

## **Open Letter**

### **Call to end the Illegal and Immoral War on Women in Afrin by Turkey!**

22 March 2021

We are writing to you because Afrin Canton is still under occupation and the international community has done far too little to end this unacceptable situation. Under the illegal Turkish occupation, crimes against humanity and war crimes continue to be committed on a daily basis. In particular, we are very concerned about the situation of women living in Afrin.

We demand an end to all forms of violence against women in the Afrin Canton of Northern Syria and for international pressure on Turkey to withdraw its forces. We demand justice for the many victims of the crimes of Turkish-backed militias and the return of the thousands of internally displaced persons who have had to flee Afrin as a result of the Turkish invasion.

In January 2018, Turkey and allied Syrian militias began an assault on Afrin Canton, part of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). This illegal act of aggression was first and foremost intended to change the demographics of the region, which had historically been majority-Kurdish with smaller Yezidi and Alevi communities. Over the course of the brutal invasion and occupation, which continues to this day, more than two-thirds of Afrin's original population has been displaced.

In addition to an act of ethnic cleansing, the invasion and occupation of Afrin has also been a targeted attack on women. The women of Afrin had created and implemented some of the most advanced laws, institutions, and policies in the world in order to fight all forms of violence and discrimination against women, and had ensured that women were represented and empowered at all levels of political and military decision-making.

Occupying forces have not only destroyed these advances, but continue to terrorize the women who made them possible.

Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) groups have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity targeting women, including rape and forced marriage. More than 200 women and girls whose identities are known have reportedly been abducted by armed groups since 2018. Sexual violence and torture are common in SNA detention sites. It is likely that these crimes are even more prevalent than is known, due to social stigma around reporting and the inability due to the risk under the occupation regime to expose cases and make them public.

The occupation has also actively increased social and political discrimination against women and girls, and has led to an increase in harmful practices outlawed by the AANES. Women and girls in Afrin feel unsafe leaving their homes unless they adhere to conservative religious dress codes and are accompanied by a male relative. Rates of child marriage have increased due to pressure from armed groups on the families of unmarried girls. Official religious authorities affiliated with the Turkish-backed SNA and Syrian Interim Government (SIG) have ruled that killings of women by male relatives are sometimes permissible.

The AANES was the only political authority in Syria to ban polygamy, forced marriage, and child marriage, and to consider so-called “honor killings” as equivalent to any other murder cases. These protections were strongly implemented in Afrin, along with legislation guaranteeing equality in inheritance, marriage, divorce and other personal status matters. The Canton adopted landmark Women’s Laws in 2014 in order to specifically address existing inequalities in Syrian law; the SIG classified these progressive laws as equally bad, i.e. “terrorist,” in their impact as the laws introduced by ISIS.

In terms of political discrimination, women now make up less than 10% of members of the Turkish-backed local government. Some Turkish-backed councils have no female members at all. No women currently serve in leadership positions on any local councils in Afrin.

Under the AANES, women were required to make up 40% of any elected body by law, and leadership positions were shared equally between men and women through a co-chair system. Parallel women’s councils and assemblies existed alongside mixed-gender bodies, and had the ability to overrule them on legislative matters concerning women’s rights.

According to the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria, the pattern of discrimination and violence inflicted on women by occupying forces in Afrin has created a “pervasive climate of fear which [has] in effect confined them to their homes.” Many women and their families have even fled Afrin specifically because of threats of sexual and gender-based violence, suggesting that these crimes are playing a role in mass displacement and forced demographic change.

This illegal and immoral war on women cannot go on any longer. Thus, as feminist organizations, human rights organization, and concerned individuals, we demand:

- an impartial international investigation into all forms of violence and discrimination targeting women in Afrin;

- that all perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence in Afrin, and individuals with command responsibility for perpetrators of these crimes, be brought to justice;
- international pressure on Turkey and the SNA to withdraw from Afrin and allow all displaced persons to return home as part of any political settlement in Syria;
- increased support for IDPs displaced from Afrin and now living in other parts of Syria.

## Supporting organisations

Congress of Women's Organizations from Rojava North and East Syria - Kongra Star

Kurdish Women's Movement in Europe (TJK-E)

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID)

International Alliance of Women (IAW)

Women in Kurdistan National Congress (KNK Jin)

Terre des Femmes e.V

Kurdish Women's Office for Peace - CENÎ

Umbrella organization of the Yezidi women's councils (SMJE)

Deutscher Frauenring

Internationale Frauenliga für Frieden und Freiheit (IFFF)

FILiA



You can support our demands by writing to  
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