Partners in Governing, Not Only in Suffering: Obstacles to Public Engagement Among Women in Northwest Syria

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Executive Summary

The 6.6 million internally displaced persons (IDP) in Syria represent the largest internally displaced population in the world. While young men are often the focus of narratives around war, conflict, and displacement, women make up roughly half of the world's refugees and displaced persons, including in Syria. Women IDPs face distinct challenges relating to their status as women which compound and interact in unique ways with the difficulties that come with displacement. In Northwest Syria, where over 70% of the population are IDPs, new governance structures have emerged in the past several years which purport to be accountable to the local populace and subject to rule of law. While these public institutions can help alleviate problems faced by women IDPs, the representation of women in these new governance structures is sparse.

This study, conducted in two local communities - Sarmada and Kafr Takharim - in the northwest of Syria in the fall of 2021, engaged 127 women in an effort to understand the primary challenges these women IDPs face and to investigate how they engage with political and public institutions to address these challenges. Using surveys and focus groups, we found that with traditional male breadwinners absent, women must now take on the role of providing financially for their entire household while juggling the load of household management and the raising of children. Conflict and displacement has heightened the presence of danger and violence in everyday life, making commutes and public spaces more fraught.

Many women expressed a high degree of interest in local politics and had ideas for potential solutions to difficulties in their communities. However, our participants found it challenging to make use of local public institutions to address the problems they faced.
In particular, a lack of women employees as bureaucrats and decision makers in the local government councils and the criminal justice system significantly has reduced their engagement with these institutions. However, participants said that NGOs were more sensitive to women's particular concerns and were effective in addressing them.

Much of the focus on women’s participation in Syrian politics has concerned their representation at the national level, but our study found a disconnect at the local level of politics. Yet this is the level that most affects women’s daily lives. More work needs to be done to empower women in their local communities, so they can participate effectively in the public

sphere at all levels. Furthermore, while much has been written on the role of women's employment as a tool for economic participation, our study found that women's lack of employment in public institutions serves to significantly curtail women's political participation and ability or willingness to access public services. Women's employment and women's broader quality of life are connected in more ways than the obvious.

The new governance structures in Northwest Syria have undergone an expansion of their scope of services and an integration into local communities in recent years. But these local governance structures can only make good on their claim to democratic representation when they represent the whole of society, including addressing both the particular and shared needs of women.

Acknowledgments

Start Point is a registered NGO with a mission to promote equality and social empowerment through various programs designed for women, men, and youth. We believe that change can only be achieved by exposing all of society to a message of justice and equality. We at Start Point work in both the research and service sectors to promote justice and long-term change in Syria through conducting human rights monitoring, data collection, and reporting so that the broader global community can better understand conditions in the region. We believe that fostering social awareness is key to rebuilding Syrian society.

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We would also like to note that, given the sensitivity of this study, and the extraordinary security circumstances in Syria, we assigned pseudonyms to all our study participants.

INTRODUCTION

The 6.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria represent the largest internally displaced population in the world. The disastrous conflict is now in its 11th year, and many IDPs have been displaced multiple times. In the year 2020 alone, 1.8 million were newly displaced (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2021). However, many IDPs have become long-term residents of their new places of refuge. They have established themselves and developed relationships with people and institutions in their host communities. As the war in Syria slowly winds down with no horizon to a comprehensive transition at the national level, now is a time to build a different future. Our study contributes to a better understanding of how Syria can be rebuilt with women's lives in mind, based on their own ideas.

Young men are often the focus of narratives around war, conflict, and displacement, yet women make up half or more of the world's refugees and displaced persons. Syria is no exception, with women making up an estimated 48% of the 5.6 million registered Syrian refugees and around half of the over 6 million IDPs inside Syria (Chazabat et al., 2020).

Understanding the diverse needs of men, women, girls, and boys of different ages is necessary for an adequate humanitarian and political response. Syrian women IDPs face unique vulnerabilities and challenges. The conflict left many women widowed and responsible for providing financially for their families on their own, despite many having little to no work experience (even before 2011, Syria had one of the lowest rates of women's employment in the world). The chaos of war and displacement makes them especially vulnerable to sexual violence, and survivors undergo additional difficulties because of community stigma around this issue. The children of IDPs face extreme challenges in accessing education, with schools closed, overcrowded, or far away with risky commutes. Pregnant women and children are at exceptionally high risk for poor health outcomes that can have significant short-term, long-term, and inter-generational health consequences (Aburas et al. 2018). Beyond this, in many rural areas where IDPs reside, women undergo additional restrictions due to cultural traditions that enforce the exclusion of women from public spaces.

Our study focuses on the Northwest of Syria, a region that hosts a large percentage of the country's internally displaced. A tenuous dual system governs the territory. Different areas are ruled by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) or the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). Each represents distinct strands of the organized political opposition to Bashar al-Assad. The Assad government has now taken back control of most of the rest of the country; as such, Northwest Syria is the largest remaining area held by rebel groups, neither Assad's forces nor the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. Since the establishment of local councils and their presence on the ground preceded the establishment of SIG and SSG, both these governments sought to lure the councils to their side. Although women make up an enormous portion of both residents and IDPs in these areas, there is a notable lack of women at all decision-making levels in regional governance structures. Women are also underrepresented in the national opposition, which engages in high-level negotiations around the future potential constitution of Syria, diplomatic ties, and spearheading humanitarian initiatives.

The United Nations resolution 1325 insists on:

> *...the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security*. (Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), United Nations 2000).

While efforts have been made to realize these ideals at the national level, this study is motivated in part by our belief that more careful attention needs to be paid at local levels of governance to ensure women's comprehensive involvement in all aspects of the conflict-resolution process. Women are the best advocates for their own needs and challenges. Yet they are rarely found in these crucial arenas where decisions are made - decisions that affect where community and international resources are allocated, how public institutions are organized, and what the future of Northwest Syria and Syria as a whole, will look like.

