supported by UN Women, have continuously called for the participation of women in Syria's ongoing peacebuilding and conflict resolution process. Women leaders have contributed

[1] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. World Population Prospects: The 2022 Revision.
[2] World Bank national accounts data - https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD?locations=SY, last accessed 25 July 2023
[3] According to UNHCR 2022 Situation overview: https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation
[4] UNDP (2022) Human Development Report 2021-22 "Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a Transforming World", released on 8 September 2022.
[5] International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), "Syrian women" <https://www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/middle-east/syria/syrian-women>
[6] Relief web Syrian Arab Republic; 2023 Human needs overview https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2023-humanitarian-needs-overview-december-2022-enar
7 https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=SY
[8] World Bank Syrian Arab Republic Gender Data Portal - https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/syrian-arab-republic/
[9] ibid
[10] ibid
[11] Gendered impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on women and girls, OHCHR, June 2023
[12] ibid
[13] Gharibah, M., Local elections in post-agreement Syria: opportunities and challenges for local representation, London School of Economics, Conflict Research Programme, P. 14 - http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100144/1/Gharibah_Local_Elections_in_a_Post_Agreement_Syria_Published.pdf> tp://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100144/1/Gharibah_Local_Elections_in_a_Post_Agreemen_Syria_Published.pdf
[14] Hilton, D., The shifting role of women in Syria's economy, Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, https://timep.org/syrias-women/economy/the-shifting-role-of-women-in-syrias-economy/
[15] International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), "Syrian women" https://www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/middle-east/syria/syrian-women

to securing several gender equality gains in the political process, such as the formation of the Women's Advisory Board (WAB) in 2016 as a mechanism to include women and gender perspectives into the process, including language setting out a minimum 30 per cent quota for the representation and participation of women in institutions and decision-making structures in the 12 essential principles that emerged from the intra-Syrian talks in 2017.[16]

After intensive negotiations, on 23 September 2019, the UN Secretary-General announced the agreement of parties and regional/international powers of the formation of a Syrian Constitutional Committee facilitated by the UN in Geneva. The Committee was launched on 30 November 2019. The Committee's terms of reference stressed the obligation to promote gender mainstreaming.

The Constitutional Committee is described as a "door-opener" to the wider political process. It consists of 150 members, of which 45 representatives are part of a smaller drafting committee. Twenty-eight per cent of the Committee are women (45)[17] and the smaller drafting Committee of 45 comprises 28.9 per cent women (13). This represents an unprecedented number of women in the political process, both for Syria and the broader Middle East region.

Despite some of these gains, women's direct participation in high-level political efforts and the percentage of women in parliament continue to remain low and discriminatory legislation still exists.[18]

[16] https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2017-12-01/note-correspondents-statement-behalf-un-special-envoy

[17] 24 per cent (12) of the Government bloc, 14 per cent (7) of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), and 47 per cent (23) of the middle third bloc

[18] https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/syria-wps-programme

Figure 2: Key development and gender equality and women's empowerment indicators

KEY DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT INDICATORS: SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

KEY DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS

23M The estimated population of Syria in 2023.[1]

Syria's Gross National Income has significantly decreased by 28.6 % since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011.[2]

OVER 12M Syrians forcibly displaced in the region, including approx 6.8 million within the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) and 5.4 million living as refugees in neighbouring countries as of 2022.[3]

Syria's Human Development Index (HDI) value for 2021 scored 0.577, ranking Syria 150 of 191 countries.[4]

15.3M People will require humanitarian assistance, including 2.1 million internally displaced persons[5] according to the 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview for Syria, in 2023.

KEY GENDER INDICATORS

72.3% The labour force participation rate among females 16.8% compared to 72.3% for males in 2022.[6]

80.9% Adult literacy lower among women than men - 91.6% for males compared to 80.9% for females in 2014.[7]

11.3% of seats in national parliament were held by women in 2022.[8]

11.2% Vulnerable employment among women 11.3% compared to 42.7% among men in 2021.[9]

92% of female-headed households living in displacement camps in Syria report insufficient ability or complete inability to meet basic needs.[10]

WAB Formation of the Women's Advisory Board (WAB) in 2016 as a mechanism for meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated political process for Syria.

28% of the Syrian Constitutional Committee of 150 (45) are women. The smaller drafting Committee of 45 has 28.9% women (13).[11]

SOURCES

[1] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. World Population Prospects: The 2022 Revision. (Medium-fertility variant)
[2] World Bank national accounts data - https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD?locations=SY, last accessed 25th July 2023
[3] According to UNHCR 2022 Situation overview: https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/syria-situation
[4] UNDP (2022) Human Development Report 2021-22 "Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a Transforming World", released on 8 September 2022
[5] https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2023-humanitarian-needs-overview-december-2022-enar
[6] https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/syrian-arab-republic/
[7] ibid
[8] ibid
[9] ibid
[10] https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/06/gendered-impact-conflict-syrian-arab-republic-women-and-girls
[11] https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/constitutional-committee-0

Source: *Prepared by the evaluation team*

1.3 The impact of COVID-19 and earthquakes on women in Syria

In Syria, the COVID-19 pandemic has further compounded the risks and hardships for millions of people inside the country and for refugees around the region. In response, Syrian women have engaged in humanitarian and awareness-raising activities, with some joining the UN Special Envoy for Syria (and others) to urge a nationwide ceasefire. [19]

A series of major earthquakes struck northern Syria on 6 February 2023, compounding the already challenging conditions in the country. The earthquakes left a significant portion of the population in need of assistance, particularly in northwestern Syria. [20] The damage to homes was substantial, leading to further displacement of communities, and increased levels of sexual harassment, gender-based violence and violence against women and children reported among displaced communities.[21]

1.4 Office of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria

Efforts to find a political solution to the Syria crisis began in 2012 with the appointment of Kofi Annan as the UN's Special Envoy for Syria. Several other mediation efforts have attempted to broker an agreement, some in coordination with the UN Geneva-led process and others outside of it. The Astana (now Nur Sultan)/ Sochi tracks have focused on military cooperation between regional powers (Turkey, Iran and Russia) and related confidence-building measures, to which the UN has been an observer. Women's participation within these forums has been limited.

The Office of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria carries out the following key activities:

- Good Offices and facilitation of the Geneva Political Process. [22]
- Established and facilitates the Constitutional Committee.
- Established the Syrian WAB in January 2016 to encourage the meaningful participation of women in the UN-facilitated political process for Syria. In addition, the Office of the Special Envoy is mandated to engage with electoral processes that are conducted in accordance with a new constitutional framework to be administered under the supervision of the UN.
- Chairs the Humanitarian Task Force to address urgent priorities related to decisions made by the International Syria Support Group and Ceasefire Task Force.[23]
- Established the Civil Society Support Room to ensure an inclusive political process by consulting with and engaging a broad and diverse range of civil society actors.

In December 2015, the Security Council adopted resolution 2254, [24] which serves as the primary framework for a Syrian-owned, Syrian-led peace process facilitated by the UN. Since January 2019, Geir O. Pedersen has been serving as the UN Special Envoy for Syria, leading United Nations efforts for full implementation of Security Council Resolution 2254, which contains all the elements required for a Syrian-owned, Syrian-led and UN-facilitated political solution to the Syrian conflict. Mr Pedersen's efforts follow those of three previous mediators: UN/Arab League Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan, UN/Arab League Joint Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi and UN Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura. While Resolution 2254 sets out an ambitious programme to address the Syrian conflict – including the development of a new constitution, free and fair elections, and political transition – the peace process remains stalled. The Syrian Constitutional Committee, the only pillar of Resolution 2254 to have been activated so far, has not met since its eighth session in May 2022 as a result of geopolitical dynamics following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

1.5 UN Country Team in Syria

The UN common system in Syria is composed of 16 resident entities and offices [25] and seven non-resident entities. [26] The UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator chairs the Syria United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in his capacity as Resident Coordinator. The guiding programmatic framework that governs the UNCT's engagement in Syria is the UN

[19] https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/syria-wps-programme

[20] Said-Foqahaa, N., Barham, T., & Sawalha, I. (2023, June). *Gender Analysis of the Earthquake Response in Northwest Syria: Key Findings*.

[21] Ibid

[22] In line with Security Council resolution 2254 (2015), the Special Envoy undertakes efforts to build trust among warring parties and convene and facilitate negotiations toward a political settlement of the Syrian conflict.

[23] To take immediate steps to secure the full support of all parties to the conflict for a cessation of hostilities as well as work on the file of detainees, abductees and missing persons.

[24] https://press.un.org/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm

[25] FAO, OCHA, OSE, UNDOF, UNDP, UNDSS, UNFPA, UNHABITAT, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNMAS, UNOPS, UNRWA, UNTSO, WFP, WHO

[26] ESCWA, IFAD, ILO, OHCHR, UNEP, UNESCO, UNIDO, and UNODC.

Strategic Framework,[27] signed with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and consulted on with a wide range of national and international partners. In 2021, the UNCT defined a common approach to promote resilience in Syria, highlighting its aim to enhance urban and rural livelihoods for vulnerable people and improve sustained, equitable and safe access to critical basic services in areas that are in severe need of assistance. The 2022–2024 UN Strategic Framework[28] focuses on multi-year resilience and early recovery programming and aims to design and implement more sustainable interventions. Through multi-year resilience and recovery programmes and projects, the UN Strategic Framework complements the Humanitarian Response Plans that set out the framework within which the humanitarian community responds to Syria's large-scale humanitarian and protection needs.

The UN Strategic Framework emphasizes that women and girls should be a key priority for UN organizations in promoting gender equality and in changing gender discriminatory practices that emerged because of the crisis. The framework commits to gender transformative programming by addressing the underlying causes of gender inequality; improving the conditions of women and girls in their daily lives; as well as improving their social position to pave the way for the achievement of gender equality. Key gender priorities in the framework include: identifying and addressing gender norms through girls' education and empowerment; supporting men and boys to embrace behaviours and attitudes that promote gender equality; and ensuring women and girls' full participation and contribution to peace, stability, resilience and socioeconomic recovery.

1.6 UN Women Syria Programme

UN Women began engagement in Syria in 2014 to support Syrian women to meaningfully participate in and influence decision-making and political processes. UN Women's response to the Syria crisis is based on UN Women's Strategic Plans (2018–2021 and 2022–2025) and the Regional Office for Arab States' Strategic Notes (2018–2021 and 2022–2025) focusing on mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment into peace and security processes; supporting women's meaningful participation and leadership in peace and security; and improving coordination and accountability frameworks on women, peace and security. See Annex 1 for more on the Syria Programme's alignment with these strategic frameworks.

The early years of the Syria Programme largely focused on supporting the WAB's capacity-building and effective participation in the political process. Implementation of Phase II of the programme began in January 2020 (to October 2023) and consists of four pillars, with greater focus on civil society's inclusion in peace and political processes: (i) political process; (ii) civil society; (iii) research; and (iv) coordination.

Under the political process, the programme has supported the Syrian WAB since 2016, which serves as an advisory body to the Office of the Special Envoy in the political process. The programme has supported strengthening the WAB's capacity to influence the political process as well as its knowledge on key topics related to the political process. The programme has also worked to further enhance the WAB's connections on the ground and its influence by strengthening its contact with key constituencies.

Under the civil society pillar, through partnerships with CSOs, the programme provided direct support to eight partners, of which four are new major partnerships that were initiated in 2022. Through these partnerships, UN Women has supported 64 women-led grassroots organizations, reportedly enabling them to increase their capacity; access financial and technical resources; and influence stakeholders across the political process and decision makers in their communities. These interventions also aimed to bridge the gap between women involved in the political process and grassroots women leaders.

Under the evidence and research pillar, the programme has invested in generating knowledge and evidence on gender equality and women's empowerment in Syria to increase the knowledge of national and international stakeholders.

Finally, under the coordination pillar, the programme worked to strengthen coordination among international stakeholders through thematic meetings between UN partners, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and think tanks, as well as through regular briefings to donors on the gender aspects of Syria's political process. This also includes the recently developed area of work to strengthen coordination on humanitarian response efforts in Syria following the 2022 earthquake to ensure a gender-responsive response.

The Syria Programme's total budget for Phase II was US$ 5,297,177, funded by the following key donors: European Union, Government of Finland, Government of

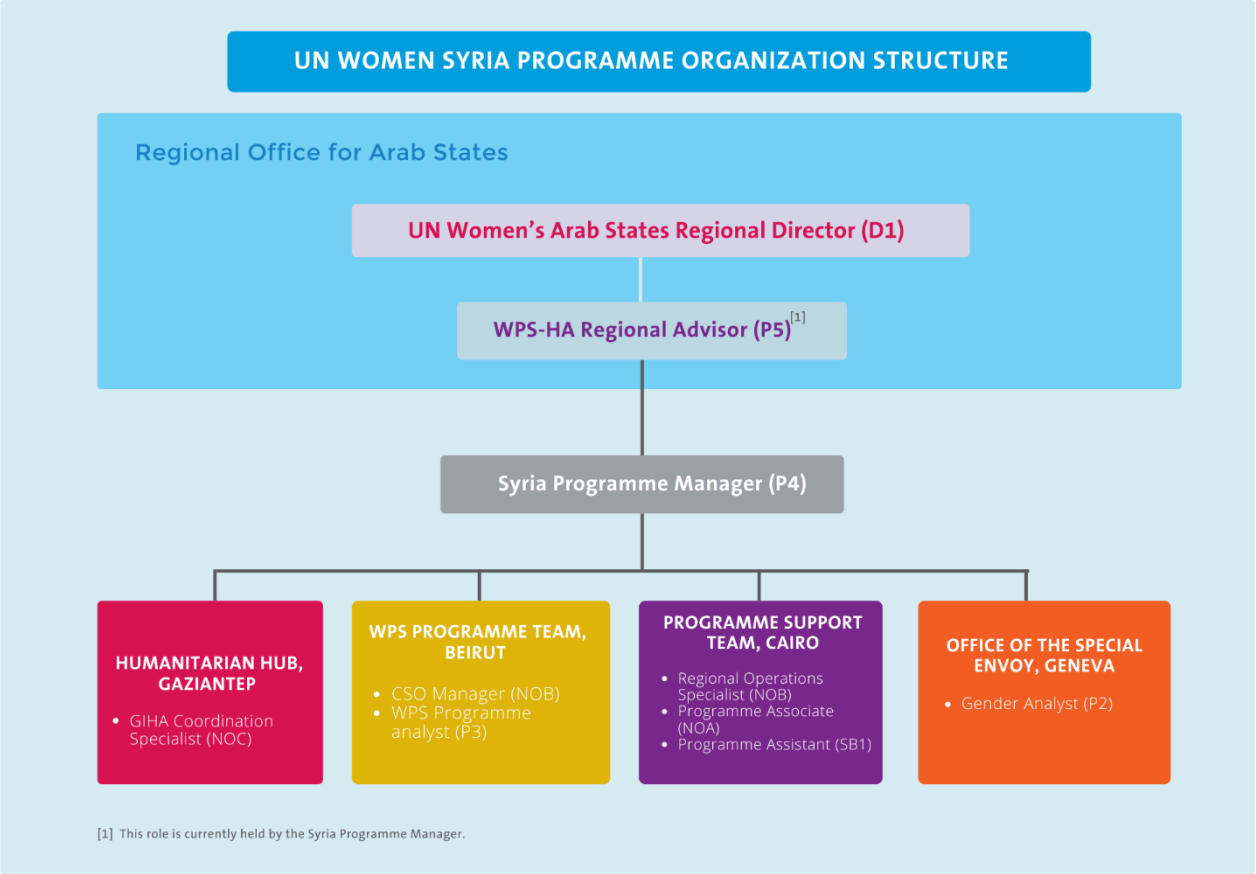
[27] The 2022-2024 UN Strategic Framework

[28] The 2022-2024 UN Strategic Framework

the Netherlands and Government of Norway. In addition, the programme received core funding support of US$ 500,000 to lead a gender-responsive earthquake response in 2022.

At the end of 2019, the programme moved to the Regional Office for the Arab States from the Humanitarian Action and Crisis Response Office in Geneva. The Syria Programme currently operates from the Regional Office for the Arab States under the overall leadership of UN Women's Regional Women, Peace and Security Adviser. The programme team operates from outside Syria and independently from the UNCT: the team works closely with Syrian civil society partners to implement interventions in Turkey and Lebanon and inside Syria across the three zones of control. The programme team operates across multiple sites with the core programme team based in Beirut, Lebanon and Gaziantep in Turkey, with operational personnel based at the UN Women Regional Office for Arab States in Cairo, Egypt. The programme also has a Gender Adviser in Geneva who works in close collaboration with the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria to influence the political process. The rationale behind the current operating structure is to enable the programme to maintain a whole of Syria approach and carry out human rights advocacy.

