

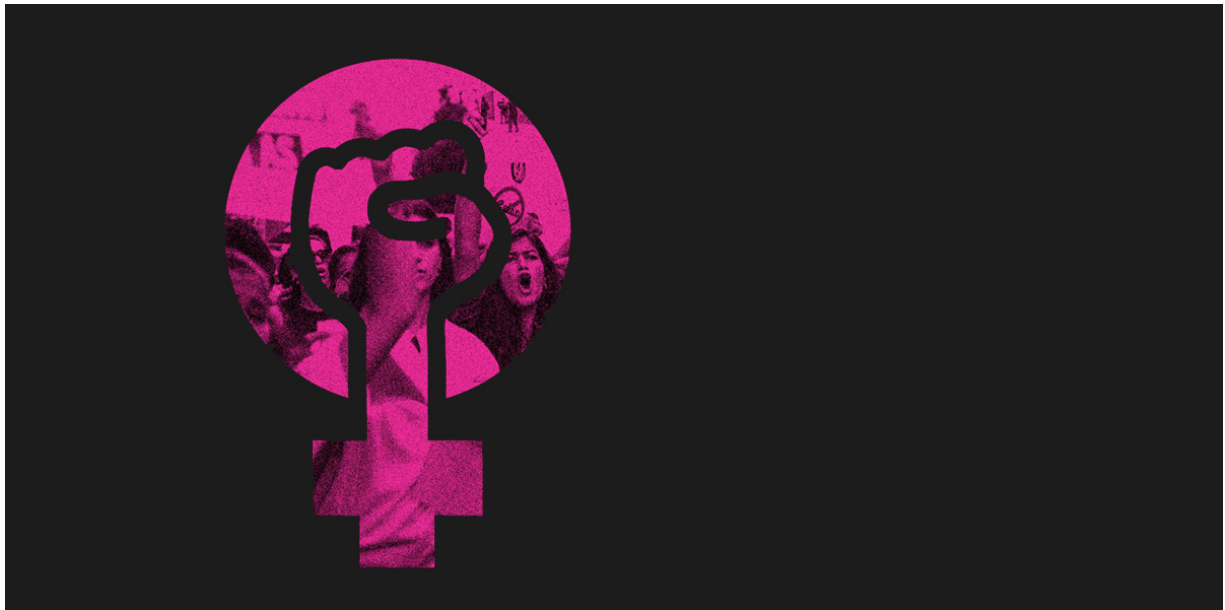


15-10-2020

## Perseverance and strategic feminist work

Perseverance and strategic feminist work

Leen Alabed



**The requirements of oppressive, complex, and rapidly-changing contexts.**

Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011, women have played significant leadership roles. The traditional leadership's norms and values often entrench hierarchical structures that perpetuate prevailing patterns

of labour division and ascribed gender roles. Feminist leadership subverts traditionally masculine notions of power such as competitiveness, rigidity, authoritarianism, and the focus on intense productivity. Feminist leadership is participatory, cooperative, relational, and transparent. It focuses on consensus-building, human capabilities, and achieving full potential. As the revolution turned into an armed conflict, they were increasingly marginalized and excluded from public spaces. But this did not stop them from playing political and social roles in other areas of struggle. Women began to organize themselves on various levels to respond to urgent needs resulting from the conflict, besiegement, displacement, isolation, and systematic exclusion.

Their work was not limited to responding to short-term needs. Instead it constituted cumulative struggles that sought to achieve political change and sustain feminist peace. According to a broader feminist perspective, peace goes beyond a narrow approach that considers peace to be the mere absence of violence and war. On the one hand, it examines the link between violence and war, and on the other it looks at the overlapping social, economic, and cultural structures, and the institutions that underpin, produce, and reinforce violent dynamics through unjust and unequal gender relations and power dynamics that separate individuals within a society. In other words, feminist peace is both an ideological and a practical approach that takes into account the causes and forms of structural violence, be they social, economic, cultural or environmental. This practical perspective aims to use its tools and mechanisms in order to establish sustainable peace. based on the needs of local communities and grassroots groups. As such, the agendas of feminist groups

sought the transformation and amendment of political, economic and social realities. They did not merely work to bring about superficial, top-down, or externally imposed changes or reforms. Several organizations with feminist agendas challenge oppressive systems, and patriarchal ones in particular. They employ gender-sensitive feminist analysis to challenge all oppressive systems that marginalize and discriminate against people on the basis of their gender, socio-political status and otherwise. Women's rights agendas focus on women's gendered experiences. They often focus exclusively on women's protection. have been established in order to advance political action in its broadest sense; towards justice, freedom and sustainable peace, and to shed light, both within and outside of the country, on the impact of the conflict on Syrians, and most especially, its disproportionate impact on women and other marginalized groups.