While some initiatives have investigated the challenges faced by women IDPs in Syria as a whole, we believe a more fine-grained study is needed, focusing on the day-to-day obstacles and opportunities for women in this unique region of the country. Rather than imposing assumptions about what would be most helpful, we asked women about their views on the most pressing issues they face and what they believe would be the most effective solutions to address their daily challenges.

IDPs and Northwest Syria

To understand the challenges IDP women are facing in the Northwest, it is critical to provide a background of Syria's current political landscape. As the dust settles on the conflict, the emergent political landscape is a patchwork governance system. Domestic actors, backed by competing external powers, hold uneasily onto their respective territories. Since 2020, Syria has settled into a tense stalemate where no sides have tended to advance or retract their forces much. Across the country, bombings and clashes have become occasional rather than the norm.

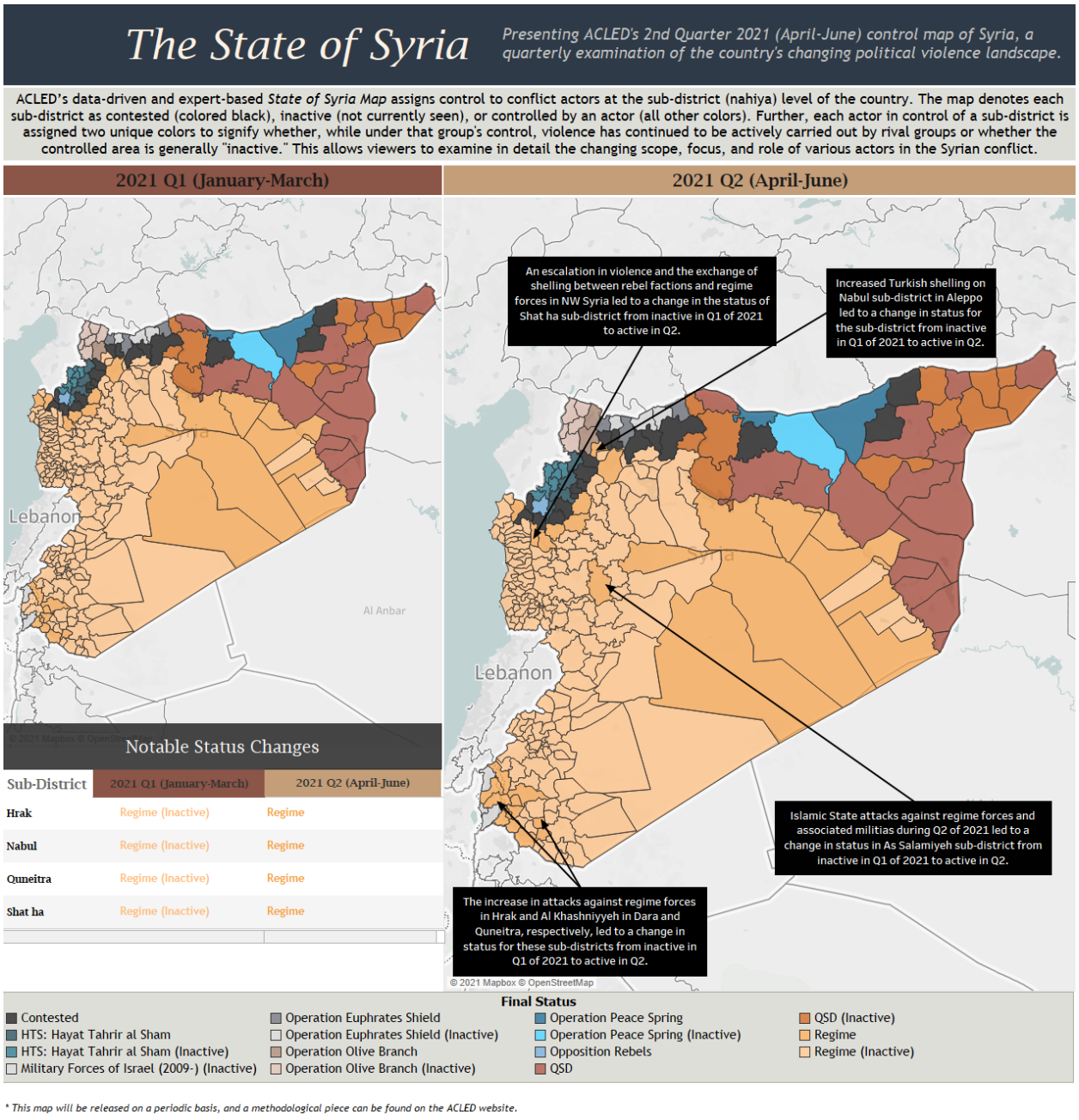

Figure 1: Map of the Status of the Syrian Conflict in Summer of 2021 Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (A., 2021).

The Assad government, backed primarily by Russian military power, rules the lion's share of territory. In addition to controlling his traditional coastal strongholds, Assad's government has retaken power in the four largest cities: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama.

Yet much of the country is still held by other groups. A large swath of the country's Northeast is controlled uneasily by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurdish-led government backed primarily by the U.S. and other Western powers.

This study focuses on women's experiences in Syria's highly contested Northwest region, in and around the province of Idlib. This area represents the last region of Syria consistently controlled by what can be loosely described as the non-Kurdish-led Syrian opposition. In the Northwest, a dual-governance system exists whereby different localities are either ruled by the secular Syrian Interim Government (SIG) or the Islamist Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). The former is supported primarily by Turkey but also receives substantial U.S. funding. Al-Qaeda and its supporters back the latter.