Figure 3: Syria Programme organizational structure



The UN Women Syria Programme is guided by a theory of change underpinned by a "if" and "then" logic:

Current theory of change of the Syria Programme:

If (1) Syrian women leaders are provided support to ensure their presence at meetings and events related to the peace process;

If (2) the capacity of a diverse cadre of Syrian women leaders is built, through multiple channels, to influence the political process;

If (3) Syrian women are engaged and supported, from the international political process to grassroots, to advance women's rights and gender equality;

If (4) international actors improved their strategic coordination and policy-advocacy around women's rights and gender equality;

and If (5) research and analysis on the status of gender equality and women's rights is disseminated and available in the public domain;

Then (6) Syrian women can more effectively and meaningfully participate in, influence and respond to windows of opportunities in Syria's peace process to secure women's rights and gender equality outcomes;

Because (7) they have sustained access to and visibility in the political process, the capabilities of Syrian women at multiple levels is enhanced, international stakeholders are better coordinated in their policy advocacy to call for the inclusion of women and gender perspectives in the process; and women's groups and broader stakeholders can root their policy options in evidence and actual data on the Syria context;

And (8) evidence shows women are agents of change whose meaningful participation can lead to more sustainable peace that is reflective of women's rights and gender perspectives.

During the inception phase of the evaluation, based on the scoping interviews and desk reviews, the evaluation team reconstructed the programme's theory of change to help the evaluation team assess the validity of the Syria Programme's intervention logic and test the underlying assumptions behind each level of the results chain (see Figure 5).

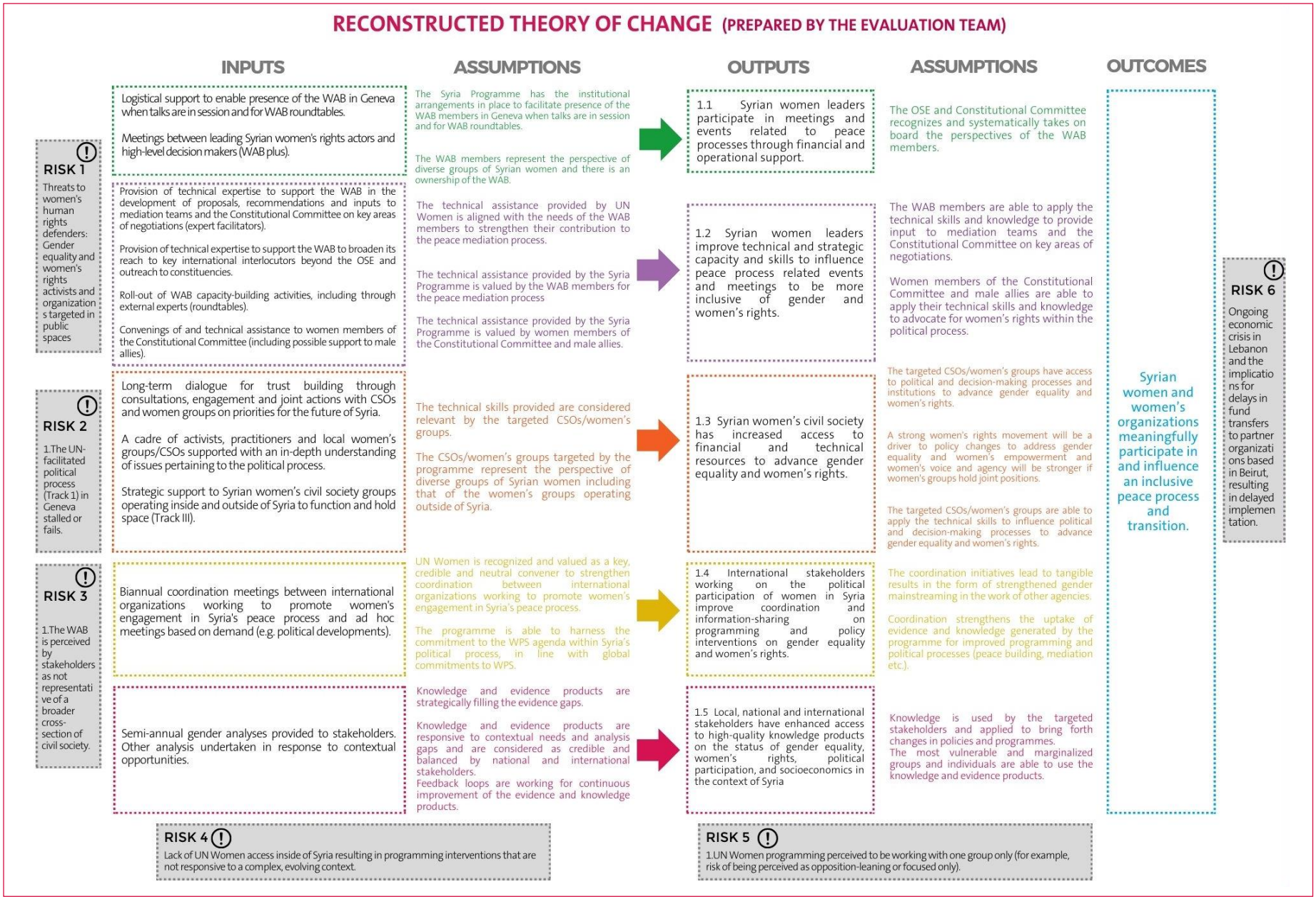
The programme has a performance framework that has one outcome and five associated outputs (see Figure 4). The evaluation used this to assess programmatic performance.

The Syria Programme document recognizes and aims to target some of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups and individuals. Specifically, women and girls with disabilities who face systemic and intersectional marginalization, female-headed households, women and girls in camp settings in the northeast of the country, particularly Al-Hol, as well as women from ethnic minority groups.

There has been one previous evaluation of the Syria Programme in 2019 (see Annex 2 for a review of the findings). The IEAS internal audit of the Arab States Regional Office conducted in 2022 recommended that the Syria Programme should be evaluated in 2023.

Figure 4: Programme outcomes and outputs

Figure 5: Syria Programme reconstructed theory of change



Source:*Prepared by the evaluation team*

Photo ©UN Women

2 EVALUATION APPROACH

2.1 Purpose and objectives

This was a planned final evaluation of Phase II of the Syria Programme. The purpose of the evaluation was twofold: (a) accountability, assessing the contributions made by UN Women during Phase II of the programme in achievement and performance of outcome-level results; and (b) learning and forward-looking in scope to support the Syria Programme and its stakeholders' strategic learning and decision-making for future programme design, implementation and scale-up. Therefore, the evaluation was primarily formative in nature but also included summative elements within its scope.

Specifically, the objectives of the evaluation were to:

(a) Assess the relevance of the UN Women's Syria Programme at international and local levels and its alignment with international agreements and conventions on gender equality and women's empowerment, particularly related to Women, Peace and Security.

(b) Assess effectiveness, efficiency and coherence in progressing towards achievement of the programmatic results as defined in the programme's results framework.

(c) Enable the UN Women Syria Programme to improve its strategic positioning to better support Syrian women and women's organizations to lead, participate and advocate effectively in Syrian political processes from a gender and women's rights perspective, and build a women's movement in the context of Syria.

(d) Analyse how a human rights approach and gender equality are integrated in the design and implementation of the Syria Programme.

(e) Identify and validate lessons learned, good practices and examples of innovation that can be scaled up and replicated to support gender equality and human rights.

(f) Provide insights into the extent to which UN Women has realized synergies between its three mandates (normative, UN system coordination and operations).

(g) Provide actionable recommendations with respect to the Syria Programme's strategic direction and programmatic interventions.

The key evaluation questions were:

EQ1: To what extent is the Syria Programme aligned to international and UN frameworks and adapted to contextual changes?

EQ2: Has the Syria Programme been efficient in obtaining the most from its limited resources?

EQ3: To what extent do the programme management structure and operating arrangements support UN Women's efficient collaboration and partnership with UN entities, international partners and CSOs in Syria?

EQ4: To what extent has the programme contributed to Syrian women's meaningful participation and influence in an inclusive peace process, improving access to decision makers and the technical capacity of women, improving coordination and the gender responsiveness of international stakeholders?

EQ5: To what extent were the programme interventions gender transformative and adhered to the principle of leave no one behind?

EQ6: To what extent were capacity and systems developed to facilitate the programme's transition and to ensure the sustainability of programme efforts and results?

2.2 Evaluation users and use

The primary intended users of this evaluation are the UN Women Arab States Regional Office, UN Women headquarters, civil society representatives and partners, donors and international partners, stakeholders and target groups.

The primary intended uses of the evaluation are:

- learning and improved decision-making to support the formulation of the future programmatic and operational direction; and
- accountability for the effectiveness of the programme in terms of UN Women's contribution to gender equality and women's empowerment.

2.3 Scope

The evaluation was conducted between July and October 2023 and covered the programme's Phase II period from June and December 2023. It built on the lessons drawn from the evaluation of Phase I conducted in 2019. [29] The evaluation covered interventions delivered both inside and outside of Syria (in Lebanon and Turkey) and initiatives taking place at a regional and international level. The evaluation was conducted

[29] UN Women, Mid-Term Evaluation: Supporting Syrian Women's Engagement in the Syrian Political Process – Building a Homegrown Constituency for Peace Programme (2019) <https://gate.unwomen.org/Evaluation/Details?EvaluationId=11410>

remotely using remote/virtual data collection tools and techniques. A detailed stakeholder analysis was conducted in consultation with the programme team to ensure that the perspectives of various individuals and groups were taken into consideration in the sample. This ensured that the geographical scope of the evaluation covered stakeholders both outside and inside Syria across the three zones of control.

Key stakeholders consulted through virtual key informant interviews included UN and other international organizations, donors, UN Women personnel (at headquarters, regional and country levels), implementing partners and a sample of CSO beneficiaries (see Annex 5 for a full list of stakeholders interviewed).

Given the current context, the evaluation included an analysis of the programme's efforts to respond to or adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquake in February 2023.

The evaluation did not consider impact (as defined by the United Nations Evaluation Group [UNEG][30]) as it is considered too premature to assess this. The evaluation considered the main cultural, religious, social and economic differences when analysing the contributions of UN Women.

2.4 Design of the evaluation

The evaluation applied a theory-based approach[31] and UNEG's guidance on gender and human-rights based principles to evaluation through their incorporation into the evaluation questions, methodology and analytical approaches.[32]

The evaluation applied the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Assistance Committee evaluation criteria and used the evaluation matrix with key questions and sub-questions to articulate areas of evaluation focus (see Annex 3 for the evaluation matrix).

The evaluation was underpinned by the Gender and Social Norms Analytical Framework.[33] Training-related interventions were assessed using the Kirkpatrick four-step training evaluation framework.[34] The evaluation applied the Guskey+ analytical model[35] to assess the effectiveness of the programme's knowledge management. The evaluation used L Kirchhoff's three principal models of mediation [36] to assess the programme's peace mediation initiatives through the WAB.

2.5 Evaluability Assessment

In line with UN Women's commitment to results-based management, an evaluability assessment was conducted by the evaluation team based on a review of programme indicators according to SMART [37] and results-based management principles,[38] and a review of the availability and quality of relevant data and documentation. The evaluability assessment was also informed through consultations with key UN Women personnel during the scoping interviews. The full evaluability assessment can be found in Annex 4.

2.6 Stakeholder analysis, sampling, data collection and analysis

Purposive sampling was used through a consultative approach with the programme team to ensure that the sample had a balanced representation of various programme interventions and generated diverse perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders. A detailed stakeholder mapping and analysis exercise was carried out by the evaluation team during the inception phase to understand the sampling universe, role of various stakeholders and to draw a representative sample to ensure the perspectives of various individuals and groups were taken into consideration in the sample. The stakeholder mapping exercise was reviewed and finalized through consultation with the programme team.

The evaluation used a mixed-method approach of qualitative as well as quantitative data collection and analysis methods, document and portfolio analysis, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, workshops and surveys. The evaluation team carried out a content and comparative analysis by synthesizing the

[30] UNEG (2013), Impact Evaluation Guidance Document <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/1433>

[31] Theory-based approaches to evaluation use an explicit theory of change to draw conclusions about whether and how an intervention contributed to observed results. For more information, refer to Government of Canada: Theory-based Approaches to Evaluation: Concepts and Practices, 2012

[32] The evaluation team will be guided by the following documents and guidance: *Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in 26 Evaluation -- Towards UNEG Guidance; UNEG Handbook for Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality Perspectives in Evaluations in the UN System*; UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation, Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct

[33] Social and Behaviour Change and Gender: Models and Frameworks

[34] https://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/the-kirkpatrick-model/

[35] The Guskey model for professional development evaluation builds on the New World Kirkpatrick Model 8 and is broad enough to be applied to any type of engagement and learning activity. Guskey outlines an additional organizational component to the New World Kirkpatrick model, which is pertinent to this evaluation. See Guskey et al. (2002) Gauge impact with five levels of data. Available at:

[36] Constructive Interventions: Paradigms, Process and Practice of International Mediation, 2008

[37] SMART signifies Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound.

[38] UN Women Training Centre eLearning Campus, *Results-Based Management Guidance* (2017), Available from: https://trainingcentre.unwomen.org/enrol/index.php?id=184

similarities, differences and patterns among stakeholders to facilitate learning and understanding of how and why particular programme approaches, or sequences of approaches and interventions, were successful or unsuccessful. The evaluation applied triangulation to validate the data through cross verification from multi-data sources and tested the consistency of findings obtained through different instruments.

Specifically, the evaluation covered the following sample:

- A review of more than 70 documents, including key policy documents, programme documents, donor and partner reports, progress reports, annual workplans and data.
- 49 key informant interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders from donors, UN agencies, INGO partners, implementing partners, CSOs and target beneficiaries (see stakeholder list, Annex 5).
- Three surveys with programme personnel (5/8 responses), implementing partners (5/6 responses) and CSOs (136/180 responses).
- One case study on the extent to which UN Women's efforts in the humanitarian response to the Syria crisis have influenced cross-border operations.

2.7 Governance and quality assurance

The evaluation was led by the Arab States Regional Evaluation Specialist, who is a member of the UN Women Independent Evaluation and Audit Services (IEAS) and acted as the team lead for the evaluation process.

An Evaluation Reference Group was established to enhance the participatory approach and ownership of the process, and for validation purposes. It included a representative sample of key internal stakeholders: UN Women Arab States Regional Director; UN Women Deputy Chief of Peace, Security and Resilience; Syria Programme Manager; and a civil society and donor representative to provide external stakeholder perspectives.

The evaluation was quality assured by IEAS, specifically the Chief of the Independent Evaluation Service (IES) and Director, IEAS.

2.8 Ethical considerations

The evaluation followed the UNEG Ethical Guidelines for evaluations.[39] Accordingly, all data collected through this evaluation was subject to UN Women's Information Security Policy to ensure informed consent was provided to the stakeholders consulted and to ensure confidentiality and data protection. The evaluation team took measures to conduct interviews with integrity and respect for the 'do no harm' principle. This included taking informed consent; explaining data management protocols and confidentiality issues; and leading interviews with openness and respect to build rapport with respondents. Consultation was also undertaken with implementing partners as to the safest ways to seek beneficiary perspectives. Beneficiary interviews were conducted in Arabic to aid accessibility. The ethical protocols adopted by the evaluation are outlined in full in the Data Management Plan (see Annex 8 for details).

