DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 05.03.2018 | Neena Gill

We must stand with Syria's women

Let's learn from Oxfam – and channel our outrage to the aid abuses against women in Syria

Revelations about the way Oxfam handled sexual misconduct by senior staff in Haiti and Chad has rightly led to outrage. Both the UK government and the European Commission have threatened to withdraw funding if high ethical standards are not met. Thousands of people across Europe are cancelling their contributions to the organisation. While I would be cautious about rashly pulling back funding from a charity which does such vital work, we should never stay silent when faced with evidence of wrongdoing.

Yet, this is exactly what we are doing in Syria. On 27 February 2018, it was reported that Syrian women are routinely forced to undergo sexual exploitation and abuse in return for aid. The assessment by the United Nations Population Fund revealed the high levels of gender-based violence faced by girls and women across Syria, using highly corroborated testimonies and evidence. Shockingly, the practice is not just widespread - with in some areas nearly half of women having facing abuse from the hands of those delivering aid - it has been going on for many years.

In some areas, nearly half of women report facing abuse from the hands of those delivering aid.

According to aid workers, the UN was made aware of such practices as early as in 2015 - but turned a blind eye. Humanitarian news agency IRIN on Monday backed up allegations that the organisation has repeatedly shelved direly needed reforms to its humanitarian aid in Syria. But it also provides important clues as to the source of the problem, reminding us of how the Syrian Assad regime continues to actively prevent the majority of UN aid convoys from entering rebel-held areas. This means that aid ends up in the often abusive hands of uncontrollable middlemen.

In response, one might ask whether working through third parties, even if unreliable, is better than not delivering any aid at all. This is the wrong

question to ask.

If one thing has become clear over the course of the now seven-year old Syrian conflict, it is that the Assad regime has consistently used humanitarian access as a weapon of war to starve those opposing his rule into submission. He has been able to do so because we let him, allowing successive UN Security Council Resolutions ordering cross-border and cross-line aid delivery to remain unenforced. The hell that is Eastern Ghouta, where fighting continues despite attempts at a ceasefire, offers an apt illustration.

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Russia remains the main force shielding the Assad regime from real pressure. But it is not only a question of whether EU Member States, including the UK, have done enough to turn up the screws on Moscow. Much more can be done.

For starters, European governments should join forces at the UN to put Gender Based Violence (GBV) Services front and centre of the humanitarian aid response in Syria. Concrete measures include tackling barriers to accessing aid services. This can be done through reducing stigmatisation and the distance to service delivery points, as well as providing transport for women. Aid organisations which have raised the alarm over abuse, including David Milliband's IRC, have already been implementing concrete measures and can help guide the effort.

Secondly, this should be part of a wider political push to enact the recommendations of the report produced by UN veteran Martin Griffith on the UN's response to aid in Syria. One of his key proposals is to appoint an ombudsman to deal with ethical dilemmas. This year-old recommendation could have a hugely positive effect. As the biggest funder of humanitarian efforts inside Syria, the EU and its member states acting together have the leverage to make this happen.

Thirdly, gender based violence in aid delivery should be placed on top of the agenda of the Second Syria Conference that will be hosted jointly by the EU and UN in Brussels on 24-25 April. The aim should be to produce more concrete measures to alleviate the plight of girls and women in Syria. It goes without saying that Syrian women should be given centre stage at the conference to steer this efforts based on their needs and experience.

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International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt said that 'not just the processes and procedures [are] lacking [...] but moral leadership'. I hope she agrees that such leadership needs to be shown when it comes to Syria as well.

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I hope to see the plight of Syrian girls and women engender the same level of outrage, decisiveness and ambition amongst British and European leaders and the public at large. Only then will we be able to ensure that aid in Syria is helping girls and women - instead of being turned against them.



Neena Gill
Brussels

Neena Gill is a Labour Member of the European Parliament for the West Midlands, UK. In January 2017 she was made a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) by the Queen for parliamentary and political service. Later that month, she was awarded a Pravasi Bharatiya Samman - the highest award given to non-Indians - for her contribution in the field of public service.

Ms Gill was the first woman of Asian origin to be elected to the European Parliament. Her work there covers economic and monetary affairs, tax, and foreign affairs.