

1.1.5 Gender Equality and Social Inclusion – 2 pages PDF

ARK has considerable experience, including CSSF-funded experience, implementing gender programmes in the MENA region. In Syria, ARK implemented a three-year gender-focused PSVI project which mobilised communities to respond to gender-based violence as a shared governance responsibility. ARK programming across the region empowers girls and women to take action to respond to community needs, building women's participation in civil society, including the media, and building bridges between civil society and governments. ARK will build on this expertise in its approach to this project, working with its gender lead Ghada Saba, who created her own gender civil society organisation in 2015 and was subsequently selected as a UN WOMEN gender champion. ARK's selected partners also have a strong track record supporting gender equality and women's empowerment and a majority of SMEs/advisors on this project will be female. As part of the inception phase, ARK will undertake a gender analysis, ensuring that issues relating to women's role in peacebuilding in Syria are adequately understood and that the project includes mechanisms to address challenges, strengthen and promote their involvement, including quotas on participation where appropriate. Although Syrian women have witnessed a significant decline in political and economic participation since the outbreak of the current conflict, and women's rights and gender equality are also often treated as secondary concern by communities given a primary focus on securing safety and livelihoods, Syrian women have been able to play a number of roles in formal and informal mobilisation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution within their communities. Through the inception mapping exercise, ARK will identify the most appropriate entry points to build on this existing base. ARK's programming experience and research to date have identified organisations led by or significantly staffed by women that work on issues like peace education, promoting civic participation, representing women's concerns before local governance bodies, psycho-social support, livelihoods creation, and countering child radicalisation and recruitment. In line with UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, ARK believes in the influential and powerful role that women can play in conflict resolution and transformation processes. ARK and its partners will deliver this project taking into consideration local host and displaced communities' needs and concerns from a gender perspective. Since conflicts affect women and men differently, gender mainstreaming has been integrated into the design of this project's methodology and approach, and into the project management lifecycle. The objectives, results, and strategies in this project have been designed in a manner which will enable women and girls' needs and concerns in the selected target areas to be voiced.

Approach 1: Promoting all possible forms of women's engagement. The range of civic activities that women can easily enter has been significantly affected by the conflict. Women are currently less likely than men to be welcomed as actors able to contribute to a sustainable peace in their local communities, apart from initiatives aiming to improve education, psycho-social support, medical care, and childcare. ARK's research and past programming has shown that there is a desire among many women, and many men, to promote women's participation in a broader spectrum of activities. ARK will seek to support women's peacebuilding groups and initiatives that fall both within and beyond the more culturally appropriate roles, working to gently support women's participation in traditionally male dominated fields. This approach will be done in a conflict-sensitive way through consultation with staff, partners, and stakeholders, to ensure that initiatives do not suffer from a public backlash. In addition to technically supporting such women's groups, ARK will also – where appropriate and welcome – increase the visibility of women's contributions to their communities. This could be done by organising public events focussed on highlighting women's efforts or the need to include women in conflict resolution.

Approach 2: Promoting gender inclusivity in women's issues and movements. Working towards women's rights and gender equality is not only women's responsibility. Male participation in women's groups across Syria is almost non-existent, however, ARK has been working to address this through its gender-based violence programming. Not adequately engaging men and boys in formal and informal initiatives fighting SGBV in the current stage of the problem may perpetuate an intra-generational transmission of violence that will make harder for women to contribute to rebuilding their communities. Using its community-based approach, *Himaya* ("protection"), that engaged community members, governance actors, and civil society organisations in Syria to tackle SGBV in their communities, ARK promoted the inclusion of men and boys as the main target group in initiatives that have been traditionally associated with women, and will continue to use this approach in this project.