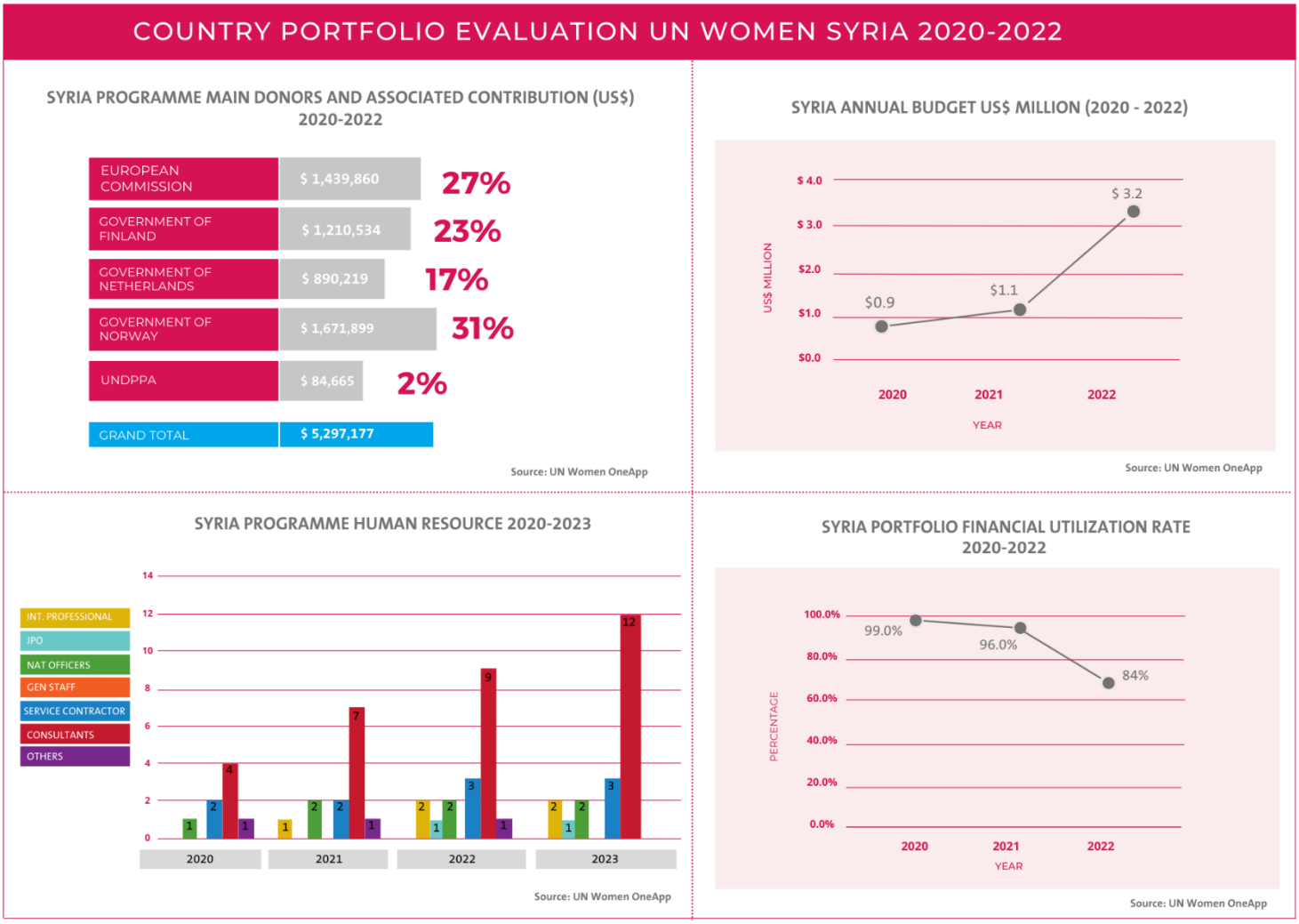
2.9 Challenges and limitations

Due to the highly politicized context, in-person data collection was not feasible and therefore data collection was conducted virtually. The context posed challenges for reaching all beneficiaries via implementing partners as target institutions and individuals often face significant security threats due to their association and involvement with international agencies. The evaluation team worked closely with implementing partners to ensure the evaluation did no harm to the target groups and attempted to seek their perspectives through surveys as well as conducting interviews, when appropriate. Despite this, the evaluation team was unable to obtain beneficiary responses from two implementing partners.

To address the language barrier, all beneficiary tools were translated into Arabic, and consultations were carried out in Arabic.

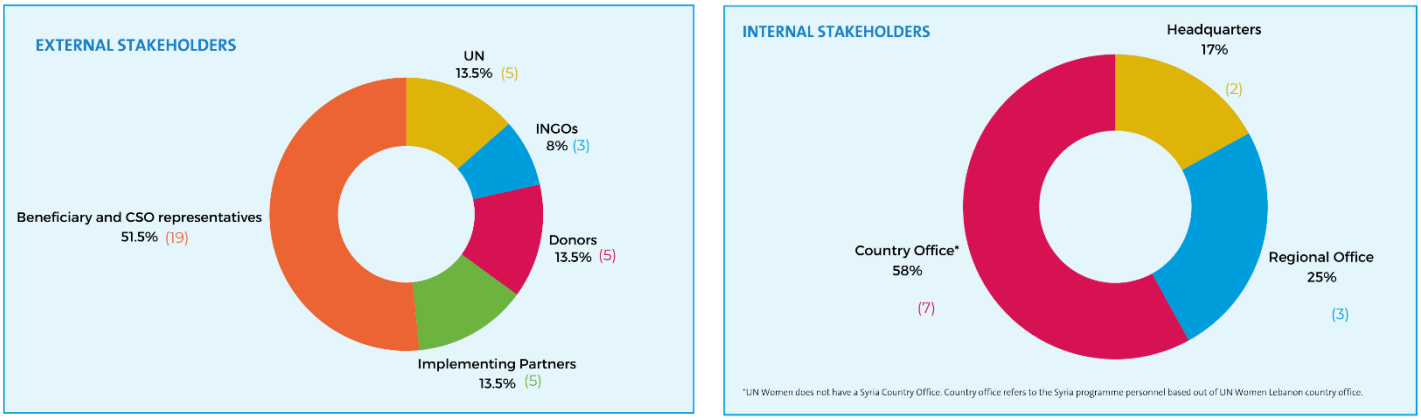
[39] https://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/2866

Figure 6: Sources and methodology for data collection



Source: *compiled by the evaluation team*

Figure 7: Types of stakeholders consulted



Source: *prepared by the evaluation team*

Photo ©UN Women

Photo ©UN Women

3 FINDINGS

3.1 RELEVANCE

EVALUATION QUESTION 1: TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE SYRIA PROGRAMME ALIGNED TO INTERNATIONAL AND UN FRAMEWORKS AND ADAPTED TO CONTEXTUAL CHANGES?

FINDING 1: The Syria Programme is well aligned to international women, peace and security frameworks. The programme was relevant to international commitments to women's empowerment and gender equality and was in line with UN Women's strategic goals. The programme could become more relevant by widening its engagement with different women's groups across Syria, with an intentional focus on women's livelihood and economic empowerment priorities.

The core principle underlying the Syria Programme is to support women's meaningful participation and leadership in peace and security; and improve coordination and accountability frameworks on women, peace and security. The evaluative evidence indicated that the Syria Programme was relevant and aligned with the UN's commitment to a Syrian-led end to the crisis through a political solution and a fully inclusive peace process, anchored in the framework of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254 (2015). The evaluation team noted that the programme is in line with the UN's commitment to UNSCR 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security to increase the participation of women in all efforts for the resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction; the Geneva Communiqué to facilitate a Syrian-led political transition process;[40] and to the UN Special Envoy for Syria's 12 Living Intra-Syrian Principles regarding the end-state of Syria.[41]

The Syria Programme was also aligned with international instruments for women's empowerment and gender equality, including CEDAW (Articles 7 and 8 and General Recommendation 30), which includes commitments to ensuring the elimination of barriers to the equal participation of women in political and public life, as well as UNSCR 2122 that affirms women and girls' empowerment and gender equality as critical to efforts to maintain international peace and security. The programme also contributes to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, particularly commitments on ending violence against women; women and armed conflict; women in power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms; and the human rights of women.

The Syria Programme was found to be aligned and contributing to the UN Strategic Framework for the Syrian Arab Republic[42] and its commitment to promoting gender equality and in changing gender discriminatory practices that have emerged because of the crisis. The Syria Programme was also aligned to and contributing to the UN Humanitarian Response Plan through its recent support to the cross-border operation from Gaziantep following the earthquake in February 2023 to strengthen gender-responsive humanitarian action. In this regard, the evaluation noted that UN Women was admitted as a member of the Humanitarian Liaison Group in March 2023 following the earthquake, which has increased its ability to champion gender in humanitarian action priorities in the cross-border operation and offered potential for the expansion of UN Women's humanitarian role.

The Syria Programme is aligned with UN Women's Strategic Plans (2018–2021 and 2022–2025), which includes mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment into peace and security processes; supporting women's meaningful participation and leadership in peace and security; and improving coordination and accountability frameworks on women, peace and security.[43]

The programme is also aligned with and contributes to the Regional Office for Arab States' Strategic Notes (2018–2021 and 2022–2025) focusing on women, peace and security and humanitarian action. Phase II of the programme complements UN Women's broader regional programming on women, peace and security, such as the "Enhancing Women's Leadership for Sustainable Peace in Fragile Contexts in the MENA Region" programme.

All stakeholders consulted reaffirmed the relevance of the Syria Programme's areas of focus, indicating the importance of sustained commitment to issues of women's political participation in the Syrian peace process in particular the focus of support to WAB members which remains the only women-focused active and functioning body of the peace process, and the importance of sustained support to Track I

[40] Geneva Communique was endorsed by the General Assembly in resolution 66/253-B and by the Security Council in Resolution 2118 August 2012

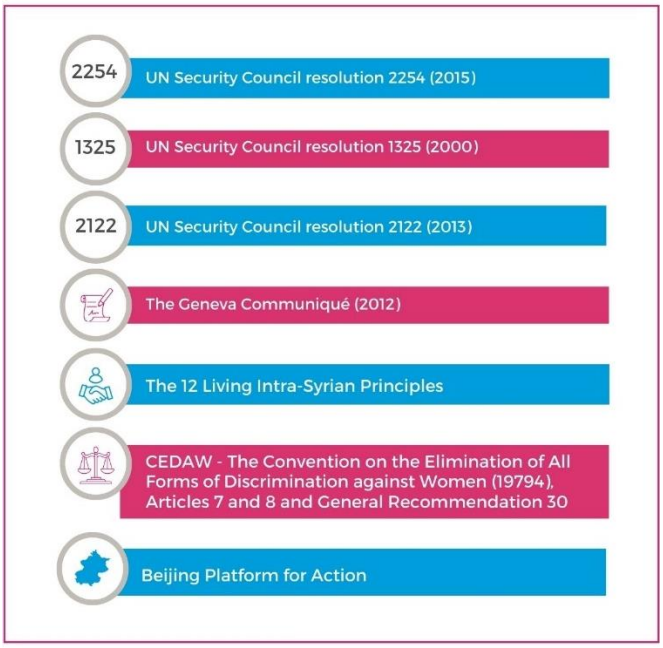
[41] https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2017-12-01/note-correspondents-statement-behalf-un-special-envoy

[42] https://syria.un.org/en/202912-un-strategic-framework-2022-2024

[43] UN Women Strategic Plan 2018-2021 Outcome 5 and UN Women Strategic Plan 2022-2025 impact area 4.

and III CSO women working on women's rights and gender equality.[44] Across surveys, almost all stakeholders reported the programme as relevant: implementing partners (100 per cent), Syria programme personnel (100 per cent) and CSO beneficiaries (71 per cent, 97/136). Two per cent of CSO beneficiaries who felt the programme was not relevant indicated that the programme needed to be more clearly tailored to the needs and priorities of women in Syria and that the programme would be more relevant by widening engagement with different women's groups across Syria and by giving greater focus to women's livelihood and economic empowerment priorities to better respond to the diverse needs of women in the region[45] (see Annex 6 for details).

Figure 8: The Syria Programme's alignment to international conventions
Prepared by the evaluation team



[44] In this context Track I refers to women leaders engaged in formal political peace processes and Track III refers to grassroots women leaders support to informal peace efforts

[45] Please note: The CSO beneficiary survey found that while 71 per cent of women found the programme highly relevant or relevant, 2 per cent felt the programme was not relevant, 6 per cent stated don't know and 20 per cent of respondents did not respond to the question at all.

FINDING 2: The Syria Programme's theory of change was relevant and reflected its underpinning intervention logic to identify and address systemic barriers to facilitate women's political participation and access to decision-making platforms. However, the theory of change did not adequately factor in the role and involvement of men and communities to transform deep-rooted gender roles and biases to contribute towards sustainable gender transformation. There is a potential to strengthen the intervention logic by having an intentional focus on women's livelihood and economic empowerment priorities, which is a key barrier to women's political participation.

The evaluation noted that the programme's theory of change had been strengthened to articulate and incorporate the structural barriers to women's political participation and the political complexity of the operating environment to be more clearly based on the recommendations of the mid-term evaluation of the programme in 2019 (see Figure 5). Accordingly, the programme design for Phase II went beyond the political pillar of supporting and enabling WAB members and was more comprehensive to ensure that Syrian women's civil society has increased access to technical and financial resources; international actors have improved coordination of policy and programming on women's political participation; and there is improved evidence and knowledge that strengthens understanding of gender equality and women's rights in the context of Syria.

The evaluation noted that this revised version of the theory of change was relevant to address the structural barriers to women's political participation working at an individual level by building capacities for women's leadership and participation. The intervention logic was also robust, reflecting the programme's work at an institutional level by influencing existing UN-led peace mediation efforts for the systematic inclusion of women's perspectives in the Syrian political peace process through the WAB mechanism.

The evaluation found that the intervention design was limited in embracing a social relations approach[46] and did not fully recognize the role and involvement of men and communities in identifying and addressing the deep-rooted gender roles and biases that discourage women from participating in the political sphere, which is critical for gender transformation and social norms change. There are greater opportunities within research and civil society strands to understand and develop strategic approaches to the engagement of men and boys in raising awareness and changing attitudes towards gender equality and women's empowerment in Syria.

Another limitation of the intervention logic indicated by the stakeholders consulted was the programme's focus on women, peace and security work. According to these stakeholders, although this focus has been a strength for the programme, a key barrier to women's effective political participation is their lack of economic empowerment and livelihood opportunities, which is not clearly reflected in the programme's theory of change. In particular, the civil society intervention design should more clearly articulate how it can mitigate against the lack of livelihood opportunities, such as by strengthening partnerships with agencies working for Syrian women's economic empowerment.

Overall, the evaluation appreciates that the operating context remains a key challenge both in terms of the stalling of the formal peace process and in relation to the security barriers to women's participation across all zones of control. These issues have created significant barriers to achieving all the desired outcomes identified in the programme's theory of change.

[46] https://www.equilo.io/gender-analysis-framework-social

FINDING 3: The Syria Programme demonstrated adaptability and agility in responding to the changing political context, COVID-19 pandemic and recent earthquake and used the opportunity to reiterate UN Women's normative and coordination mandate.

The programme demonstrated adaptability and agility in responding to the changing context. All stakeholders and implementing partners (100 per cent) felt the programme had been well adapted to the context, and the vast majority of beneficiaries (75 per cent, 102/136) perceived the programme as responsive to their context and needs (see Annex 6 for details).

The stalling of the peace talks has been a key hindering factor, limiting progress. Under such circumstances, the evaluation noted that the programme has adapted to ensure the focus of the WAB remains relevant and continues to be seen as a credible actor in the peace negotiation, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction process. To achieve this, the programme continued to focus on capacity strengthening for WAB members, including their ability to engage with key influential members states, and redirected the WAB's focus to internal conversations regarding their joint positions thereby preparing the ground to re-engage in the process of finding a political solution.

The start of Phase II of the programme was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the programme faced a challenging period in the absence of in-person peacebuilding activities. The evaluation found that the programme adapted its plans to meet the challenges presented by COVID-19 by showing flexibility and modifying its style of work. Most capacity-building activities were moved online and there were no significant delays to planned activities. At a strategic level, the WAB continued to meet virtually throughout the pandemic and provided recommendations on the nationwide ceasefire and highlighted the urgency of addressing the increase in violence against women and girls.[47]

The evaluation took note of the programme's rapid response to facilitate a gender-responsive earthquake response in 2023 through its partnership with the UN and its civil society networks. UN Women became chair of the Gender Working Group for the Syria cross-border operation and was admitted as a member of the Humanitarian Liaison Group in March 2023 following the earthquake. This has significantly increased UN Women's capacity to lead on gender in humanitarian action priorities in the cross-border operation and has provided the necessary impetus to strengthen the Entity's gender mainstreaming coordination mandate. The programme has been able to use this platform to amplify the needs of women in response to the earthquake through its post-earthquake gender analysis. The programme also received core funding for the first time for its gender-responsive humanitarian action work. Given that UN Women is now a member of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the evaluation noted that the programme's experience is feeding critical lessons into regional and corporate knowledge and understanding around gender in humanitarian action to support and refine UN Women's niche in this space. For details, refer to the case study on gender-responsive humanitarian action (see Annex 13)

[47] Assessing macroeconomic response policies to COVID-19 in the Arab region: What implications for women's economic empowerment?, October 2021 - https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/10/assessing-macroeconomic-response-policies-to-covid-19-in-the-arab-region

3.2 EFFECTIVENESS

Evaluation Question 4: To what extent has the programme contributed to Syrian women's meaningful participation and influence in an inclusive peace process, improving access to decision makers and the technical capacity of women, improving coordination and the gender responsiveness of international stakeholders?