While the Assad government and the SDF have each been relatively unified and organizationally coherent throughout the 11-year-long conflict, the remaining Syrian opposition has been a virtual kaleidoscope of ever-shifting political organizations, militias, and coalitions. These groups have lost the most territory recently as Assad has reconquered opposition-held cities and the SDF has expanded the borders of their political domain. As such, over the past several years, the Northwest has become the primary receiving ground for forcibly displaced people fleeing from regions of Syria formerly dominated by opposition groups. In just a few years, Idlib province's population doubled to more than 2.7 million, making it one of the most densely populated parts of the country. IDPs now make up 70% of the population (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2021), and more than 56 percent have been displaced for five years or more (Humanitarian Needs Assessment Program, 2021).

Similar to Syria as a whole, the Northwest is ruled by numerous overlapping and competing institutions: the SIG, the SSG, and a complex network of civilian organizations and NGOs. On the one hand, the SIG, formed by an umbrella of coalition groups, stakes its claim as the sole legitimate representative of the region. The stability of the last two years has allowed it to expand its scope beyond the previous opposition's focus on negotiations, obtaining funding, and coordinating military operations. The SIG's Local Councils operate quotidian services such as schools and hospitals. They have courts and a police system; they answer complaints from

locals; and they deal with infrastructure issues. The umbrella opposition group which formed the SIG is The Syrian National Coalition (in Arabic: '*Etilaf*). The 'Etilaf is also represented at the national and international levels in processes such as the Geneva Peace Talks and the Constitutional Committee. It engages with the Assad government, the international community, and various other representatives of Syrian society under the auspices of the United Nations.

But the SSG, an Islamist governing body that runs its own ministries and civic institutions, challenges the SIG's claims to sole political legitimacy. They also build infrastructure, run schools, and have a legal governance system based loosely on Sharia' law.[1] Adding to the already fraught situation, the Islamist militia Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which backs the SSG, faces military challenges from other smaller Islamist militias in the region.

Overlaid on top of this web of competing local governments is a complex network of international, national, and local civilian organizations like the White Helmets and the Red Crescent, which carry out work such as civilian rescue, home visits for those suffering the effects of Covid-19, humanitarian relief, and socio-political initiatives.

Women in Politics During War and Displacement

Despite gender being a central organizing feature of social life, only in recent decades has it come to the fore in studies of forced migration and displacement (Pessar and Mahler, 2003). This lack of attention previously is not due to an underrepresentation of women among the displaced, as women overall migrate and are forcibly displaced at the same rates as men.

Nonetheless, gender has necessarily played an essential role in conditioning the experiences of the displaced, as "major areas of life - including sexuality, family, education, economy, and the state - are organized according to gender principles and shot through with conflicting interests and hierarchies of power and privilege" (Glenn, 1999:5). For this reason, scholars have argued that studies of migration and displacement that take gender into account must not simply ask the

[1] From a March 2022 email correspondence with a source familiar with the internal workings of the SSG: "Sharia' law and ijtihad is used to decide the rulings issued by the executive levels of the Salvation Government. As for the administrative system in which the institutions are run, it is based on ministerial and administrative decisions and processes specific to each institution according to their vision of the work of each institution. These are subject to continuous change and amendment."

same questions of both men and women. They must examine how gender relations shape the experiences of the displaced, both in the sending communities of migrants and the communities that host them. Do the reshuffling processes of displacement further enforce existing gender norms, as families and communities seek continuity and a base set of standards to reorganize their lives around? Or do they create new openings for different balances of power, divisions of labor, and ideas about how people's lives should be structured?

Women who are displaced face specific challenges. Like men, they may have experienced traumatizing episodes of violence and destruction and heavy economic losses in their families. They must navigate and find their way in a new community where norms, social and political hierarchies, and economic conditions are different. They also continue to deal with the same gender-specific challenges and responsibilities as before displacement. They raise children and manage households, avoid sexual harassment and assault, and navigate limitations on their access to certain kinds of jobs and public spaces. Each of these sets of challenges may compound with and exacerbate the others: sexual harassment may be heightened in a community without established social ties; difficulties finding work become urgent challenges for widows who suddenly find themselves needing to provide financially for their families; advocating for the needs of a child who is sick can be especially treacherous when you do not know where to go for medical help.

Many of these challenges could be better addressed with direct input from women in these communities. But as many other scholars have noted, war and violence tend to reduce women's involvement in politics (Khatib, 2008; Williams and Kaufman 2010; Johansson-Nogués 2013). Nevertheless, women have emerged as political leaders and organizers in various facets of the Syrian uprising, especially in the non-violent arenas of political contestation. Gilbert (2020) finds that women's involvement was highly contingent on women's organizational capacities and ruling groups' ideologies in their region. However, in many areas, even when women try to participate in community meetings, men still often take over and exclude women when a decision needs to be made.

Syrian Women in Politics

Women's overall underrepresentation in Syria's conflict-era political institutions is a continuation of patterns from the pre-conflict era, despite the many other changes the uprising and war have brought. Since 1963, Syria has been governed by one-party rule under the Ba'ath Party. The Ba'ath Party's relationship with women's status has been complicated. On the one hand, at the time of the party's takeover, they pledged full gender equality. In the 1973 Constitution, legally, women were guaranteed the right to vote, education, work, and the ability to run for office. Still, in practice, these legal rights were contradicted by gender-discriminatory facets of the Personal Status Law; laws regarding adultery and so-called "honor crimes" in the Penal Code; and the Nationality Law, which only allows men to pass their Syrian nationality onto their children (al-Rahabi 2005). As of 2010, women comprised 12.4% of the Syrian parliament, making the country's rank 91st out of 142 countries in the world for women's representation in the parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). Yet even these numbers tend to obscure the degree of marginalization of women in Syrian politics, as Syria does not operate under the democratic rule of law. As Marina Ottaway (2004, 6) states it: "putting in place programs to get more women elected to powerless parliaments neither empowered women nor promotes democracy." Furthermore, women have been de facto highly economically disenfranchised for decades, Syria has had one of the lowest rates of women's employment in the world (World Bank Data, 2022).

