



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.

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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.