FINDING 4: The Syrian Women's Advisory Board gender inclusion mechanism remains a credible and effective modality in the Syrian political process, with the ability to leverage political will, provide technical expertise and engage in high-level political dialogue despite the stalled political peace process. Greater attention could be paid to ensure systematic and meaningful engagement of WAB members with women in Syria, and local/civil society, linking Track I and III initiatives and strengthening representation of diverse voices.

UN Women has been actively engaged in supporting the Syrian WAB since 2016, which serves as an advisory body to the Office of the Special Envoy in the political process. UN Women has supported strengthening the WAB's capacity to influence the political process as well as its knowledge on key topics related to the political process. The evaluation noted that the WAB is recognized as the first institutional gender inclusion mechanism for women's participation ever established for a UN special political mission. The lack of progress on the political process has limited tangible results, but the WAB has adapted to remain relevant through preparing the ground to re-engage by exploring positions on constitutional reform, early recovery and scenarios to unlock the political process.

A member of the Constitutional Committee speaking at the EU Delegation in Beirut (photo: Cecilia Pellosniemi, UN Women)

One of the most significant contributions made by the WAB has been the advancements made in recognition of women's participation in the political process. This includes near achievement of the 30 per cent quota in the Constitutional Committee, including three former/current members of the WAB.[48] Since September 2020, the Constitutional Committee has held five rounds of talks and while no outcome documents were produced that could be assessed, women's greater representation in the Committee has contributed to the inclusion of gender perspectives in these discussions.[49] For instance, the evaluation noted that during the fourth Constitutional Committee round in December 2020, gender equality and women's rights themes featured more prominently than in previous rounds. In addition, the WAB developed draft language on the preamble and constitutional principles, which assisted the Office of Special Envoy for Syria to undertake more gender-responsive engagement with the parties concerned. According to the stakeholders consulted, during the meetings held in parallel to the Constitutional Committee, the WAB played a constructive role in supporting the talks by conveying strategic priorities and identifying areas of consensus among the parties.

The evaluation noted that since 2019, the WAB has developed over 19 documents (joint statements/position papers) across a number of key topics including: Mutually Agreeable Principles (March 2022), Preamble to the Constitution (January 2021) and a series of thematic papers on Constitutional Principles including on education, legislation, economy, centralization/decentralization [50]

[48] The evaluation noted that women's participation in Constitutional Committee (CC) delegations has decreased slightly since 2019 due to the resignation of a woman member in each of the three CC delegations. There has been no change in the number of women members of a smaller body of the CC, and one less woman in each of the three delegations of the larger body of 150.

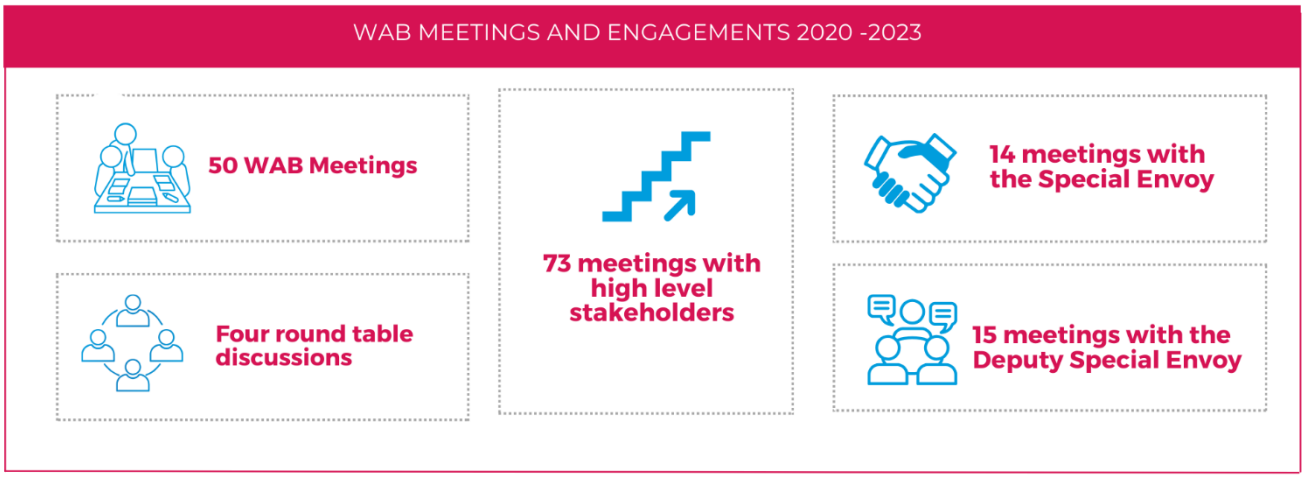
[49] During the fourth Constitutional Committee round in December 2020, gender equality and women's rights featured more prominently than in previous rounds. In addition, the WAB developed draft language on the preamble to the constitution and constitutional principles, which assisted the OSE in gender-responsive engagement with the parties.

[50] 14 joint products on constitutional issues officially submitted to the OSE to support its work related to the CC: Mutually Agreed Principles (Green Principles) (2020); the Preamble to the Constitution, possible textual

(see Annex 9). The WAB has also been able to use its position to inform the international response to the Syrian crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic providing recommendations on the nationwide ceasefire.

The evaluative evidence indicated that UN Women's technical and logistical support has contributed towards maintaining the WAB's high profile as the most visible mechanism to realizing the meaningful participation of women in Syria. All stakeholders interviewed (100 per cent) indicated that the WAB continues to be an effective modality and recognized it as a trusted adviser to the Office of Special Envoy for Syria, and one of the most inclusive structures in the political process.[51]

Figure 9: Summary of WAB meetings



Source: prepared by the evaluation team

positions of the Syrian parties (including the northeast even though not formally part of the negotiations); textual proposals on the following constitutional principles: the army, armed forces, security and intelligence; the rule of law; sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic; terrorism and extremism (sixth round, October 2021, submitted in March 2022), basics of governance; state symbols; regulation and functions of public authorities (seventh round, March 2022); unilateral coercive measures from a constitutional perspective; maintaining and strengthening state institutions, supremacy of the constitution and status of international treaties; and transitional justice (eight round, May-June 2022). In addition, the WAB submitted a letter drafted to the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Rosemary DiCarlo, calling upon UN leadership for measures to revive the political process and enable the WAB to meet in person (April 2021). In August-September 2022, the WAB drafted four scenarios to unlock the political process (see Annex 9).

[51] 2022 Parry, J, UN Women, Women's participation in local mediation: lessons from Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, p28

During Phase II of the programme, UN Women facilitated 50 WAB meetings, eight in person and four round table discussions in relation to education, mediation, local governance and constitution building, as well as centralization and decentralization and the economy (see Annex 10). The evaluation noted that organizing in-person WAB meetings was challenging due to the complexities of the Syrian context, the COVID-19 pandemic and related regulations of host governments, but regular dialogues with the WAB proved important as it helped to keep the WAB functional, relevant and alive. As indicated above, stakeholders acknowledged that the WAB remains the only women-focused functional body of the Syria political process that is still active. The programme facilitated the WAB members' meetings on certain issues to articulate common positions and build consensus. The ability of the WAB as a diverse group of women to agree on joint messages strengthened its credibility and positioning vis-à-vis the Office of Special Envoy for Syria as well as others in the donor community.

The evaluation noted that the programme also supported the WAB's participation in over 73 high-level engagements. According to the stakeholders consulted, in the context of a stalled political process, this helped WAB members to remain engaged in representing Syrian women's perspectives at various political forums. In this process, they gained confidence and acceptance as a source of expertise on key gender issues related to Syria.[52]

The programme supported the WAB to hold 14 meetings with the Special Envoy and 15 meetings with the Deputy Special Envoy. According to stakeholders, these meetings and UN Women's partnership with the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria helped the Office's receptivity to the inputs and expertise of the WAB[53] and amplified the role of women in Syria through increased civil society, high-level briefings to the UN Security Council.[54] The evaluation noted that the WAB would benefit from broader engagement with the Astana guarantors and Arab League member states.

A historic criticism of the WAB has been its inability to provide a fully representative body and that its membership was drawn exclusively from privileged, middle-class women. The evaluation noted that the WAB has increased its outreach efforts to facilitate inclusion of voices and perspectives of Syrian women at the grassroots level. For instance, as per the programme monitoring data, WAB members carried out consultations with over 350 women and men in 2021–2022. The evaluative evidence indicated that this consultative process has strengthened the legitimacy of WAB in the political process.[55] Civil society consultations have also enabled Syrian civil society actors to share challenges and seek recommendations increasing the programme's inclusivity, i.e. of intersectional needs across different constituencies and geographies. Despite these positive steps, the evaluation noted some areas of concern: stakeholders particularly indicated that middle-class women from the age group of 30–40 are still the face of the WAB and younger women, emerging leaders, women living with disability, women from low socioeconomic backgrounds as well as from certain geographies are not yet represented in the WAB. The evaluation hopes that the upcoming rotation process of WAB members and subsequent selection of a new cohort will address these concerns.

As the Syria Programme has broadened out from the high-level peace process to a civil society partnership, the evaluation noted that WAB members were acting as an important bridge providing new entry points for broader networks of civil society women to the political process. However, greater attention could be paid to ensure the systematic, meaningful engagement of WAB members with women on the ground, local/civil society and Track I and III initiatives. This will help to further build on the legitimacy of the WAB and ensure it remains relevant and informed by increasingly diverse Syrian voices. Greater involvement of WAB members to provide capacity-building support to civil society could also further strengthen Syrian CSO networks.

The evaluation noted the positive feedback from WAB members regarding their increased level of confidence about participation in the political process as captured in the self-perception surveys conducted by UN Women in January 2022.[56] The self-perception surveys noted:

- All WAB members (100 per cent) reported increased substantive knowledge;
- 86 per cent reported increased access to international decision makers;
- 94 per cent reported increased ability to advocate for their ideas and beliefs;
- 94 per cent reported being equipped to engage in constitutional drafting;
- 81 per cent reported being more known for its expertise;
- 88 per cent reported increased receptiveness of the

[52] UN Women WPS EU Progress Report September 2020-August 2022
[53] January-February 2022, UN Women, WAB Perception Surveys
[54] 20 Syrian women representing civil society have briefed the Security Council since 2019. Before 2019 no Syrian women representing civil society had briefed the Security Council. UN Women has assisted Member States to select women civil society briefs.
[55] UN Women WPS EU Progress Report September 2020-August 2022
[56] January-February 2022, UN Women, WAB perception surveys

Office of Special Envoy for Syria to the WAB's inputs and expertise;
- 73 per cent reported that international actors were more receptive to the WAB; and
- 81 per cent reported the WAB had more legitimacy in the political process as a consequence of its outreach activities.

The WAB members interviewed by the evaluation team validated the self-perception survey data and indicated their overall enhanced abilities to influence the peace process. They indicated that UN Women's technical support has strengthened their capacity to make more strategic contributions through increased technical knowledge as well as by providing more global exposure to women's organizations. For instance, visits by WAB members to Italy and Finland to meet with other women's organizations from different contexts were noted as particularly significant.

The evaluation also noted a tension between WAB's role as a gender inclusion mechanism to the Office of Special Envoy for Syria and WAB members' involvement in UN Women's wider gender equality and women's empowerment advocacy efforts where WAB members' access to funding and advocacy opportunities can create competition and power imbalance among the WAB membership. The programme team mitigated these concerns by seeking to ensure geographic, political and ideological balance among WAB members selected for opportunities outside of WAB meetings, and for WAB members involved in UN Women's civil society efforts.

Testing the theory of change assumptions:

Evidence shows that the programme's intervention logic to provide financial and technical support to the WAB to influence an inclusive peace process was valid and yielded successes, leading to the inclusion of gender perspectives in key discussions and identifying areas of consensus among the parties concerned. However, the assumption that strengthened capacities would translate into direct influence on the peace process has yet to be established and proven given the peace process has stalled.

FINDING 5: Civil society capacity-strengthening engagements have begun to yield results at an individual and organizational level, but the lack of coordination across civil society is impacting the scalability of results and Syrian women's movement building.

The Syria Programme initiated a distinct civil society programme pillar targeting women-led organizations and women activists to bridge the gap between women involved in the political process and grassroots women leaders. During Phase II of the programme, UN Women provided direct support to eight CSO partners. The CSO stakeholders consulted by the evaluation team confirmed that the programme had demonstrated a relevant and effective model by increasing collaboration with Syrian women across the five major Syrian host/home geographies of Lebanon, Turkey, and northwest and central/southern Syria. They indicated that the ongoing and real-time consultation with partners, beneficiaries and key stakeholders has allowed for ongoing course correction of the programmme. According to these stakeholders, as part of capacity strengthening, WAB members have also facilitated training on key women, peace and security and political process-related themes, strengthening linkages between Track III and Track I women leaders.[57]

According to the programme monitoring data,[58] the Syria Programme has increased access to financial and technical resources for 120 women leaders across 64 local women's CSOs trained.[59] The evaluation noted that implementing partner reports suggested this has had a multiplier effect and resulted in further trickle-down training of over 2,000 civil society women. The evaluative evidence indicated that this capacity strengthening has increased CSOs' awareness of key gender and political concepts related to the future of Syria, including on topics ranging from women, peace and security and UNSCR 1325, leadership, constitutional issues, justice, elections, and advocacy and campaigning.[60] For instance, of the 19 beneficiaries interviewed by the evaluation team, 78 per cent (15/19) reported that the training provided by the Syria Programme was highly relevant and effective, specifically that related to advocacy and community dialogue. Similar views were noted in the pre and post-surveys conducted by implementing partners: an average of 77 per cent of women community leaders reported increased knowledge after the training, and 83 per cent of the beneficiaries reported satisfaction with the training content and that it was aligned with their training needs.[61]

In contrast to this, the evaluation noted that only 50 per cent of programme implementing partners surveyed as part of the evaluation felt that UN Women had strengthened their capacity to a great extent. This was partly due to the fact they were already well established and well-resourced organizations. The evaluation team also noted that this was not an intended outcome of the programme.

The CSO stakeholders consulted indicated that they had experienced many positive differences in their lives as a result of the UN supported interventions. On a personal level, they had gained more knowledge, skills, confidence and awareness in various topics such as gender, human rights, dialogue, advocacy, etc. On a professional level, they had improved their performance, quality and leadership in their work or field. The CSO stakeholders also learned how to design, implement and evaluate projects and initiatives. On a social level, they built stronger and wider relationships and networks with other people involved or interested in similar issues, and also participated more actively in their community and supported the causes of women at local and regional levels.

According to these stakeholders, gender equality remains highly sensitive in Syria and the programme offers some good practice examples of work engaging with religious communities around gender equality issues. While women remain heavily excluded from decision-making and political participation, at an individual and community level technical training has increased the confidence of women to participate in community activities with small signs of progress in increasing the acceptance of women in leadership roles. However, stakeholders indicated that increasing backlash and abuse of women engaging in politics means that their work is often limited to addressing women-focused issues such as gender-based violence and issues of personal status law relating to marriage, inheritance and divorce, which limits their progression as organizations and scope for wider political influence.

Despite these positive signs of progress, some areas of improvement were noted by the evaluation. For instance, online training has been limited by poor connectivity and there was a preference for more face-to-face training opportunities. The short time span of pilot interventions and the format of one-off training programmes also impacted programme sustainability, as longer-term sustained support and a clear partnership strategy was required to ensure continuity of results. Safety and security concerns continued

[57] In this context Track I refers to women leaders engaged in formal political peace processes and Track III refers to grassroots women leaders support to informal peace efforts.
[58] UN Women WPS EU Progress Report September 2020-August 2022
[59] UN Women WPS EU Progress Report September 2020-August 2022
[60] 2022 Implementing Partner Reports
[61] UN Women WPS EU Progress Report September 2020-August 2022

to pose challenges, impeding both capacity-building activities and coordination among local CSOs across diverse geographic regions. The CSO partners interviewed indicated that two areas needed more attention: a greater focus was required on psychosocial support, and the need for computer literacy and cybersecurity training to enable the participation of more marginalized women given the politically sensitive operating context.

Another key challenge observed and indicated during the interviews with civil society actors was the lack of coordination among various international organizations and the subsequent overlap of interventions. This overlap, whether driven by donors or CSOs, often leads to the duplication of efforts by INGOs and development actors and the simultaneous targeting of the same communities. The evaluation noted that to address this, the Syria Programme initiated the first civil society workshop in October 2022, with the aim of increasing cross-fertilization between UN Women's civil society partners. This event was appreciated as a space to share experiences and explore opportunities for collaboration and coordination. Despite these efforts, substantive coordination to support political participation remains limited both within and across different geographical areas and there is greater scope for coordination of partners that work on similar topics and for joint projects to avoid duplication. The stakeholders consulted looked to UN Women to convene a platform to facilitate learning and alliance building across their joint priorities.