2011 was a turning point in all aspects of Syrian politics. Inspired by the overthrow of heads of state in nearby Tunisia and Egypt, people took to the streets calling for freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. The early protests in 2011 featured a notable degree of women's participation and coordination. Women also took up critical roles in oppositional media and humanitarian work. But at higher leadership levels, women remain underrepresented. As Razan Zaitouneh,[2] the co-founder of the oppositional Local Coordination Committees lamented, women's active participation and contributions were not reflected in the leadership roles of these committees.[3]

[2] Razan Zaitouneh is a Syrian human rights lawyer and activist. She played a central leadership role in the 2011 uprising; she co-founded and was the spokesperson of The Local Coordination Committees of Syria. Zaitouneh was kidnapped on 9 December 2013, most likely by Jaysh al-Islam. Her fate remains unknown.

[3] Zaitouneh came to this conclusion after she conducted a survey sent to all the dozens of local committees asking about female participation and receiving unenthusiastic participation by only 16 local committees (Zaitouneh 2013).

The majority of political efforts regarding women's inclusion in politics have focused on women's participation in peace-making initiatives. Before the conflict, Syria did not have a national plan[4] for UN resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security[5] and the political opposition has only made minor progress in this regard. In 2016, the UN established the Syrian Women's Advisory Board[6] and an additional women's advisory board to the High Negotiations Committee. In 2019, with the establishment of the Syrian Constitutional Committee,[7] some successful efforts have been made to include women as members, with women making up 30% of the membership.

Unfortunately, much less effort has been devoted to supporting women's participation at the local governance level, even though the conflict has imposed new de facto realities of a decentralized governance system throughout the country. These national-level initiatives are increasingly disconnected from the governance that shapes Syrians' daily lives. Overall, the absence of a practical framework for women's inclusion at all levels of public affairs undermines the progress made at the national levels.

This pattern of women's political marginalization in political institutions in the Northwest has continued and has even perhaps worsened over the past decade of conflict. Currently, the SIG and Local Councils have a small percentage of women members (Syrian Interim Government, 2022), and the SSG is opposed to women in governance altogether. In the Local Councils, women remain underrepresented in the executive offices and on decision-making levels, while in some councils women have succeeded in obtaining lower level administrative posts (Hajjar et al. 2017). While SIG did assign some women to positions as heads of ministries, these were notably restricted to stereotypically female soft sectors such as child care, education, and culture. For instance, Dr. Taghrid Al-Hajli was assigned to the duties of Minister of Culture and Family in Ahmad Tu'mah's Cabinet (Al-Manar News Network, 2013), and later, Dr. Huda Al-Abbassi was

[4] A list of countries that have a national action plan: https://www.securitywomen.org/united-nations/unscr-1325-and-national-action-plans-nap
[5] https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/
[6] https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/women%E2%80%99s-advisory-board
[7] Link to UN website on the Constitutional Committee here: https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/constitutional-committee-0

assigned Minister of Education in Abdurrahman Mustafa's Cabinet (Ugarit Post, 2018).[8] Meanwhile, the SSG has no women in their cabinet at all (Syrian Salvation Government, 2022).[9]

In general, governing bodies in northwest Syria, and indeed political bodies involved in Syria as a whole, continue to circumvent the pressures to increase the numbers of women in political roles by funneling women off into women's affairs offices, women's committees, or even advisory bodies, rather than integrating them into already existing governmental bodies and positions. For example, instead of including women as lead mediators during UN peace talks, UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura established a Women's Advisory Board (Yakupitiyage, 2016), a move criticized as failing to allow women meaningful contributions to the peace process (Syria Justice and Accountability Center, 2016). Similarly, in response to criticisms of women's weak representation in their High Negotiation Committee, the Syrian Opposition Negotiation Committee formed a Women's Consultative Committee rather than directly bringing more women into their core negotiating team (OrientNet, 2016; Syrian Opposition Negotiating Committee, 2016). Sometimes women are recruited as staff members in governance bodies, for no other reason than to comply with the conditions of the donors who fund specific projects (Hajjar et al., 2017)

It's worth noting that in contrast to official political institutions, women have found more success in working inside and alongside NGO organizations, which have mushroomed on the back of multiple streams of international funding into and around Syria. When governance structures have been more focused on military activity or international negotiations, these NGOs have taken on quasi-governance roles in many aspects of daily life.

The decentralized and complex governance structures, of the Northwest, specifically and Syria more generally, present obstacles but also new opportunities. Women's exclusion from political life is not a foregone conclusion. Still, it may be highly contingent on the ideologies of ruling institutions, the organizational capacities of women in various areas, and the trajectory of ongoing social and economic changes on the ground.

[8] Since Dr. After Al-Abbassi's resignation from the SIG, no woman has been named or nominated to any ministry.
[9] A link to their website: https://syriansg.org/

In this paper, we look at women's involvement at all levels of governance in Northwest Syria: in the public institutions that they deal with daily; both competing governments; the Local Councils; the justice system; domestic and international NGOs; and national-level peace-making and diplomatic institutions.