By examining the feminist spaces that were available before 2011, we can see that the security restrictions that applied to civil society as a whole were an additional motivation for feminist leadership, and women in general, to establish and develop feminist spaces. Some organizations sought to respond to the existing gender gaps by responding to emerging needs for service provision, building capacity through awareness-raising activities, providing psychosocial support, or by providing job opportunities and counselling services to women affected by the conflict or forced displacement. Others chose to focus on feminist social mobilization, realising social change, peacebuilding efforts, transitional justice, documenting violations and initiating advocacy efforts to ensure women's voices are present and centred in both

local and international discussions. Despite the differences in the agendas and the different modes of action employed by feminist and women's organizations, they often face similar external challenges. Perhaps what all feminist and women-led organisations have in common is the dedication to ensuring women's rights and gender justice are upheld in private and public spheres – politically, economically, legally, and socially.

However, the determination and resilience shown by feminist and women's organizations It should be noted that we cannot think of feminist and women's organizations as a homogeneous group. Given the similar external challenges facing them, we will, however, examine them in general terms in this article. requires a basic foundation that ensures their continuation and the sustainability of their efforts. Some feminist organizations have indicated that an empowered or resilient organization "is an independent one, capable of autonomous decision-making. This means that it has access to diverse, flexible and sustainable resources which enable it to work according to its own vision and not according to that of donors. An empowered organization has the right to work and operate in the place of its choosing. It must have high technical capabilities, and responsible strong leadership who have a clear vision and values, and operates with equality and respect. Its staff team works effectively together, have a healthy work-life balance, and general wellbeing. An empowered organization and its staff have the ability, space, and freedom to network and coordinate with others in order to better implement their work." This definition was formulated by feminist and women's organizations during a convention held by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which is a non-profit organization that

brings together feminist and women-led organizations and feminist activists to work collectively towards peace by nonviolent means. Through these meetings, WILPF seeks to promote political, economic and social justice through cross-conflict learning, advocacy and producing a joint analysis of conflict. WILPF started its partnership with Syrian women-led organizations in 2012 in order to support them in promoting their feminist agendas.

By unpacking this definition, we can categorize the components of empowered and resilient organizations into four main pillars: 1) a favourable operational context, 2) independence from donors' agendas, 3) safety and security, and 4) a supportive social environment. Looking at these conditions, we can see that they are not fully met for Syrian women's organizations. Thus, we can conclude that the most obvious and complex challenges facing most, or all, feminist and women-led organizations, challenges that threaten their sustainability and existence, can be analyzed with regards to the above four categories. The following is an account of the most prominent features of these complex challenges. They constitute a fundamental obstacle to ensuring the sustainability of these organizations' efforts, threatening the foundations of their resilience and their very existence.

## Unstable work climates

The geographic scope of the work being done by women's organizations has expanded. They are now operating across different regions of Syria, as well as in many neighbouring

countries and around the world. This is due to several factors such as migration and forced displacement. The challenges facing organizations in different areas remain largely the same, despite differences in context depending on their geographic scope.

Registration and licensing are a fundamental challenge that faces these organizations regardless of the geographic range in which they are working. Whether emanating from the Syrian regime, the de-facto authorities in Idlib, or from neighbouring governments and European countries, the numerous obstacles imposed on the registration and licensing of Syrian organizations jeopardizes to the status and legitimacy of organizations. It can even threaten their very existence and continuation. When an organization is unable to register or obtain a work permit it can lead to various repercussions that impact its ability to open bank accounts. Thus limiting its ability to access the financial resources it needs in order to increase its active role in the civil space, in turn threatening the organisation's sustainability. It also affects its employees, who face problems in obtaining work or residency permits in countries of asylum, thus compromising the economic security of the team.