The evaluation noted that in Phase I, the Syria Programme provided capacity-building support to the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy. Since scaling back of support to this initiative, there has been limited opportunities for coordination/networking mechanisms across CSO actors to advocate for joint positions, and the lack of effective collaboration undermines the collective strength of civil society. Stakeholders recognized the importance of addressing this coordination deficit and the need to improve opportunities for CSOs to work together on key issues of concern. They have also called for additional civil society workshops. The evaluation noted the growing demand for UN Women to establish a more structured and consistent forum for WAB members to brief civil society on its work. Building stronger connections between civil society and the political process streams is also a key request from donors.

In August 2022, UN Women revised its Civil Society Strategy,[62] recognizing the need to expand UN Women's focus to broaden issue areas beyond participation in peacebuilding and political participation to include a greater focus on women's role in prevention, protection, relief and recovery efforts. UN Women identified key entry points for greater women's participation regarding climate justice, local mediation, justice and accountability, reintegration as well as humanitarian leadership. The new strategy advised greater focus to advance the work of civil society in addressing sexual violence as a tactic of war and to elevate these issues as an essential agenda item of conflict transition. The strategy also identified potential for greater linkages between the research strand and Track I engagements and expansion of capacity strengthening to support CSO advocacy efforts. The new strategy highlighted the potential evolving role of women's civil society in relation to recovery efforts which should be explored through consultation with civil society partners to ensure responses are locally owned and women led and to better understand how UN Women can support women-led organizations to continue to engage in a climate of shrinking civil space and backlash.

The evaluation noted that anti-Syrian sentiment in Lebanon and Turkey is impacting the space for Syrian women's civil society. Inside Syria, challenging legal frameworks are restricting CSO registration, engagement with foreign entities and banking restrictions are limiting the flow of funds to women-led organizations that are largely unregistered and informal.[63] Economic instability and funding are major hindering factors for CSOs. Many CSOs indicated they would like to access UN Women funding directly and not via an implementing partner, but many CSOs remain unregistered and the conflict context and lack of official presence inside Syria continues to make direct funding of CSOs inside Syria prohibitive. On an individual level, economic instability is a major barrier to the progression of women. The evaluation noted that the Syria Programme is developing women's economic empowerment programming in northwest Syria as part of the Humanitarian pillar, but there is currently a lack of strategic linkage with this work and the programme's overall civil society engagement work.

The evaluation noted UN Women's CSO partners have a strong commitment to the localization agenda; however, the partners indicated the programme is working in areas that already have an international presence and the women targeted are often the same women or representatives from the same women's organizations consulted or engaged by other international stakeholders. The programme can build on its commitment to localization by broadening the selection of CSO women beyond the existing leadership and by exploring the opportunities to work directly with women at the grassroots level.

[62] UN Women Syria Programme (2022) Civil Society Support Pillar: Strategy 2023-26

[63] UN Women Syria Programme (2022) Civil Society Support Pillar: Strategy 2023-26

Backlash to women's participation is resulting in civil society organizations adopting low-visibility strategies. In this climate, the civil society beneficiaries interviewed recognized the importance of involving men and boys in the promotion of gender equality and women's rights in Syria. The programme has supported some initiatives that aimed to engage men and boys as allies, partners and agents of change in challenging patriarchal norms and structures that perpetuate discrimination and violence against women. For example, some CSOs have conducted workshops, dialogues and campaigns with men on topics such as gender roles, gender-based violence, CEDAW, etc. These initiatives aimed to raise awareness, change attitudes and foster positive masculinities among men. However, the involvement of men and boys remains limited and faces many challenges. Some of these challenges include lack of a clear strategy and framework to engage with men and boys; limited measurement and reporting on the impact of interventions on men and boys; and the need for more coordination and collaboration among civil society actors. Therefore, there is a need for more support and guidance from UN Women and other stakeholders to enhance and ensure the involvement of men and boys as allies.

Testing the theory of change assumptions:

The evaluative evidence shows that the programme's intervention logic that providing financial and technical resources to civil society will advance gender equality and women's rights was valid and generated initial results. The assumption that the strengthened technical capacity and resources will translate to changes in women's decision-making power missed the social relational approach and could be strengthen by focusing on engagement with male allies and the wider community.

FINDING 6: UN Women is respected by UN entities and international actors as the expert voice on gender equality and women's empowerment in Syria, and the programme team has made efforts to strengthen coordination between international partners. The Syria Programme's efforts and its ability to coordinate a gender-responsive response to the 2023 earthquake were recognized as a good example of UN Women's coordination mandate. However, there is room for improvement by establishing a more formal "whole of Syria" women, peace and security coordination mechanism. There is also a scope to broaden the mandate beyond women, peace and security coordination to include gender mainstreaming and women's access to livelihoods.

The evaluation noted six coordination streams for the Syria Programme:[64]

1) The Donor Steering Committee includes representatives of the development partners funding the programme.[65] It takes place biannually. The Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria is invited to provide a political update and to discuss strategies on the WAB in particular.

2) Coordination with Syrian civil society partners to support substantive coordination between UN Women's civil society partners, including across geographies.

3) INGO–UN coordination meetings to increase understanding of each organization's comparative advantage and to strengthen coordination on gender equality and women's rights.

4) Research round tables to share the outcomes of existing and upcoming research and knowledge products with relevant stakeholders.

5) EU Heads of Mission briefings, co-hosted by the EU Delegation in Beirut and UN Women to facilitate information-sharing on the gender equality and women's rights aspects of the Syria Constitutional Committee process.

6) Humanitarian coordination and the Brussels Conference provides an opportunity to link humanitarian and women, peace and security themes. UN Women generally facilitates a meeting between the WAB and the EU High-Representative for Foreign Affairs.

On the humanitarian coordination front, UN Women is a member of the Humanitarian Liaison Group; Chair of the Gender Working Group in the cross-border operation following the 2023 earthquake; and participates in the Regional Durable Solutions Working Group meetings under the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan coordination structure and is part of the regional communications focal point network under the plan.

The INGO–UN coordination meetings engaged organizations which included both feminist INGOs, organizations involved in Track II negotiations and a range of UN agencies (a full list of partners engaged in coordination meetings is outlined in Annex 11). The evaluation found that INGO–UN coordination events were valued as a source of information-sharing and that international stakeholders appreciated the programme team's technical expertise on women, peace and security and gendered analysis on Syria. The coordination structure was welcomed by the participating agencies as many of the organizations are not part of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee/humanitarian coordination structures. The number of organizations engaged in coordination meetings has increased steadily to 36, which included 23 new organizations that have joined since the start of 2022.

During Phase II, a total of six INGO–UN coordination meetings were held covering various themes related to gender equality dimensions of the Syrian conflict (see Figure 12). Meetings were also used to share programme activities, research and calls for proposals. However, the stakeholders consulted asserted that there had been minimal communication between meetings and that they would value more regular programme briefings. The stakeholders consulted also called for increased engagement of Syrian civil society partners in these coordination initiatives.

Figure 10: INGO-UN coordination meeting themes during Phase II

Capacity development focus	No. of participants	Location
Youth, peace and security, and gender in the context of Syria	36	virtual
Climate, women, peace and security in the context of Syria	35	virtual
The status of gender equality and women's rights in Syria: mapping the terrain	24	virtual
Gender and disability	20	virtual
First thematic meeting on justice	26	virtual
First coordination meeting	22	Virtual

Source: *compiled by the evaluation team*

[64] The Syria Programme's strategic approach to coordination is outlined in a concept note and implementation plan developed in November 2022 - Concept Note Coordination Concept, 29/12/2022

[65] Finland, Norway and the Netherlands. The EU takes part as an observer, as the EU-funded programme is managed separately.

The evaluation noted positive feedback from donors regarding various coordination initiatives undertaken by the Syria Programme. They appreciated these coordination efforts as they contributed to increasing their knowledge and coordination on key gender equality issues in Syria, discussing strategies on the WAB and considering issues related to civil society participation.[66] According to the donors, the civil society briefings co-hosted by the EU Delegation in Beirut and UN Women supported information-sharing and discussion on the gender equality and women's rights aspects of the constitutional process.

In early 2023, UN Women's coordination efforts extended into the humanitarian response to the Syria crisis as it became the newest member of the Humanitarian Liaison Group and was appointed Chair of the Gender Working Group in the cross-border operation. UN Women's humanitarian efforts are structured around four pillars: gender analysis to inform a more gender-responsive operation; strengthening women's leadership through the Women's Advisory Group for the Humanitarian Liaison Group and women-led organizations; coordination through chairing the Gender Working Group to mainstream gender; and strengthening women's access to livelihoods and protection (LEAP). For more details, refer to the case study in Annex 13. UN Women's humanitarian efforts and ability to inform a gender-responsive humanitarian response to the earthquake were highlighted as a key achievement by stakeholders. Chairing of the Humanitarian Working Group has provided a good practice example of how women, peace and security coordination work could be structured.

The stakeholders consulted appreciated the contribution made by the Syria Programme to highlight women's participation in the political process at the EU-led Brussels VI and VII Conferences, such as by hosting a side event with the Government of Finland and the EU on women's leadership during the Brussels VI and VII Conferences on Supporting the Future of Syria in May 2022 and June 2023 respectively.

The evaluation noted that the UN's International Impartial and Independent Mechanism, Syria[67] requested that UN Women review and contribute to its Gender Strategy to support investigations – recognition of UN Women's coordination role on gender equality and women's empowerment in the country.

Overall, stakeholders appreciated the contribution made by UN Women in setting the agenda and confirmed that UN Women is respected by international actors for its gender coordination role and technical expertise. However, there is a desire for UN Women to take a greater leadership role in supporting gender mainstreaming in Syria to ensure substantive coordination and synergies across actors and to avoid duplication. The evaluation noted that the dispersion of UN actors and stakeholders across various locations (Amman, Beirut, Damascus, Gaziantep and Geneva) and UN Women's lack of UNCT membership remain a challenge to coordination.

While progress has been made in gaining attention for key coordination issues, and there is willingness and goodwill for strengthening coordination work, there is room for improvement in formalizing coordination arrangements, such as by establishing more formal networks to convene gender focal points and advisers across different players, and through continued efforts to explore the possibility of establishing a formal "whole of Syria" women, peace and security coordination mechanism. There is also scope to broaden the coordination mandate beyond women, peace and security to cover gender mainstreaming and women's access to livelihoods beyond the cross-border operation.

Testing the theory of change assumptions:

Evidence shows that the programme's intervention logic that coordination of international stakeholders working on the political participation of women in Syria will improve coordination of programming and policy interventions was valid and generated initial results. The assumption that this strengthened coordination would translate into gender-sensitive programming and policy has proven results in the Humanitarian response.

[66] UN Women facilitated five briefings by Syrian civil society to Heads of the EU Mission between June 2020 and July 2022.

[67] https://iiim.un.org/

FINDING 7: The Syria programme's contribution to generating evidence to increase knowledge and analysis on gender equality and women's empowerment in Syria was recognized and appreciated by stakeholders but the programme did not have a clear knowledge and learning strategy, including a dissemination and knowledge measurement plan. More work was needed to identify evidence gaps collectively with other stakeholders through a participatory approach. The programmme also needed a well-developed communication strategy and action plan.

Phase II witnessed the introduction of a specific focus on generating evidence and evidence dissemination. The evaluation took note of the programme's evolved approach towards evidence building from initial ad hoc research projects to an approach that involved better engagement with Syrian stakeholders as research partners. The aim of the evolved approach has been to increase understanding of the gender dimension in the Syria context, and to leverage positions in support of the women's movement and build trust with key actors working on women's engagement in the peace process.

Between 2020 and 2023, the UN Women Syria Programme published seven knowledge products to address the limited availability of accessible knowledge and analysis on the gender dynamics of the Syrian conflict and political process (see Figure 13). The knowledge products included gender analysis of the impact of the 2023 earthquake[68] and a study on women's role in local mediation in Syria.[69] In addition, the team published over 170 social media posts and developed a programme webpage.[70] The programme has also committed significant resources to developing research methodology to conduct a quantitative and qualitative survey of over 1,000 individuals for the forthcoming study on the status of gender equality and women's rights of Syrian women. This study, due for publication in early 2024, will represent the programme's first "whole of Syria" women, peace and security analysis. The Syria Programme has also embarked on developing a gender analysis of Al-Hol in northeast Syria, where women and children with alleged ISIS affiliations are held.

Figure 11: Programme knowledge products by type

Types of knowledge product	Syria	Regional
Policy briefs/papers	1	0
Research reports	2	4
Social media posts	170	

Source: *compiled by the evaluation team*

The programme commissioned research on the Syrian constitution and Syria's electoral system following gender analysis of the electoral framework, which found that critical data on women's participation in elections in Syria remains largely unavailable, creating a major barrier to achieving progress in this area. The evaluation noted that due to political sensitivities, these two documents were not published externally. Risks to civil society actors meant that external communications on the knowledge products produced have been minimal.

The evaluation applied the Guskey+ analytical model[71] to assess the effectiveness of knowledge management within the Syria Programme (see Figure 12 for a summary of the evaluation assessment). The evaluation noted that the Syria Programme used different dissemination pathways: publishing research reports, policy papers, press releases, coordination meetings; and presentations/briefings at key meetings, conferences and events.

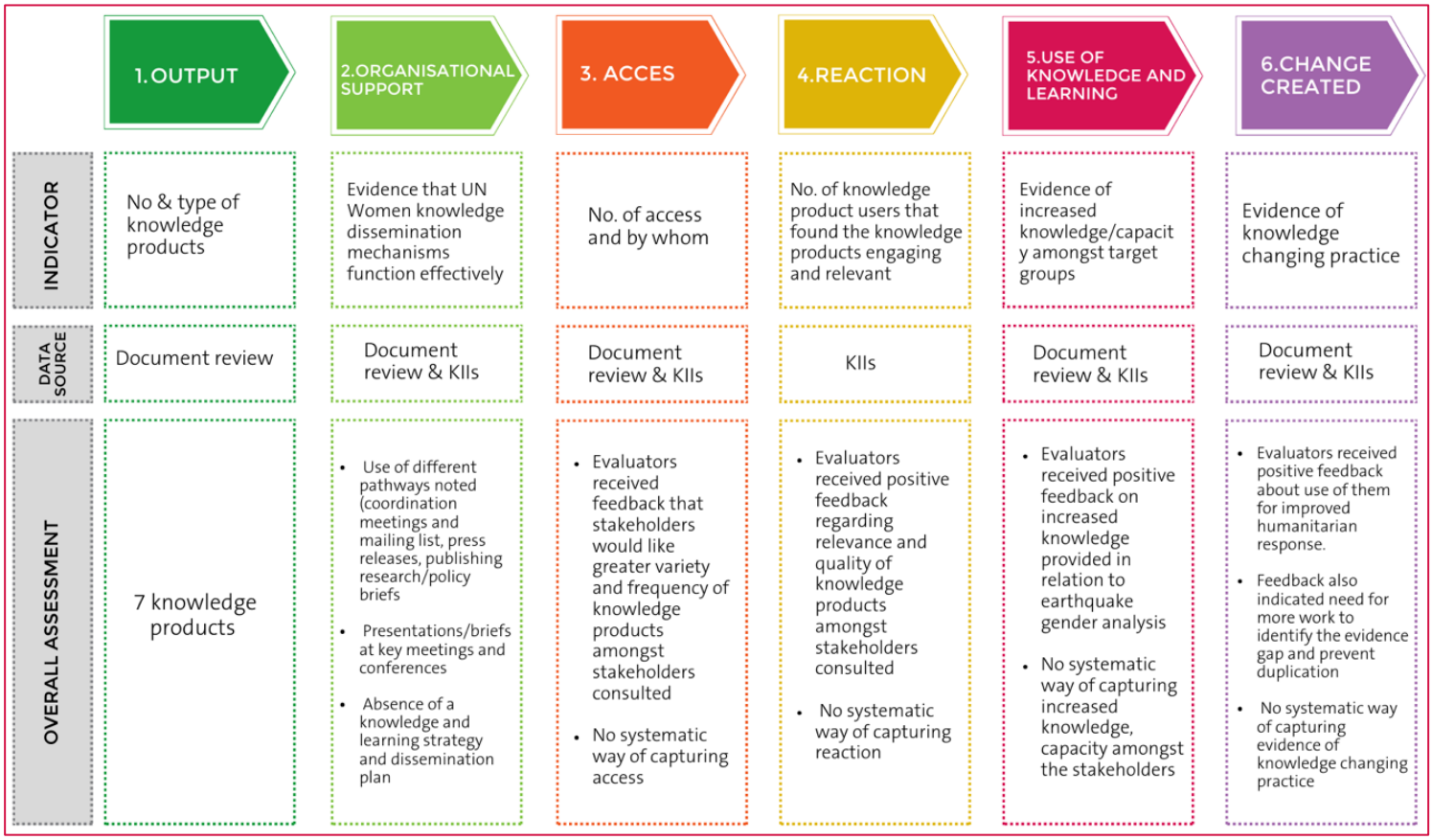
[68] https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/search results?search_api_fulltext=earthquake

[69] 2022 Parry, J, UN Women, Women's participation in local mediation: lessons from Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen - https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/06/womens-participation-in-local-mediation-lessons-from-iraq-libya-syria-and-yemen

[70] Increased collaboration between Syrian women within and across the five major Syrian host/home geographies of Lebanon, Turkey, northwest and central/southern Syria which was also challenging due to safety and security concerns.