OUR PARTICIPANTS

In this study, we sought to solicit women's opinions in Sarmada and Kafar Takharim, two small towns in the Idlib governorate which are considered prominent hubs for IDPs. Hosting populations and IDPs have lived together side by side there for years now. Our study conducted eight focus groups with 66 women, both IDPs and native residents, about what they thought were the most pressing issues they faced. We also conducted a survey study of 127 women, 48% of whom participated in the focus groups.

The average age of participants in our study was 32, with the youngest participant being 15 years old and the oldest 55. 75% of participants were married, and 3% were divorced or widowed. 70% of participants had children; and among those with children, the average number of children was four. With regards to education, 29% of the participants had received only a primary education, 22% only up to a middle school education, 24% only up to a secondary education, and 25% had attended university. In terms of place of residence, 35% of participants lived in Saramada, 25% lived in Kafr Takharim, and other participants lived in surrounding areas such as the camps in Kawkaba, Atlma, and Jabal Zawiya. Our participants had a wide range of origins from across Syria, but the plurality came from the Idlib province, as shown in figure 2 below.

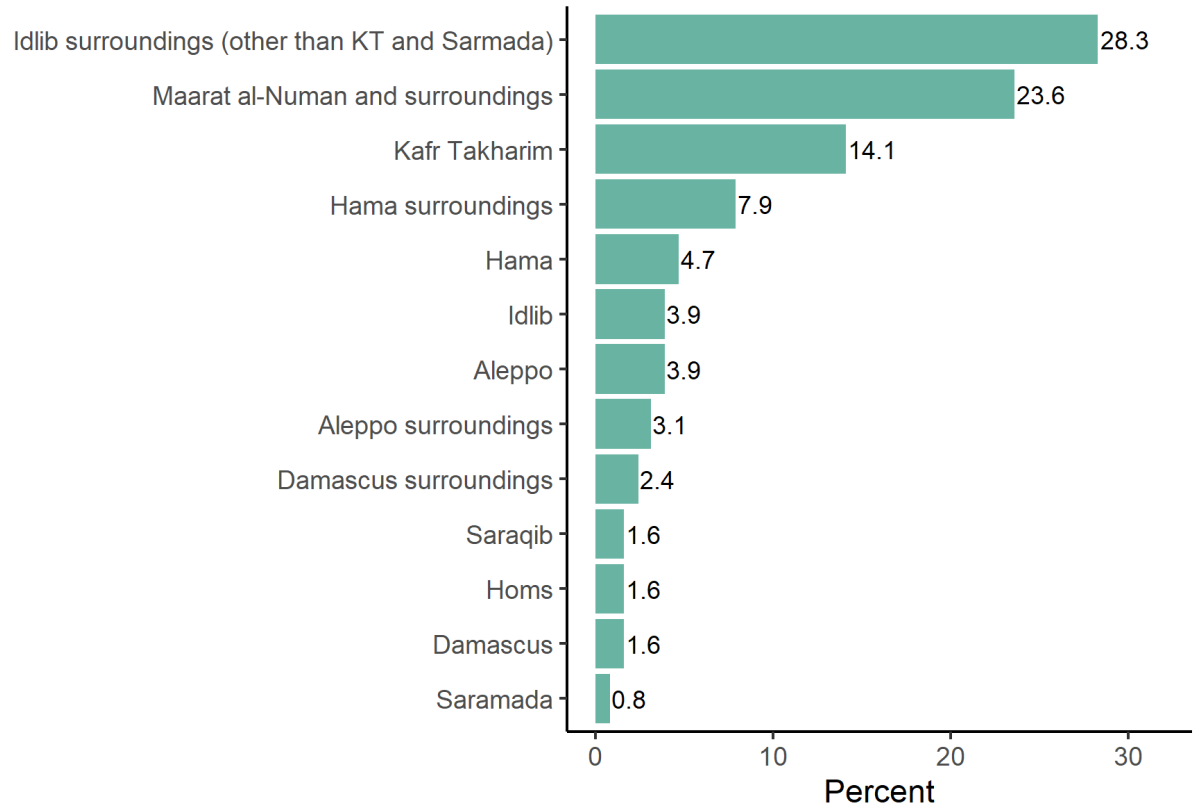

Figure 2: Locations of Origin of Participants, Percentages.

EMERGENT THEMES

The Responsibilities of Missing Men

In Syria, men have traditionally held the role of breadwinners and protectors. Yet many fathers, husbands, and brothers have been killed, disabled, or imprisoned due to the conflict. Women in these families are suddenly confronted with a new duty of providing economically for their family and ensuring their physical security in addition to their familiar responsibilities of managing domestic affairs. In many cases, especially among older women, they have little educational background and have never worked for pay before.

Tala noted: “In the beginning, a man was present, and the woman would help him. Now, she is responsible for raising the kids, educating them, working, expenses -- she has every type of responsibility because of the loss of her husband.”

Sometimes these new economic challenges have left women vulnerable to exploitation. One of the participants, Yara, brought up the pressures around accessing aid from humanitarian NGOs: “Sexual exploitation [is a huge problem]. For example, I’ve heard that if you go to request a food basket, sometimes you don't get it unless you agree to have sex.”

Yet, as is often the case with war, new challenges also came with new openings. Lubaba best expressed these opportunities:

> *In the shadow of the war, there were women who came out and were standing with men, they were nurses and emergency medics, and they took on leadership roles. They proved themselves. In the beginning, women were rejected from society, but now some women work in things we used to say we would never see a woman working in.*

Women reported taking on new tasks and learning new skills such as driving cars, construction, and setting up fires. Nisreen described her experience of taking on new challenges:

> *The most difficult experience was the death of my two brothers during our displacement from our area in the Al-Ghab Plains. The loss affected me greatly. I started taking on additional burdens such as chopping firewood so that my father would not feel the loss of my brothers.*

Aseel reported on learning how to defend herself from physical harm: “I learned to shoot with a gun to protect myself in case I get into trouble.”