In addition to the above, feminist organizations throughout Syria—be they in the areas controlled by the regime, by the de-facto authorities, or in north-eastern Syria—face major interference by the governing powers on the ground. These forces impose security restrictions and interfere with the scope of organizations' work by forcing them to employ people who are affiliated with them. Moreover, they often demand that organizations request approval before implementing projects or activities which frequently get

rejected.

When we examine these obstacles and challenges, we find that they are disproportionately imposed on the work and operation of feminist and women's organizations. We might conclude that this stems from a sense of threat that is felt by these hegemonic forces, especially when we note that the restrictions are stricter than ones imposed on relief-work organizations, for example. Thus, it may be that behind the restrictions imposed is the fear that those forces harbor towards the capacity of feminist and women's organizations to enact actual social and cultural change through the employment of work methodologies which are contrary to their oppressive ideologies.

These restrictions establish a hostile and inauspicious environment for feminist work, and largely counteract the condition required by organizations to ensure their perseverance and the sustainability of their work, specifically, "the right to work in the place of their choosing". We can also see a link to the need for an organization to have "access to diverse and flexible resources."

## Donor rigidity

Donor rigidity, the limitations and conditions that they impose, their almost complete disconnection from local contexts, and their lack of understanding of the needs on the ground, often lead to them being exclusionary and only channelling funds to certain organisations while excluding

others. Most funders impose their agendas on organizations by creating conditions that link the requirements of a grant's application with their agenda. They also make grants conditional on the implementation of contractual projects that require a certain set of activities which are usually not linked to a transformational or cumulative context, or based on local needs. All of this is in addition to donors' negligence of organizations' needs to secure basic operational costs for their activities.

In both the short- and long-term, these challenges have a negative impact on the agendas of feminist and women's organizations. In the short-term, the ability of organizations and their work teams to implement projects can be affected. This increases the rate of staff turnover, causes instability, and hinders the sustainability of their work. In the long-term, donors' requirements pose pressure on feminist and women's organizations' ability to maintain their feminist agendas that actually constitute political action. As a result of this pressure to jettison their feminist, demand-based rhetoric, these organizations have to work very hard not to lose track of their purposes, or to become limited to merely satisfying the donor's bureaucratic requirements and implementing externally imposed projects.

For this reason, and in order to ensure their sustainability and secure the margin of freedom that is necessary for feminist political action, these organizations have diversified the sources of their funds. This also allows them to cover the basic operational costs that are not covered by activity-based grants. However, the diversification of grants is not an easy or mechanical process due to several factors: the bureaucracy of donors, manifold requirements



associated with receiving funding (such as the submission of periodic reports), and a possible lack of technical and institutional skills that can make it difficult for the organizations to meet all the donor's requirements. Due to the rapid emergence and growth of women's organizations during the past nine years, most have not had the opportunity to diversify their funding or establish donor networks. They can allocate neither the time nor the resources necessary to develop mechanisms that would address the requirements of these donors. This is especially the case with small and unregistered feminist civil society organizations that find it difficult to obtain funding during the early phases of their establishment. What this essentially means is that donors' rigidity and strict bureaucracy disproportionately marginalizes the smaller and more fragile organizations.

Rapid changes taking place in the general Syrian context provoke constant parallel changes in donors' policies and priorities while they try to keep pace with emerging needs. This subsequently creates a series of additional challenges for women's organizations regarding the continuation or sustainability of their existing funding channels. In some areas in Syria, dominant de-facto forces play a role in imposing the policies of some donors or stopping the work of others. The matter is further complicated by the existence of alliances that link some of the donor agencies with political forces on the ground.

All of this negatively affects feminist civil society organizations in certain regions, especially the organizations whose agendas are in contradiction with those of the de-facto dominant powers, and work towards combating oppressive structures that marginalize their

work. With limited access to funding, these feminist organizations are further marginalized, as such the frameworks of their community-based resistance become less effective as they lose different forms of funding, resources, and support.

Taken together, the rigidity and bureaucracy of some donors in addition to the rapid changes in their priorities constitute a huge impediment to the necessary conditions for resilience and sustainability of feminist work. Based on their own definition, “autonomous decision-making” and “access to diverse, flexible and sustainable resources which enable it to work according to its own vision and not according to that of donors” are some of the most important conditions for the perseverance of women’s organizations. The many challenges that prevent these conditions from coming about make women’s organizations vulnerable to threats that affect their work mechanisms, sustainability, and existence.