[71] The Guskey model for professional development evaluation builds on the New World Kirkpatrick Model 8 and is broad enough to be applied to any type of engagement and learning activity. Guskey outlines an additional organizational component to the New World Kirkpatrick model, which is pertinent to this evaluation. See Guskey et al. (2002) Gauge impact with 5 levels of data. Available at: https://tguskey.com/wp-content/uploads/Professional-Learning-1-Gauge-Impact-with-Five-Levels-of-Data.pdf

Figure 12: Assessment of the effectiveness of knowledge management in the Syria Programme: Guskey+ framework



Source: prepared by the evaluation team

The evaluation noted positive feedback from stakeholders who appreciated the knowledge products and briefings in terms of relevance and quality. Stakeholders appreciated the contribution made by the Syria Programme to generating evidence and in setting the agenda, and felt it had contributed to increased stakeholder knowledge and analysis on gender equality and women's empowerment in Syria. However, the stakeholders also noted that more work could be done to identify evidence needs gaps collectively through a participatory approach. The stakeholders noted that they could collectively contribute to the identification of knowledge and evidence themes and, at the same time, proactively prevent duplication of research across international stakeholders in Syria. Therefore, there is potential to build a more systematic approach to filling gaps in the evidence base by involving stakeholders to develop the evidence agenda and to inform decisions about new research topics and where UN Women could invest its resources more strategically.

The evaluation found that the programme did not have a clear knowledge and learning strategy, or dissemination plan. In some cases, stakeholders were not aware of the evidence and knowledge products produced and the evaluation noted that knowledge-sharing was largely undertaken informally on the basis of information needs. The evaluation also noted the absence of human resource capacity within the programme team to support such functions.

Assessments of the impact of knowledge products on practice was not carried out systematically; therefore, it was difficult for the evaluation to assess the extent to which knowledge products reached their intended users. The programme has a working mailing list but further work could be undertaken to map target audience and dissemination pathways to reach desired groups. The monitoring and learning systems also need to be further developed to measure the uptake, use and impact of knowledge products on intended users. Methods for assessing the impact of the dissemination pathways such as Bean counting,[72] recording

[72] https://fr.ircwash.org/sites/default/files/Saywell-2000-Dissemination.pdfhttps://fr.ircwash.org/sites/default/files/Saywell-2000-Dissemination.pdf

website hits, citation analysis, documentation of target audience changes, follow-up telephone calls to document feedback, and use and change stories are highly recommended.

The evaluation noted that the programme's communications work needed more attention and technical support. Until early 2023, communication work was carried out in a rather ad hoc manner, and with a risk averse approach. Most of the external stakeholders consulted valued informal programme updates and saw UN Women as knowledgeable in providing gender analysis on the changing circumstances inside Syria, but they indicated that information-sharing could be formalized through more regular updates. According to these stakeholders, the programme needed to provide regular bulletins/newsletters covering lessons learned or good practices, in addition to the research and policy papers it was generating.

Internal stakeholders were of the view that the programme needed to strengthen its donor visibility, media coverage across mainstream media platforms and develop impact stories of women and youth empowerment.

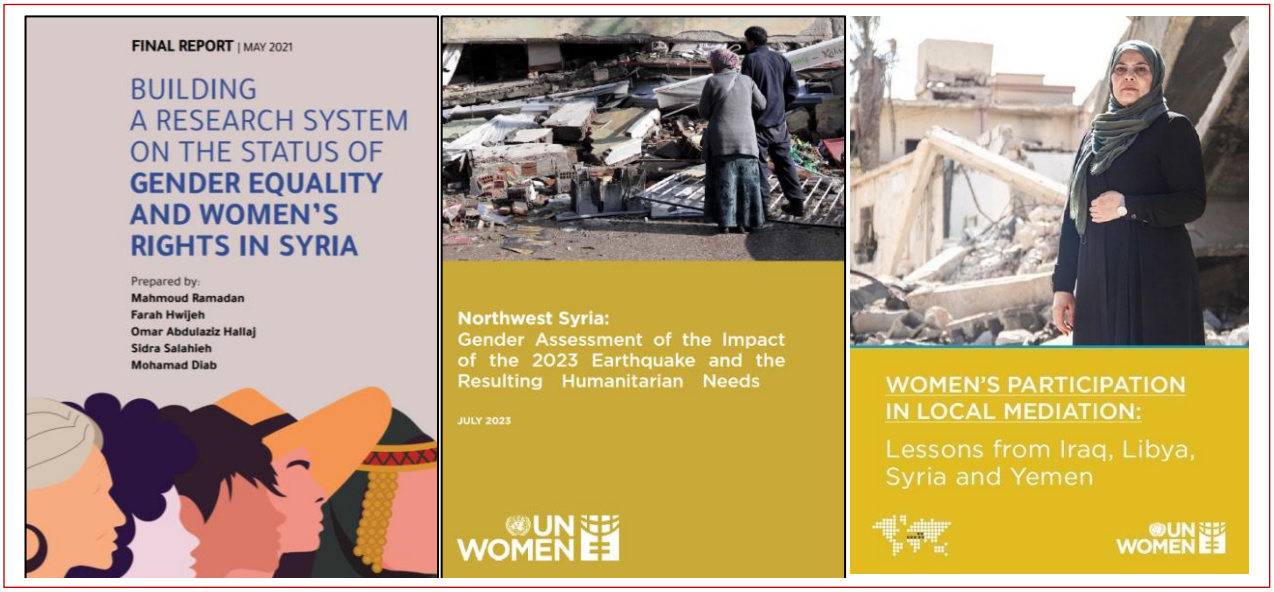
The evaluation acknowledges the political sensitivities around the programme interventions and the inherent limitations of publicizing and disseminating its work and successes, but the programmme needed to have a thought through, well developed, conflict-sensitive communication strategy and action plan. The evaluation noted that the programme had started to receive systematic technical advice and oversight from the recently expanded regional communications team and a dedicated strategy and communications plan was under development.

As per corporate guidelines, the programme is likely to benefit from allocating closer to 5 per cent of its total budget to communications work.

Testing the theory of change assumptions:

Evidence shows that the programme's intervention logic that the Syria Programme's research produced evidence-based knowledge products to increase understanding and informed actions on gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of Syria was valid, but that it was not possible to fully assess the impact generated due to limited monitoring.

Figure 13: Research and knowledge products



3.3 EFFICIENCY

Evaluation Question 2 and 3: Has the Syria Programme been efficient in obtaining the most from its limited resources? To what extent do the programme management structure and operating arrangements support UN Women's efficient collaboration and partnership with UN entities, international partners and CSOs in Syria?

FINDING 8: The Syria Programme has been successful in increasing and diversifying funding across new donors, and secured core funding for the first time for a gender-responsive earthquake response in 2023. It has maintained a fruitful strategic partnership with the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, but a wider UN–INGO partnership requires a strategy and more formal approach. The programme also has the potential to strengthen its results monitoring systems and tools.

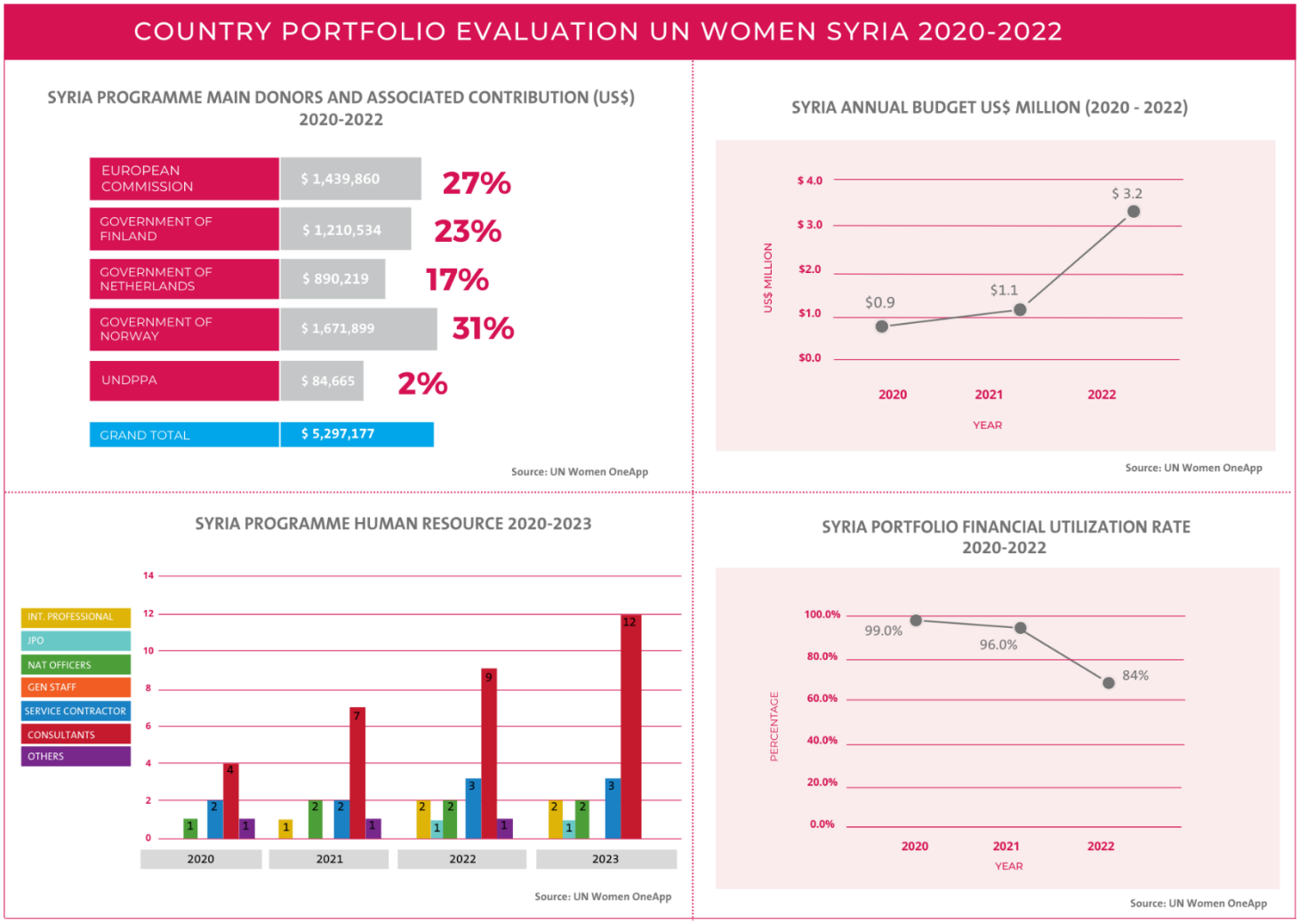
The Syria Programme operates on non-core funding. The total budget of the programme was US$ 5,297,177 during Phase II funded by the following key donors: European Union, Government of Finland, Government of the Netherlands, Government of Norway and the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. In response to the February 2023 earthquake, the Syria Programme received additional core funding support of US$ 500,000 for the first time to lead a gender-responsive earthquake response.

Since 2020, the programme has successfully mobilized funding and had a positive annual budget growth trajectory. Figure 14 outlines the funding received for Phase II of the women, peace and security programme, as well as for the humanitarian portfolio. The evaluation noted that the programme has acquired donor support from Finland and Italy for Phase III and discussions have begun with the European Commission, the Netherlands, UK, US and Norway on potential funding opportunities. The evaluation team noted the positive feedback from the donors and the open and constructive relationship they had with the programme team.

Programme expenditure was high in 2020 (99 per cent) and in 2021 (96 per cent). Expenditure for 2022 was 84 per cent. The evaluation team could not access up-to-date data for 2023 as the data from Quantum was not available at the time of audit.

The evaluation noted that from 2020 to 2023, the largest area of budget allocation was to support the WAB Output 1.1 and Output 1.2: (US$ 1,367,588); followed by support to civil society Output1. 3 (US$ 927,930). A total of US$ 484,553 was spent on coordination (Output 1.4) and knowledge management (Output 1.5).

Figure 14: Syria Programme – highlights of the portfolio analysis[73]



At the end of 2019, the Syria Programme moved to the UN Women Arab States Regional Office from the Humanitarian Action and Crisis Response Office in Geneva. Since moving to the Arab States Regional Office, the programme workforce has grown from four to eight full-time personnel and its operational set-up is established in the Regional Office. The programme onboarded more personnel in 2021 and 2022 to consolidate its work. New personnel included a P4 Programme Manager (July 2021), NOB Programme Analyst (September 2021), P2 Gender Analyst seconded to the Office of the Special Envoy (July 2021), and a Junior Professional Officer funded by Finland.

The programme is overseen by the Women, Peace and Security-Humanitarian Action Regional Adviser (P5) [74] based in the Regional Office. The programme's day-to-day management is led by a P4 Programme Manager based in Beirut. The main programme team is also located in Beirut. This team includes a CSO Manager (NOB) (Beirut based), P3 FTA WPS Specialist (Beirut based). The team included a dedicated monitoring and reporting personnel – a Junior Professional Officer funded by Finland – from 2021 until June 2023. In 2023, a humanitarian programme team was established in Gaziantep to strengthen the programme's work in the cross-border operation. At the time of the evaluation, a Gender in Humanitarian Action Coordination

[73] The programme received core funding of US$ 500,00 to implement a gender-responsive earthquake response. This is not reflected in the portfolio analysis as the 2023 data from Quantum is not yet available.
[74] Currently the Syria Programme Manager is the acting WPS-HA Regional Adviser.

Specialist (NOC) was coordinating implementation of UN Women's humanitarian efforts in northwest Syria and supporting international stakeholders working on humanitarian response to improve gender analysis and coordination. To ensure operational efficiency and coordination, UN Women has a Programme Support team based in the Regional Office in Cairo, including a Regional Operations Specialist (NOB), a Programme Associate (NOA) and a Programme Assistant (SB1), funded through a cost-shared arrangement with the broader Regional Women, Peace and Security-Humanitarian Action team. Additionally, a Gender Analyst (P2), who is required to be an Arabic speaker, is embedded in the Office of Special Envoy for Syria in Geneva. The team also benefitted from an additional 12 consultants who act as specialist advisers, facilitators and interpreters on various interventions.

The programme team's technical knowledge and expertise emerged as a strength from interviews with stakeholders. Donors, UN entities and INGOs appreciated programme personnel's technical inputs and knowledge regarding the situation of women in Syria. CSO representatives also valued the team's technical expertise on gender equality.

However, the evaluation noted that the Syria Programme Manager has had a dual role since the third quarter of 2021, holding the acting position of the vacant Women, Peace and Security-Humanitarian Action Regional Adviser, which was highlighted as impacting management capacity of the Syria Programme. The personnel survey conducted by the evaluation team highlighted that 75 per cent (3 of 4 respondents) felt that the level of stress they experience in their job was unacceptable. The evaluation also noted that, until recently, communications and knowledge management functions were missing. Since 2023, the programme had started to receive systematic technical advice and oversight from the recently expanded regional communications team.

Based on stakeholder consultation and desk analysis, the evaluation noted that UN Women had managed its financial/administrative functions, including donor reporting with no major bottlenecks. The evaluation team noted effective communication and relationships with donors.

Regarding the current set-up of the programme, the regional leadership indicated that while the current set-up has been working well, providing an opportunity for the programme team to liaise with the Syrian diaspora and donors based out of Beirut, in the long term, the regional leadership would ideally like to locate all technical personnel in Cairo, at the Regional Office, to facilitate closer interaction with regional teams, including other thematic experts and the regional leadership. The evaluation noted that a few other UN agencies, including OHCHR and UNESCO, have been operating with a similar structure outside Syria from Beirut.