In addition to stories of the heavy burdens born by the conflict, our participants also frequently took pride in overcoming immense challenges. Women gave us accounts of continuing education despite all odds, caring for their families, and building new lives in a new place. Lamar praised the leadership roles women had taken on: “We did not give up, neither professionally, nor financially, nor in education.” Umaima said: “Sometimes, displacement and migration sometimes gave women greater opportunities because it motivated them.”

Norms and Traditions

The phrase "norms and traditions" (*'adaat wa taqaleed*) was the single most spontaneously repeated phrase across respondents in all our focus groups as a challenge facing women. "One of the challenges is the norms and traditions in our society. Women are limited to a certain arena. They cannot go beyond these limits", notes Inana.

Women described these norms as coming from husbands, parents, and society at large. Amani, who participated with us in Sarmada, said:

> *Norms and traditions [are a challenge women face]. You find that women desire to get out, but they do not find encouragement from their husband and family. This prevents them from participating in all fields, such as health and education. Women aspire to engage in many fields, but there is no encouragement from those around them, so they are always restricted.*

Work was one frequently mentioned area where norms and traditions narrowed the scope of options available to our participants, as Nawa explained: "The challenges, in general, are the presence of a patriarchal society. Men have a greater scope entering into any kind of work they want, more than women do."

Women also reported that norms of disregarding women's opinions meant that men ignored them when they spoke up about an issue. A handful of participants also said that cultural norms leading to a lack of male involvement in domestic affairs created additional burdens for women.

Some participants thought that change could only come from changing the norms and traditions in their own families first. Khadija represented this perspective: "I need to work at the level of my household, work to teach my children that women have rights. If we raise our kids right, maybe it will change [society's] understanding."

Interestingly, multiple women cited religion as a *solution* to this problem. Several of our devout participants argued that the anti-feminist attitudes of many official Islamist institutions were a

distortion, such as Muhja, who argued that a primary barrier to women participating in governance was a "lack of Islamic culture." None of the comments from our participants explicitly linked what they saw as harmful "norms and traditions" to an Islamic basis. This suggestion may be surprising considering that many of the strongest proponents for excluding women from public life come from religious institutions that use arguments drawing on Islamic texts.

One public incident was illustrative of this dynamic. Just before conducting our study, in August 2021, the Syrian Islamic Council[10] declared its official position on gender equality during President Sheikh Osama al-Rifai's Friday sermon (al-Khateb 2021). He spoke to the local community, warning against women's participation in foreign organizations in the region, characterizing them as breaking with religion and customs. He added that the West and the United Nations recruit women intending to disrupt the stability of Syria's family and social order by spreading foreign ideas that are banned under Islamic law. However, Al Rifai's comments elicited hostile reactions on social media (Al Shami 2021), even from women who wear the hijab and are outwardly pious.

Freedom of Movement

Participants repeatedly brought up the difficulties of moving freely through their areas as a challenge for women. While these restrictions were not new in their lives, everyone agreed that they had become exacerbated after displacement. Sumaia said: "You are in danger as long as you are displaced and among strangers, and dangerous things can happen, and we must always keep that in mind." Raihana described:

> *There was not this fear before displacement. It grew due to the extreme danger [we faced]. Before everyone knew each other, but [now] everyone only watches out for the women from their hometown.*

However, in a more in-depth discussion of these challenges, infrastructure emerged as a critical contributing factor to this problem. Areas that had received IDPs had less developed services and

[10] A link to their website here: http://sy-sic.com/

transit, especially compared to the towns and cities where many IDPs came from. This already underdeveloped infrastructure had come under additional strain due to the new population density of the area. This problem was particularly notable in the sessions in Sarmada.

The area's physical infrastructure was cited repeatedly as a significant challenge negatively impacting women's ability to study, work, and access local political and aid institutions. Asmaa said:"The traffic in the streets sometimes prevents me from attending sessions held at the [women NGOs] centers."

In some cases, infrastructure issues served to compound other constraints on women's movement such as sexual harassment, Lubaba explained:

> *My husband is sick and unable to work. So for the first time in my life, circumstances forced me to give private lessons. These lessons ended in the evening. I wasn't scared of that except that cars would pass by and then stop and [the drivers] would tell me, "Come with me," and that would only be in dark areas because I am a woman and there are no lights in that area like on the road or in Sarmada city. That would happen over and over, nearly daily, and there is no surveillance or help in lighting the path to avoid this harassment.*

Lack of infrastructure also poses a significant barrier to ensuring their children's education, particularly girls. Instead of small schools serving a relatively nearby community, participants described schools servicing a large population across wide geographic expanses. One participant's child attended a school servicing four refugee camps. This makes women's traditional task of contributing to children's educational success especially difficult, as Hadia explained:

> *The distance of schools from the camps [is a challenge]. My daughter is in ninth grade this year, and she has to traverse a very long distance [to get to school], and that obligates a lot of girls to leave their studies.*

Another way that infrastructure affects women's movement is through the lack of secure, protective housing for IDPs. Many new arrivals have to make do with makeshift forms of insecure shelter that offer little privacy or safety. As Rukaia pointed out, these women have "no home to protect [their] children," posing an especially vexing problem for women who want or need to leave the camps for work. Furthermore, women tend to have higher expectations of modesty than men, so the lack of private bathrooms in the camps poses a daily challenge.

Women advocated for themselves to ease these pressures on freedom of movement. Najat recounted the organizing she had collectively engaged in with the local government: "In Kafr Taal, we suggested to the police that we need to have regular patrols. They responded to this, and this eased the challenges we faced."