## Security and safety

Challenges related to security and safety impede the creation of a safe or favorable environment for feminist work. These challenges are of a structural and complex nature, taking different forms depending on the geographic location in which an organisation is based or operates. While all civil society organizations are affected by these challenges, the particular forms they take when confronting feminist or women-led organizations are more complex due to a number of additional gender-based challenges.

Several years before the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, most civil society organizations started to work online in the context of limited mobility and transportation. Despite their ability to develop online working tools, they have continually faced digital security risks and are dealing with a notable increase in rates of violence on the internet. This has only increased with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the higher shift to online work. The most recurrent forms of cyber violence that target women, and especially women activists, range from “doxing” Finding personal information such as a person’s name and address or other personal details and publishing it on the internet without the person’s permission or consent. to “sextortion,” A type of blackmail that forces a person to do something, usually a sexual act, by threatening to leak publish naked pictures of them or sexual information about them. “trolling,” Sending messages or making comments of an insulting, inflammatory, or perverted nature on the internet, in order to provoke or annoy the readers into displaying emotional responses and normalizing tangential discussion, either for the troll’s amusement or for specific gains or premeditated purposes. and the circulation of intimate content without consent, i.e. “revenge porn.” This has effectively transformed different forms of gender-based violence into the online space, penetrating geographic borders and physical barriers, with the anonymity of perpetrators’ identities, resulting in the amplification of the harm caused.

In addition to these emerging challenges, the organizations operating in Syria face other security risks that stem from the proliferation of weapons and armed groups and the presence of security and intelligence forces. The instable and unpredictable nature of the conflict in Syria has

displaced many organizations and forced others to shut down in order to avoid the dangers of systematic bombardment and violence. Many centers belonging to women's organizations have in fact been bombed, and in many cases several centers operated by the same organization were targeted. Women Now for Development lost two centers to bombings, Ghouta in 2018 and Idlib in 2020.

Feminist and women-led organizations in Lebanon and Turkey also face insecurity due to the governments' restrictions on Syrians and Syrian organizations, which impose restrictions on their movement in the country, such as on travel across governorates and municipalities. In Lebanon, for instance, Syrians (especially refugees) suffer from limitations placed on their movement by racist and xenophobic policies and attitudes enacted by both governmental and the local authorities.

In the same vein, many countries have harsh entry procedures and limit the number of entry visas that they grant to Syrians. This only affects those who can travel or apply for entry visas, however. The residents of certain areas in Syria, such as Idlib, suffer from other hardships, like not being able to leave the governorate in which they reside. The unstable situation plaguing Syrian refugees in Europe also creates additional burdens and challenges. These undermine the ability of women's organizations to network, attend meetings and training opportunities, or travel for advocacy and related work. Security and safety factors such as these are directly related to the definition mentioned above, as they affect the ability of employees "to maintain a healthy work-life balance, and general wellbeing" and limit their "ability, space, and freedom to

network and coordinate with others in order to better implement their work.” This places organizations’ ability to be resilient and effective in a constant state of vulnerability.

These impediments on mobility limitations and travel restrictions can also be attributed to the prevailing patriarchal social context that oppresses and controls women by restricting their mobility. This negatively affects the capacity of feminist and women-led organizations to mobilize.

## Patriarchy and social context

Not only does a repressive patriarchal system limit women’s movement and freedom, it also multiplies the challenges and obstacles that lay before them. Restrictions imposed on women’s movement are a form of gender-based violence. Gender-based violence is rooted in power inequalities and includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence. Some examples of gender-based violence include: spousal violence, domestic violence, economic violence (such as child marriage, deprivation from education, denial of employment, etc.), restrictions on movement, and detention/confinement within the private space. that activists suffer from in unjust ways.

The fact that women are often restricted to stereotyped gender roles hinders their participation in public and private life, especially their meaningful political participation. Women-led and feminist organisations are often side-lined and marginalised. There is, on the other hand, significant

instrumentalization of women's rights and feminist rhetoric in discussions related to Syria in the pursuit of political or personal interests. One of the most prominent examples of this instrumentalization within Syrian civil society spaces is when a woman is invited to participate in a panel discussion on sexual violence, for example, but only in her capacity as a "victim." She is restricted to a role that only involves sharing her feelings and experiences, alongside men who are asked to share their analysis and opinions on the matter. These practices perpetuate the misconception that women cannot meaningfully participate, which leads to their continued marginalization and confinement to the side-lines.