Overall, the evaluation found that teams had established good relationships and funding modalities with programme implementing partners. However, the implementing partners indicated that the reporting and supporting documentation process is heavy and time consuming. Sometimes delays in processing requests from implementing partners were reported as resulting in delays in the transfer of funds to the programme partners. This resulted in some programme partners reportedly using their own funds while waiting for funds from the Syria Programme.

Another issue raised was the frequent no-cost and cost-extensions that covered short periods of work. While this was appreciated by implementing partners for providing flexibility, it increased programme operational costs in terms of time required by programme personnel to support such extensions.

Further, an internal audit of UN Women's Regional Office for the Arab States conducted in 2022[75] reflected critical views over the Syria Programme signing partner agreements with a US-based programme partner that led to two stages of sub-grant to other CSOs/NGOs.[76] The audit noted that pass-through and subgrants may increase the management costs of partner agreements, resulting in operational inefficiencies and reduction in the resources available for the substantive work. The audit recommended that the design of partner agreements should consistently embed value for money principles. In line with the audit observation, the programme has moved away from the use of US/Europe-based partners to partners based in Lebanon and Turkey. However, the conflict context and lack of official presence inside Syria continues to make direct funding of CSOs inside Syria prohibitive.

Regarding risk management, the programme prepared an annual risk register and risk management framework, covering threats to human rights defenders, elitism/lack of representation, lack of access to communities inside Syria, risks of increasing tensions, risks associated with the stalling of the political process, lack of compliance of partners, and financial insecurities and uncertainties, as well as health risks associated with future pandemics. The risk register was

[75] Audit Report No. IEAS/IAS/2022/005, 14 November 2022: UN Women Regional Office for the Arab States

[76] The Regional Office signed a partner agreement in 2019 with a programme partner based in the United States of America to implement activities in Syria. One of the implementation modalities in the partner agreement was to provide grants to another CSO located in Lebanon, which in turn went on to subgrant 10 local CSOs through an incubation process. At the time it was not possible to directly sign a partner agreement with the CSO in Lebanon, as the CSO lacked the appropriate financial absorption capacity to manage funds

monitored and updated annually but could have been strengthened by more regular quarterly reviews and by linking it more closely to context monitoring.

Regarding monitoring and evaluation, the programme had a dedicated monitoring and reporting personnel from 2021 until June 2023. The programme allocated about 1 per cent of the budget to evaluation (US$ 48,000). The programme had a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework and performance management framework. The monitoring of data against the results framework took place bi-annually with a review of progress, challenges and contribution analysis. An evaluability assessment was conducted by the evaluation team at the inception stage of the evaluation that included a review of programme indicators according to SMART and results-based management principles, and a review of the availability and quality of relevant data and documentation. The results matrix outcomes, outputs and indicators scored strongly with two output indicators identified as weak. The full evaluability assessment is available in Annex 4.

The evaluation noted that the programmme took on board and implemented recommendations from the Mid- Term Phase I Evaluation conducted in 2019. It also demonstrated some good practice examples of monitoring WAB outcomes such as through high-level document tracking.[77] There were some incidents of delays in receiving implementing partner narrative reporting and that the conflict context and limited access to the field was hindering data verification and validation. Some implementing partners were utilizing pre and post-training surveys to assess training outcomes but data was not consistently captured by all partners. Further, the evidence of increased knowledge and capacity was largely anecdotal and not systematically followed up to track the impact of interventions beyond pre and post-satisfaction surveys and could be further strengthened. More attention also needs to be given to capturing and measuring more qualitative transformative change.

The evaluation noted that in Phase II of the Syria Programme, UN Women continued to strengthen its partnership with the Office of Special Envoy for Syria, which focuses on management of the Syrian WAB by providing financial, technical and logistical support for the board members. A New Special Envoy, Mr Geir O. Pedersen, was appointed in 2019 and Najat Rochdi became Deputy Special Envoy in 2022. In addition, UN Women seconds a P2 Gender Analyst to the Office of Special Envoy for Syria to support its gender team, which is headed by a P4 Gender Adviser. The evaluation team noted overall constructive feedback on the Syria Programme's partnership with the Office of Special Envoy for Syria in strengthening Syrian women's voice and their participation in the political process.

The key strategic partner for this project is Syrian women's civil society, including Syrian groups and networks that have a track record of working on women's rights and protection. During Phase II of the programme, UN Women established partnerships with eight CSOs and had six implementing partners. Four of the current implementing partners are located in Lebanon and two in Turkey. The implementing partners are operating interventions inside and outside Syria, supporting capacity strengthening of 62 women-led organizations across the three zones of control. All implementing partners surveyed (100 per cent, 5/5) rated UN Women's management of the partnership as effective or highly effective (see Annex 6).

The evaluation noted that UN Women had developed strong partnerships with some UN entities and INGOs, including OHCHR, OCHA, CARE International and Search for Common Ground. However, the evaluation noted that further ability to take advantage of the goodwill and willingness from international stakeholders to coordinate and partner with UN Women in the context of Syria requires formal membership in the UNCT in Damascus and other key coordination mechanisms.

The stakeholder consultation indicated that awareness of UN Women's Syria Programme varied across stakeholders and increased communications were required both internally and externally. While stakeholders appreciated the sensitive political context, most indicated that the programme could still communicate more about its work, lessons learned and results in a conflict-sensitive manner (described in more detail under Finding 9). The evaluation noted that UNCT partnerships are impacted by UN Women's lack of formal presence in Syria, described in more detail under Finding 5.

[77] The programme team produced a tracking document to log key high-level meetings referencing the WAB. This included tracking inputs from the Constitutional Committee, Security Council and Astana meetings.

FINDING 9: The current modality of operating outside Syria presents some challenges, but it has helped to maintain the "whole of Syria" approach and neutrality of the programme. However, with the evolving context, UN Women's formal partnership and engagement with the Syria UNCT needs to be defined and communicated.

Management of the Syria Programme was shifted from the UN Women Humanitarian Action and Crisis Response Office in Geneva to the Regional Office in 2019 to expand its work beyond the high-level discussions led by the UN Special Envoy for Syria based in Geneva and to increase its work at the community level. Subsequently, at the donors' request, the programme was moved to Lebanon to be closer to Syria.

The evaluative evidence indicated that the geographically dispersed nature of the team has supported engagement with key strategic partners, such as with the Office of Special Envoy for Syria, INGOs, UN partners and donors. The placement of the gender analyst in Geneva has allowed for close collaboration and synergy between UN Women and the Office of Special Envoy for Syria, contributing to the effective integration of gender perspectives in the political process. At the same time, location of the core programme team in Beirut has facilitated access to knowledge exchange across key international actors supporting the Syria response, particularly key member states and donors. Placement of the programme support team at the Regional Office in Cairo has facilitated operational efficiency.

UN Women does not have an office inside Syria; therefore, most of the work carried out under the Syria Programme occurs outside Syria and/or inside Syria through programme partners. Despite some initial engagement with the Government of Syria in the early stages of the programme, over the last decade no UN Women personnel have received Syrian visas, and the programme has received a number of formal diplomatic complaints from the Government of Syria.[78]

The evaluation noted that UN Women faces challenges related to perception with the Government of Syria, which views UN Women as sympathetic to the opposition. UN Women was also restricted in the expansion of its role in the cross-border operation; its engagement on gender equality and women's empowerment issues with de facto authorities; and human rights advocacy due to concern that this was likely to jeopardize potential future relations with the Syrian government. According to the stakeholders consulted, shifting the programme to the Regional Office and UN Women's increased outreach efforts in Government of Syria controlled areas, has nominally improved the situation, with the Syrian government's greater acceptance of the work undertaken by the WAB and more openness to women living in Government of Syria controlled areas to engage with UN Women.

The evaluation noted that a number of international stakeholders – 54 per cent (13 of 24) – felt UN Women should have a stronger presence inside Syria and within the Syria UNCT, highlighting that UN Women's current position remains unclear which has inadvertently impacted the perception of its neutrality. Stakeholders emphasized the operational challenge of UN Women working outside of Syria while implementing projects/programmes for Syrian women and girls. Further, in the context of an increasing normalization of the current Syrian government, lack of engagement risks sustainability. In contrast, 25 per cent of stakeholders (6 of 24) felt UN Women should remain outside Syria and recognized the flexibility afforded by operating outside the country as the programme could then continue to have a "whole of Syria" approach. Stakeholders are aware of the difficult context and operational challenges of operating inside Syria, but the evaluation noted that most UN entities have a presence inside Syria and that many entities that left during the conflict have now re-established a presence in the country.

An internal audit of the UN Women Arab States Regional Office conducted by the UN Women Independent Audit Service in 2022 also highlighted the pressing need for a strategic decision on whether and how to establish a presence in Syria. [79]

According to the stakeholders consulted, personnel's inability to travel to Syria has restricted UN Women's access to women in Government of Syria-controlled areas and the organization's credibility with local partners. It has also impeded UN Women's full participation in the UNCT and its ability to create coordination synergies to strengthen gender equality and women's empowerment in Syria. It has also restricted in-person monitoring of programme activities.

[78] UN Women, Syria Policy Note and Options Paper- internal document

[79] Audit Report No. IEAS/IAS/2022/005, 14 November 2022: UN Women Regional Office for the Arab States

In the absence of UN Women's presence in Damascus, many traditional areas of its mandate, including women's political participation, capacity-building for women-led CSOs, and even women, peace and security efforts inside Syria, have been taken over by other UN entities. This poses a number of strategic risks not only in Syria but also in the region, affecting UN Women's credibility in key areas of its comparative advantage.

The evaluation noted that during 2022, UN Women began discussions with the UN Resident Coordinator's Office in Damascus on UN Women's participation in inter-agency coordination structures. Noting that entering into Syria presents a set of opportunities and at the same time warrants some political and resource considerations, the programme and regional management conducted a SWOT analysis of the current state of the Syria Programme and the advantages and disadvantages of UNCT membership and country engagement (see Annex 14). Based on the stakeholder consultation and the SWOT analysis prepared in the context of this evaluation, the evaluation team notes there is an opportunity to consolidate UN Women's corporate strategy on Syria engagement and reignite conversations about its membership of the UNCT. In addition, the regional leadership was also considering the possibility of placing a gender equality technical expert in Damascus in the Resident Coordinator's Office. The evaluation noted that the programme could benefit from having distinct operations, separating out UN Women's existing Women, Peace and Security Beirut operations from any new Damascus hub which would have a wider gender equality and women's empowerment mandate and allow for the continuation of a "whole of Syria" approach.

3.4 GENDER EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS BASED APPROACH

Evaluation Question 5: To what extent were the programme interventions gender transformative and adhering to the principle of leave no one behind?

FINDING 10: The programme has been gender-transformative in terms of influencing the UN's existing institutional mechanism for peace mediation through the Women's Advisory Board. It is making progress in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment at individual and community levels by holding space for women for political participation and leadership roles. However, more systematic work is needed to achieve social norms change with regard to women's role and political participation.

The Gender at Work Framework allows for an evaluation of the holistic nature of a gender equality and women's empowerment portfolio, assessing impact and interrelationship between gender equality, organizational change and institutions, and the power dynamics within communities. When the Syria Programme was viewed across the Framework's four quadrants (see Figure 15), it was evident that the programme targeted each of the four quadrants, and targeted both formal and informal structures through a variety of interventions to a greater and lesser extent.

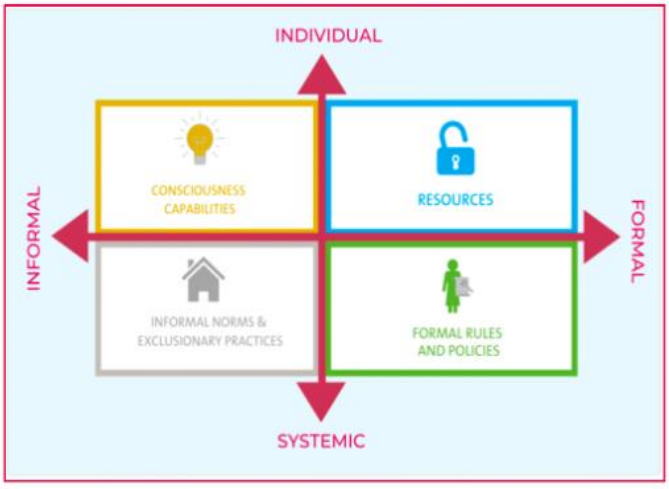
Regarding the formal quadrants, it is clear that the programme has been gender-transformative in terms of influencing the UN's existing mechanism for peace mediation through the WAB. Normative frameworks to secure women's participation in the peace process were strengthened through the WAB with further potential to influence the development of a gender-responsive Constitution. The programme also worked to strengthen evidence on gender equality and women's empowerment and the status of women in Syria. UN Women's research and consultations showed that gender equality and women's empowerment is severely challenged by all authorities in Syria and in all zones of control. Tangible results in legislative and policy adherence to women's political participation, gender equality and women's empowerment at a country level is minimal due to the challenges of direct engagement with de facto governing authorities and the Government of Syria.

The programme made gains in facilitating access to technical support and financial resources for women-led organizations, strengthening the individual capacity of women to move into leadership positions.

The programme also opened up possibilities for expanding initiatives to include livelihoods projects and economic empowerment opportunities for women in the context of the humanitarian response to the earthquake in February 2023. Pilot interventions on livelihoods offered in response to the earthquake and context-sensitive gender equality work could provide models for gender-responsive humanitarian–development nexus by demonstrating practices of women playing a role in labour markets, supporting humanitarian responses and as mediators. However, risks of backlash remain high, and the concrete impact of the programme was not fully evident.

In the informal quadrants, the programme made progress in responding to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment by raising awareness and increasing acceptance and space for women to take on leadership roles in informal spaces. The evaluative evidence showed that 100 per cent of implementing partners felt the lives of women and girls around them had been improved by the work of the Syria Programme. However, there was limited engagement of women with disabilities and WAB representation from less privileged communities, including from rural and hard to reach areas.

Figure 15: Gender at Work Framework



All stakeholders interviewed as part of the evaluation process indicated that work remains to be done to change prevailing attitudes and perceptions concerning women's political participation, in particular in engaging men. The Syria Programme made efforts to influence the social norms that prohibit the participation of women, increasing acceptance of women in leadership and the importance of women's roles in Syria's future. However, there was less systematic engagement with men and communities to identify and transform gender bias and social norms. A stronger social relations approach was needed to support CSOs, involving work with men and communities to achieve sustained social norms change. The programme's results framework could be strengthened with tools to measure social and gender norms to better capture resistance to change and potential backlash.

Civil society engagement is at an early stage and requires long-term investment and engagement. Its monitoring and evaluation systems did not adequately track the transformative changes of civil society interventions, such as changes in attitudes towards women's participation and tangible changes in individual women's participation in decision-making. Establishing a means of capturing and analysing this data will support the Syria Programme's transformation efforts.

Overall, the programme has been gender-transformative in terms of influencing the UN's existing institutional mechanism for peace mediation through the WAB. It is making progress in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment at individual and community level by holding space for women for political participation and leadership roles. However, more systematic work is needed to achieve social norms change with regard to women's role and political participation. There is also greater opportunity to use coordination work as a sounding board, to share innovative practices in regard to gender mainstreaming; women, peace and security; women's economic empowerment; and civil society engagement.

FINDING 11: The Syria Programme intentionally targeted marginalized women but required more structured consideration of inclusion to ensure no one is left behind, particularly by paying attention to the equitable representation of women from various age groups, geographies and socioeconomic backgrounds. A more structured consideration of disability inclusion is also required as per the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy.[80]

Leave no one behind is a fundamental principle driving the work of UN agencies and a critical element of achieving the SDGs.[81] The Syria Programme identified specific target groups from traditionally marginalized and religiously conservative communities, including women with disabilities and women headed households. Implementing partners demonstrated a commitment to localization and inclusion. The programme also increased the scope of civil society engagement under Phase II.

Despite these efforts, there were also some limitations. The stakeholders interviewed indicated that the programme missed an opportunity to reach younger and the most marginalized women. Women from privileged backgrounds, mostly from the 30–45 age group, have been the focus of activities and there was a need to shift to prioritize the representation of young and emerging leaders in the WAB.

Stakeholder consultations also indicated limited targeted interventions to take on board the concerns and needs of women with disabilities and their perspectives into the political process.

The evaluation noted that the perception of UN Women as a valued actor across civil society has improved since the programme's mid-term review (2019) and that trust in UN Women from government-held areas had increased. However, beneficiaries also highlighted that the programme needed to strengthen its focus on government-held areas, particularly as key international feminist INGOs have increasingly withdrawn interventions from these areas.