But governments themselves also contributed to these restrictions on movement. The Islamist SSG's control of areas is perceived as limiting women's ability to operate freely, through its imposition of more strict gender segregation. Women and girls in SSG control areas face restrictions, including barriers to their movement and from engaging in public life. Despite its more developed infrastructure, Idlib, the largest nearby city controlled by SSG, was considered by our participants as closed off to women without a male custodian.

Divisions Between IDPs and Long Term Residents

Different opinions emerged among our participants regarding the relative difficulties IDPs face versus long-term residents of Sarmada and Kfar Takharim. Undoubtedly, IDPs faced obstacles that non-displaced women had not encountered. Rahma reported:

> *The resident woman is surrounded by people who she knows, but the migrant woman came to a new society, maybe just with herself and her immediate family. Her friends and relatives aren't with her here, so she will feel like a stranger to this place. She lost her job if she had been working […]. Here she's starting her life again from zero*.

Many IDPs complained about favoritism among the community of long-term residents and IDPs being shut out of opportunities. Across the Arab world, the necessity of *wasta* (connections or

networking) for getting into jobs is widespread. Lujain explained, “I have to deal with housing costs, but I do not have a source of income because of my inability to get work. Every job opening needs a *wasta* and a recommendation.” IDP women lamented that due to a lack of job opportunities for the displaced, they were forced to rely on the relief packages provided by aid agencies. Laila expressed that she would prefer work opportunities rather than dependence on these relief packages.

Other participants pushed back against this view or saw the challenges of the two groups as comparable. Maytham pointed out: “The suffering is on both sides, the displaced women and the resident women. All of us are rebuilding our lives in every way.” Many voiced that life had become harder for both, as both suffered from the general effects of the conflict and its fallout: a spiraling economy, overcrowding, lack of sufficient educational resources for children, and strained infrastructure. Yet some participants wanted to point out that the arrival of IDPs should not be considered a disadvantageous development for the region's economy. Shaam said:

> *The long-term residents have come to consider displaced people as encroaching on their livelihood, and they fail to note that their business has increased because of the displaced people [moving to their area].*

Increased Obstacles to Education

Before 2011, Syria had made significant progress in increasing women’s access to education; the conflict has had devastating consequences for women and girls’ schooling. (See Figure 3)

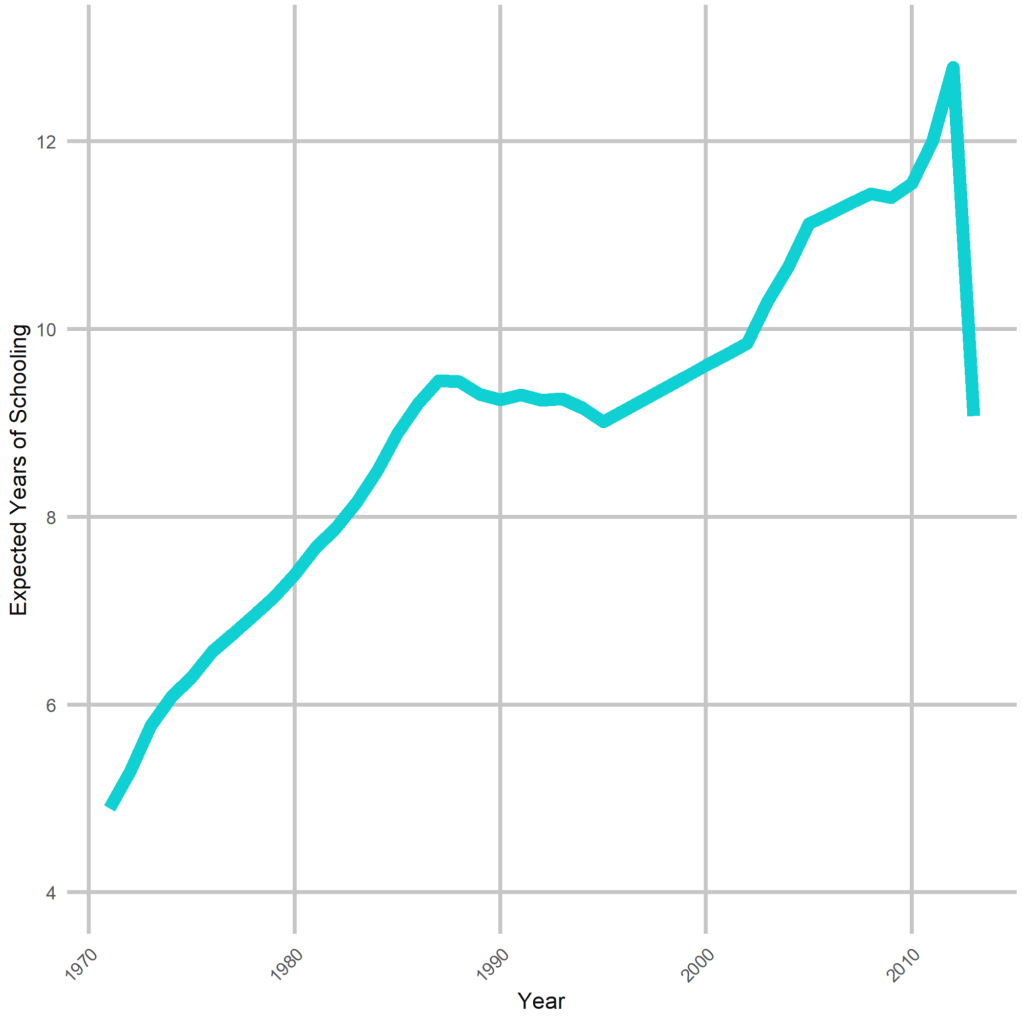

Figure 3: Expected Years of Schooling for Women in Syria, 1970 - 2013.
Data source: World Bank Gender Statistics (World Bank 2021).