Approach 3: Words and images matter. When media informs about women's issues and status in the current conflict in Syria, women's capabilities, identity, role and function in society, behaviours, and

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relations to men often unintentionally or intentionally frame women as victims and weak individuals, whose commitment to society is related to family care. Such stereotypes appearing in local, national and international media platforms perpetuate a distorted and simplified image of Syrian women. In the series of communications products that will be produced and shared on social media during this project, ARK will contribute to counteracting the stereotyping of women by designing, producing and disseminating alternative images capturing the more complex nature and role of women during the conflict.

Approach 4: Working with the conflict and cultural context. Women's participation in public initiatives is limited by real and perceived threats to their security and safety. Even with the recent de-escalation in hostilities between warring parties, the prevailing loss of law and order continues to result in increased criminality and impunity for perpetrators. In this context, controlling girls and women's access to public spaces is a rational, if sometimes exaggerated, response to very real threats of SGBV, harassment, or kidnapping. For cultural reasons, women's burden of responsibilities in the home may mean that they have less free time. Further, unmarried, widowed, or divorced women are also more likely to self-segregate and refrain from participating in activities outside the home – or to feel discomfort and social scrutiny if they do so. ARK's project team will work intensively during the gender analysis phase and partner with its field staff, both male and female, to solicit the views of community members on how to take a gender-sensitive approach. Activities will be designed so that women who participate are safe and feel welcomed, and that every possible effort is made to reach women with more limited mobility using creative approaches.

ARK's gender programming in Syria has provided useful learning experiences in this regard. In some communities where projects were implemented, norms and/or insecurity created challenges to direct consultations for women in a public forum. In these areas, ARK's field teams implemented alternate strategies such as face-to-face surveys in homes, women's clinics, child-care centres, women's centres, and other places where women were likely to congregate. Partners conducted surveys over social media and also enlisted the support of local CSOs led by women to conduct consultations and report back. Critically, women's inclusion in these processes resulted in their interests being directly represented in sub-grant proposals. The deliberate inclusion of men and youth in consultations also ensured that processes were not seen as biased or representing special interests. ARK's research and monitoring and evaluation teams will also build on best practice and ARK's experience in Syria. For example, ARK will systematically collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data. ARK's research and monitoring and evaluations staff will also interview women and men separately to ensure women feel comfortable enough to freely share their views; ARK's research partners were in part selected for their ability to field female researchers. Building on its three year experience of gender programming in northern Syria and its existing networks of women groups, CBOs, CSOs and activists, ARK and its partners will support experienced women's groups to work with peacebuilding groups within their governorates. Promoting synergies and cooperation among different groups is crucial to ensure sustainable and effective efforts at both the local and national level. At the international level, ARK and its partners will work with the Women's Advisory Board (WAB) that was created by Swisspeace and NOREF in cooperation with the UN Special Envoy for Syria to integrate women's needs into Syrian peace talks, noting that the participants in this groups are fixed.

Certain social and ethnic groups have been also traditionally marginalised from public consultations and participation in public affairs, making them vulnerable to political, economic, and social changes. ARK has solid experience in working with marginalised and vulnerable communities in the current Syrian context, such as IDPs. Consultations conducted this week with Idlib Council Head Ismael Anadani confirmed that the presence of IDPs in Idlib is also a considerable source of potential conflict. IDPs now comprise 75% of the population in Idlib and locals in the city complain over competition on resources, aid that targets IDPs only without attending to the needs of the host community, IDPs establishing their own schools and clinics, assembling in certain neighbourhoods and conducting their own neighbourhood watches and IDPs' feeling of being more entitled to services as they have suffered for a very long time in besieged areas. During the mapping of existing activities that will be undertaken during the inception phase, peacebuilding initiatives and movements targeting these groups will be identified and then encouraged to participate in the project; ARK has already identified several through its mapping to date in Idlib. ARK will work through existing and new partners to reflect on the best approaches to reach and involve Syria's growing number of people living with a disability, including through existing partners such as the Idlib Medical Council whom ARK has supported through charitable donations that specifically assist the disabled.