Given that security issues remain a major impediment to women's participation in Syria, the stakeholders consulted indicated that the Syria Programme should focus on providing computer literacy and cybersecurity training to facilitate safe access to capacity-building opportunities if it wants to reach women in hard-to-reach, marginalized populations.

Overall, the evaluation noted that future programmes should strengthen the focus on equitable representation of women from various age groups, geographies and socioeconomic backgrounds. A more structured consideration of disability inclusion was also required, as per the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy.[82]

[80] https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/
[81] https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/
[82] https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/

3.5 SUSTAINABILITY

Evaluation Question 6: To what extent were capacity and systems developed to facilitate the programme transition and to ensure the sustainability of programme efforts and results?

FINDING 12: Some elements of the Syria Programme have demonstrated sustainability and a clear pathway of transition. The Women's Advisory Board is a sustainable mechanism to ensure women's voices and perspectives are included in the political and peace process within the existing UN-led institutional process. The programme has also successfully diversified its funding beyond 2023. The civil society pillar of its work did not have an explicit sustainability/transition strategy making the assessment of handover timelines unclear. The sustainability of the programme's coordination pillar is dependent on a formalized women, peace and security coordination mechanism as well as UN Women's UNCT membership, which is currently missing.

The programme was successful at diversifying funding beyond 2023 providing for the sustainability of existing interventions into Phase III. The evaluation noted commitment and buy-in across stakeholders, partners and beneficiary women on the importance of the programme.

The key risks to sustainability highlighted by stakeholders related to the stalled political process and that this could result in donor fatigue and demotivation of Syrian women leaders. Therefore, ensuring that the WAB continues to remain relevant was critical. In this regard, the evaluation noted that the programme had made sustainable gains to ensure that women's participation in the political process remains a top priority for the Office of Special Envoy for Syria and donors, and that WAB members continue to work in ways that enhance the participation of women once the peace process restarts. The longer-term perspective and engagement of the WAB has consolidated recognition of the importance of women's role in the peace process at the international and institutional level. Long-term investment in the WAB has also paid dividends in its professionalism, coherence and recognition. The evaluation underscores the importance of building upon the lessons learned in the subsequent WAB membership rotation(s) to ensure sustained impact and strengthened representation.

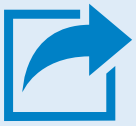
The Syria Programme's Civil Society Strategy did not have an explicit sustainability/transition strategy for its civil society work, making an assessment of its continuity plans difficult. According to the stakeholders consulted, civil society interventions have been too short-term to provide sustainable results, and there is a need to unify efforts to amplify their voice and agenda, to ensure greater coordination across the different geographical locations. Stakeholders indicated that the creation of a coordination mechanism across civil society that provides a more structured forum for WAB members to systematically engage with civil society and strengthen access to donors is likely to have a positive impact on sustainability. Further, the stakeholders indicated that UN Women can play a leadership role in building networking opportunities across civil society stakeholders, international actors and donors for more predictable funding. The programme also needed to have a clear, long-term strategy and investment plan for sustainable social norms change to promote women's leadership and political participation. Implementing partners particularly suggested the need for increased support and protection of Women Human Rights Defenders in Syria, multi-track engagement and work to engage male allies to deconstruct harmful gender norms is also required.

Overall, the programme needed to define a clear exit/transition strategy at the civil society level through a consultative process to ensure that the gains made are sustainable.

The evaluation noted that the lack of formalized coordination mechanisms across international stakeholders is leaving the programme dependent on individual working relationships, which risks long-term sustainability as staff move on. Despite the flexibility afforded to UN Women operating outside Syria, the lack of UNCT membership was also a hindering factor for sustainable results.

Photo ©UN Women

4 KEY LESSONS LEARNED



A multitrack approach involving deliberate and systematic work at and across different levels of society to link high-level actors (Track I) with non-governmental representatives from civil society (Track II) and grassroots and local women's organizations and communities (Track III) is necessary to attain sustainable peace.[83] At the same time, it is imperative to be cognizant that representation needs to encompass more substantial participation. The Track III actors may not always have the required resources, skills, language, confidence and agency to sustain their network and participate in the peace process. Considerations of these issues and a long-term vision to build capacity and resource investment is needed. In the case of the Syria Programme, during Phase II, UN Women has supported the WAB's outreach to its constituencies to ensure greater communication between the political process and grassroots civil society to reinforce the WAB's messages and increase its leverage vis-à-vis Track I actors. Despite progress on greater inclusion, the WAB is still perceived by some as an elite body. Such perception can negatively affect the WAB's credibility, and the evaluation found that a stronger feedback mechanism needs to be built between the WAB and Track III women peacebuilders. The forthcoming expansion of the WAB will also support the inclusion of under-represented groups and integration of an intersectional approach.

Defined institutional arrangements are needed to guarantee women's participation in peace processes. In the case of the Syria peace process, the WAB is linked to the political process via its role as an advisory board to the Office of Special Envoy for Syria. Regular support to the WAB has built trust among its membership and legitimacy with key stakeholders, as well as boosting WAB members' technical capacity to meaningfully engage. While the WAB has served as an effective advisory body to the UN Special Envoy, it is not a party to the negotiations of the political process. The evaluation noted that greater efforts are needed to increase its influence in the political process. For instance, despite producing highly relevant work on the Constitutional Committee, including proposals on draft constitutional principles, there was no defined methodology to channel WAB proposals to the Constitutional Committee and other relevant stakeholders. A means to channel remains a good example of facilitating women's voice and perspective in peace and political processes, more formal institutional arrangements are needed to operationalize the women, peace and security agenda.

UN Women strives to be a thought leader on gender equality, a go-to knowledge hub for cutting-edge knowledge on policies and programmes to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. As a thought leader, UN Women also aims to shape global discourses and influence policies and practices on gender equality. Programmes and interventions with a dedicated focus on evidence and knowledge generation must be underpinned by three key steps: evidence planning, evidence generation, and evidence dissemination and impact assessments. A participatory and multi-stakeholder approach to evidence planning and needs or evidence gaps identification helps to avoid duplication of efforts and facilitates strategic resource investment. Any knowledge generation plan must include a communication and dissemination plan to ensure stakeholders successfully use knowledge products as policy and programming tools. At the same time, an assessment of the uptake and impact of the evidence generated should be integrated into programme design, and data related to the same should be systematically collected, analysed and used for future planning and decision-making.

UN Women would benefit from corporate guidelines regarding periodic analyses of the challenges and opportunities of entering countries affected by active conflicts and humanitarian crises, and being part of the UNCT. In the case of Syria, UN Women has been implementing a women, peace and security programme since 2012 without a country presence and without being part of the UNCT. Despite positive progress in coordination efforts, the Syria Programme was missing out on opportunities to further integrate approaches by operating outside of the UNCT. Other UN entities had, by default, taken up the role to address gender equality and women's empowerment issues.

[83] Overcoming barriers to grassroots inclusion in peace processes, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Photo ©UN Women

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides overall conclusions and corresponding recommendations. The recommendations have been drafted following a consultative approach with the Evaluation Reference Group. Presentation of the preliminary findings and the way forward took place with the programme management team to inform the recommendations below. Each recommendation is tied to corresponding conclusions and includes actions for consideration by the Syria Programme team. The level of priority and responsibility for actions are indicated with each recommendation.

Conclusion 1:

The Syria Programme is relevant to the needs of Syrian women in terms of facilitating their political participation and access to decision-making platforms. The programme is aligned with international normative frameworks and strategies promoting women's participation and gender equality. It is also well aligned with UN Women's strategic goal of mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment into peace and security processes, supporting women's meaningful participation and leadership in peace and security. The programme demonstrated agility in responding to the changing contextual challenges including the stalled political process, the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent earthquake, and used the opportunity to reiterate UN Women's gender coordination mandate. Its theory of change and intervention logic is valid in terms of identifying and addressing the structural causes of inequality and barriers to women's meaningful participation in the political process. However, the intervention logic needs to reflect an intentional approach to systematically strengthen the involvement of men, communities and other key institutions to transform deep-rooted gender roles and biases for achieving and sustaining the intended gender-transformative outcomes and would benefit from a stronger social relations approach. The intervention logic also needs to have a more intentional consideration of women's livelihoods and economic empowerment priorities as key barriers to women's political participation.
(Finding 1, 2, 3)

Recommendation 1: Reconstruct the Syria Programme's theory of change for Phase III to reflect an intentional approach to systematically strengthen the involvement of men, communities and other key institutions to transform deep-rooted gender roles and biases using a social relations approach. This should also reflect an intentional consideration of women's livelihoods and economic empowerment priorities as key barriers to women's political participation.

Responsible organization: Syria Programme Management
Priority: High
Actions:

1. Develop a reconstructed theory of change reflecting the programme's intentional approach to systematically work with men, communities and other key institutions as well as an intentional consideration of women's livelihoods and economic empowerment priorities as key barriers to women's political participation.
2. Facilitate knowledge exchange among partners on the best approaches to engage men in supporting norms change, i.e. improving openness to women's meaningful political participation.
3. Facilitate partnerships and regular exchange with other UN entities working in the area of Syrian women's economic empowerment and the women's economic empowerment team at the UN Women Arab States Regional Office.

Conclusion 2:

The programme's coordination approach and investment in key strategic partnerships have been instrumental in achieving results. The programme has maintained a fruitful strategic partnership with the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria to strengthen Syrian women's voices and participation in the political process. Its technical knowledge and expertise were valued by donors, UN entities, INGOs and CSO partners. However, UN Women's absence from the UNCT has affected its ability to strengthen coordination synergies on gender equality and women's empowerment in Syria. There was goodwill and willingness from partners to coordinate and work with UN Women to contribute to gender equality in Syria. Partners expect UN Women to lead coordination work for better coherence on gender mainstreaming in Syria. There is also a pressing need for a strategic decision on whether and how to establish a presence in Syria as UN Women's current position remains unclear and has inadvertently impacted the perception of its neutrality. In the absence of UN Women's presence

in Damascus, many traditional areas of the Entity's mandate are being supported by other UN organizations. This has a risk of affecting UN Women's credibility in key areas of its comparative advantage. Therefore, UN Women should look to refine its corporate strategy on engagement with the UNCT in Syria to facilitate greater access to UN partners and communities inside Syria to achieve the desired scale and impact of gender equality initiatives. *(Finding 4, 5, 8)*

Recommendation 2: UN Women should take a strategic decision about membership of the Syria UNCT and whether and how to establish a presence in Syria. This should include development of a forward-looking engagement strategy with a view to becoming a member of the Syria UNCT to improve the programme's strategic position and to support greater engagement inside Syria across both non-government and government-held areas of the country. UN Women should widely communicate its position vis-à-vis Syria UNCT membership and its presence to the stakeholders concerned.

Responsible organization: Country Office, Regional Office, headquarters
Priority: High
Actions:

1. Initiate discussions with the Syria Resident Coordinator on the possibility of securing membership in the UNCT and review risks and benefits of becoming a non-resident entity and/or establishing a Country Office.
2. Initiate discussions with the Resident Coordinator on the possibility of a formal UN Women presence in Damascus to strengthen gender coordination and develop substantive partnerships with UN sister agencies. UN Women could benefit from keeping its existing women, peace and security Beirut operations separate from any new Damascus hub which would have a wider gender equality and women's empowerment mandate and allow for the continuation of a "whole of Syria" approach.

Recommendation 3: Clarify a vision and strategy on the Syria Programme's coordination work, exploring the possibility of establishing a formal "whole of Syria" women, peace and security coordination mechanism, as well as the possibility of extending its policy influence for stronger gender mainstreaming in Syria.

Responsible organization: Country Office, Regional Office
Priority: High
Actions:

1. Collectively develop a vision and coordinated strategy on UN Women's coordination work, exploring the possibility of extending the programme's policy influence beyond women, peace and security to a stronger focus on gender mainstreaming and women's economic empowerment.
2. Explore the possibility of establishing a formal working group/s to convene gender focal points and advisers from different thematic areas. This should include continued efforts to explore the possibility of establishing a formal "whole of Syria" women, peace and security coordination mechanism.

Conclusion 3:

The Syria Programme's comparative advantage is its ability to act as a critical bridge between international stakeholders and Syrian women activists and CSOs. The programme has consolidated gains, for example in establishing the legitimacy of including women's perspectives in the political peace process through the Syrian WAB. The WAB as a gender-inclusion mechanism remains a credible and effective modality in the Syrian political process, with the ability to leverage political will; engage in high-level political dialogue; and provide technical expertise despite the stalled political peace process. The WAB has successfully engaged with the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, but it would benefit from broader engagement with the Astana guarantors and Arab League member states. The Syria Programme's success and credibility lie in its ability to meaningfully bring together diverse women's voices, including the perspectives of younger women, women living with disability, women from low socioeconomic backgrounds as well as from certain geographies such as government-controlled areas. The upcoming rotation process of WAB members is an opportunity to strengthen the diverse representation of the board. The programme's civil society interventions have begun to yield results at an individual and organizational level, but lack of coordination across civil society is impacting the scalability of results and Syrian women's movement building. The programme needs to further strengthen its partnerships with CSOs by developing a long-term

strategy and shared vision for civil society engagement and by facilitating or convening a platform for CSOs to share and coordinate efforts for gender equality in Syria. *(Finding 6, 7, 10,11)*

Recommendation 4: The programme should build on the success and profile of the WAB, ensuring that the rotation of members broadens representation, strengthens connections with the civil society strand through formalized mechanisms and continues to increase engagement with the Astana guarantor and Arab League member states.

Responsible organization: Country Office, Regional Office
Priority: Medium
Actions:

1. Strive for wider representation in the upcoming rotation of WAB members to support greater engagement of diverse constituencies and support the outgoing members of WAB as peace assets to ensure continuity and propagation of expertise.
2. Work to build relationships between the WAB and the Astana guarantor and Arab League member states.
3. Strengthen the systematic meaningful engagement of WAB members with women on the ground, local/civil society and Track I and III initiatives.

Recommendation 5: The programme should continue to strengthen a shared vision for civil society engagement and facilitate or convene a platform for CSOs to share and coordinate efforts for gender equality in Syria. The programme should further strengthen systematic engagement with and representation of diverse women's voices, including the perspectives of younger women, women living with disability, women from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as from certain geographies such as government-controlled areas.

Responsible organization: Country Office, Regional Office
Priority: Medium
Actions:

1. Build upon civil society strategy to collectively develop a long-term vision for civil society engagement with other players to create shared ownership.
2. Establish and convene formal coordination mechanisms across civil society to facilitate learning and alliance building across joint priorities.
3. Facilitate sharing of knowledge and exchanges among programme partners.
4. Embed planned interventions for the equitable representation of women from various age groups, geographies and socioeconomic backgrounds. Implement more structured consideration of disability inclusion as per the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy.

Conclusion 4:

Evidence-based and credible knowledge is central to UN Women's work. The formalization of a knowledge management pillar has been a key step of Phase II. The Syria Programme's contribution to creating knowledge and awareness around gender equality in Syria is valued across stakeholders as central to supporting better outcomes for Syrian women. Making the best use of UN Women's resources requires a more systematic approach to knowledge management and learning, including identifying the evidence gaps collectively with other stakeholders through a participatory approach. The programme's communication portfolio took a rather risk-averse approach and was quite minimalistic due to political sensitivities around programme interventions. Internal and external communications need more attention and improvement to ensure programme stakeholders are systematically kept informed and engaged. The programme's monitoring systems could also be strengthened to capture impact and transformative changes. (*Finding 4,7, 9*)

Recommendation 6: The Syria programme should develop a knowledge management and learning strategy, and institutionalize a system of identifying evidence gaps collectively with other stakeholders through a participatory approach to inform decisions about new research topics, prevent duplication and better understand where UN Women would like to invest its resources more strategically. It should also develop a communication strategy and action plan to strengthen its internal and external communication work.

Responsible organization: Country Office, Regional Office
Priority: High
Actions:

1. Develop and implement a knowledge and learning strategy, including a knowledge dissemination plan.
2. Institutionalize a system of identifying evidence gaps collectively with other stakeholders through a participatory approach.
3. Develop a communication strategy and action plan in collaboration with the Regional Office's Communications team.

Recommendation 7: The programme needs to strengthen its monitoring framework and tools to capture transformative changes. The monitoring system should also include systematic verification and validation of the data reported by implementing partners.

Responsible organization: Country Office, Regional Office
Priority: High
Actions:

1. The results framework could be strengthened with tools to measure social and gender norms to better capture resistance to change and potential backlash.
2. Strengthen results verification and validation systems.
3. Capture the transformative impact of capacity strengthening initiatives, knowledge uptake and use.

UN WOMEN IS THE UN ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN. A GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, UN WOMEN WAS ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.

Un women supports un member states as they set global standards for achieving gender equality and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.

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