The surging patriarchal backlash which systematically reinforces the exclusion of women and increases their vulnerability to violence and marginalization is a means to preserve male privilege, and preserve the unequal power dynamic that men impose over women, especially in the face of the gradual positive shift in existing norms and traditions towards women's rights and gender justice, and the re-balancing of unequally distributed power dynamics. We have seen this since the early days of the revolution, when men marginalized women under the pretext that "it's not the right time, we need to focus on getting rid of the regime, and then we'll get to women's rights." This oppression, practiced by men, reproduces the oppression that is practiced by those forces which control all citizens. Men's inability to perceive and address this reinforces the oppressive patriarchy.

These and other challenges have not stopped feminist and women's organizations from resisting cultural, security-related, political, and financial obstacles by persistently

advancing women's rights, mainstreaming gender-sensitive and feminist discourse in their work, and continuously asserting that women's rights are human rights.

## Persistence and perseverance through feminist strategizing to shift power structures

Knowing that their work is an indispensable tool for political and social change, feminist and women-led organizations have resorted to numerous strategies to address the challenges they face. The most important of these strategies may be establishing and reinforcing relationships with the communities in which they operate in order to establish a social support system and supportive environment. This can replace formal legitimacy with social and popular legitimacy and gain the local community's confidence. Building trust through the above-mentioned strategy awards women-led and feminist organizations with a margin of freedom to implement their projects and build trust with the community. These relationships with the local community help to resist the patriarchal political system and its security apparatus in many areas where field work is beset by challenges that these entities create. In addition, many feminist organizations operate anonymously and "underground." They do not reveal their strategies or activities and limit their presence on public platforms, with the goal of circumventing the powers that be and ensuring the continuation of their work.

Finally, many feminist and women-led organizations have

resorted to self-financing, relying on the organization's own resources and its volunteer potential in order to deal with donor rigidity and a lack of funding. They have sought to reduce costs by working from home or by fund-raising through donations and other income-generating activities. Relationships of trust with local communities have also been renewed, bringing huge benefits to these organizations.

As Syrians, both men and women, the one of the most important things we can do to support feminist organizations in resisting the challenges they face is to invest in them with confidence, legitimacy, and community support. We must avoid exploiting their contributions, work, and agendas for political or personal gains, and have faith in their ability to shift the balance of power and challenge oppressive systems.

## Conclusion

We classified the variety of challenges facing feminist and women's organizations into four main categories in order to clarify each area in its specificity while also shedding light on the additional gender-based challenges that work against the agendas of feminist organizations. In reality, however, these challenges are so overlapping and complex that they collectively constitute a threat to feminist action and its sustainability. Dominant de-facto powers continually take advantage of the intersection of oppressive system by exploiting existing structural challenges (such as the patriarchal context and the lack of financial resources) in



order to further suppress these organizations and restrict their work.

Thus, we can conclude that given the complex nature of the challenges facing women's and feminist organizations, there is a steady positive correlation between the depth of the challenges that feminist agendas face and the fear that is provoked by the changes they seek to bring about. As feminist agendas have a transformative force, capable of disrupting intersecting forms of oppression and threatening the strength and discourse of patriarchal systems, they are feared by the powers that be. The more these dominant de facto forces fear them, the more they try to tighten their grip on feminist workspaces in Syria.

Feminist and women-led organizations have been able to persevere and endure due to their determination and persistence, despite a myriad of challenges imposed by oppressive systems, including the patriarchy. Their participatory, contextual, gender-sensitive, rights-based and community-driven approaches have provided them with the tools necessary to confront systems of oppression that have recently been further exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, such as an increase in domestic violence during quarantine.

Feminist and women-led organizations have organically developed methods and strategies in order to shift the balance of power. Therefore, they have been able to maintain their focus on achieving long-term outcomes in the pursuit of political, economic, legal, and societal change, with the ultimate goal of achieving sustainable feminist peace and justice.