The conflict has hurt educational prospects for all young people. Most obviously, there are the pressing difficulties of the physical danger of simply leaving the house and arriving at school and other consequences of the physical violence. Namsa explained why she almost dropped out of school at one point right before the end of the semester test:

> *A plane bombed us a week before our finals, and the first day of the finals coincided with the first day of the mourning period for my father after he was killed. At first, I was going to excuse myself from the exam, but my mother and siblings encouraged me not to lose*

> *the opportunity to complete the exam. They told me, "Just try it, if you pass, that is good, and if you don't pass, at least you will have the experience.*"

In some cases, schools and universities have simply shut down or been destroyed. Lubna expressed: "Parents have a lot of fear for their children because the area has changed. Sometimes there aren't schools nearby, there aren't universities."

Secondary consequences of the conflict, such as rampant inflation, also impede educational goals. Ruba explained how financial challenges make completing post-secondary education difficult: "If we go to enroll in a university or institute, the biggest challenge is the fee of 100, 75, or 50 dollars, for example."

Yet women face distinct challenges. In particular, "norms and traditions" were cited as a significant obstacle to their educational attainment. When asked what the most critical challenge faced by women, Najlaa answered:

> *Norms and traditions. When the war started, I was finishing high school and was accepted to university. But my parents forbid me from going, not only because of fear of my security. The biggest reason was norms and traditions and the fear of what others would say*.

Lastly, overcrowding in households was cited as a factor encouraging families to marry off teenage daughters before they could complete their education, a reversal of previous trends towards later marriage in Syria.

Women's lack of access to education poses enormous problems in the new context where they are responsible for so much more in the home. Faced with new financial responsibilities that they had been sheltered from before displacement, Mania pointed out:

> *We were forced to work despite the continued presence of children and domestic obligations, so the pressure on women was greater. This was especially hard due to the*

> *lack of educational degrees, which meant that women had to work sometimes cooking food for people.*

Among less-educated women who had managed to find white-collar work, their lack of degrees meant they faced additional disrespect in the workplace. Nahla noted:

> *I work as a supervisor in an orphanage camp, but society confronted me saying, ''No people will ever prosper who entrust their leadership to a woman''[11]. Despite my ability to manage things, [they dismissed me] because they knew I didn't have an advanced education.*

Participants also saw a lack of education as a significant obstacle to women's participation in local politics.

Troubles at Work

Participants reported that despite small numbers, women had entered into a wide variety of ever-expanding fields of work, such as business, education, engineering, and health. Yet teaching, nursing, and NGOs were mentioned as the fields most open to women. Many said that they had been pressured into these fields in particular after rejection from other areas of work that they were more interested in. This is similar to what happened to Rawia: "The society in which I live does not allow me to work as anything other than a school teacher under the pretext of other work being 'shameful.' For men, all jobs are available."

Returning to the theme of freedom of movement, lack of reasonably nearby work was a significant obstacle to employment. Despite women having some presence in various fields, finding women at the level of management and administration was rare. Moreover, even when they could access gainful employment, women reported particular difficulties at work. Hanan described her experience:

[11] This refers to a *hadith* claimed to be said by Abu Bakrah (Sunan an-Nasa'i 5388, Book 49, Hadith 10)

> *I had an experience as a school principal. Because I am a woman, there was a lot of harassment, and many men envied my position. [I tried to overcome it] but because of the harassment, I handed over the work equipment to the local council. However, the local council handed over the equipment to someone else to work in. I wanted to complain to the courts, but as a woman, I preferred to abandon everything and not go to court.*

Participants repeatedly argued that the simple fact of women's absence from specific fields, such as public administration, the judiciary, and law enforcement had ripple effects that made all women's lives more difficult in other ways. For example, Layal said, "I would like for my daughter to study medicine because it would make it easier for many women to keep updated on their health, considering that they aren't allowed to visit a male doctor."

WOMEN IN AND AROUND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The Complex Governance of Northwest Syria

Since the early days of the 2011 protests, Idlib province was a locus of the Syrian political opposition. Its highly strategic location near the Syrian-Turkish border played a major role in repelling Assad's forces from large areas of the province relatively early in the conflict.

In May 2017, a framework for de-escalation of the conflict was agreed upon in the Astana Talks between Russia, Iran, and Turkey (Collins, 2017; Reuters and the Associated Press, 2017). Four ceasefire zones or de-escalation zones were suggested to calm the heavy fighting between the various groups participating in the Syrian war. One of these de-escalation zones was in the greater Idlib area.. In 2018, Turkey and Russia agreed to a demilitarization deal to cool down the escalating fighting between Assad's forces and various opposition and Islamist militias in Idlib. This deal allowed for a Turkish and Russian joint-patrolled demilitarized zone, with Assad refraining from attacks within Idlib territory. In effect, the deal set the stage for a swath of Northwest Syria to remain out of the rule of Assad's forces for the indeterminate future (Chulov, 2018).

The upshot of all these agreements was that following the Assad government's capture of significant regions of the country in the second half of the conflict, Idlib province was the receiving destination of the vast majority of forced displacement convoys (Siege Watch 2018). The displaced in Idlib would be governed by a system set up by the political opposition.

As a political hub for the anti-Assad movement, Idlib passed through governance by many iterations and facets of the Syrian opposition. These are too many to summarize here adequately. Still, a consistent organizational trope is Local Councils, based on the Local Coordination Committees, which were one of the first governing bodies which emerged in Syria during the course of the uprising. They were first suggested as an organizing strategy by opposition activist and intellectual Omar Aziz's[12] 2011 proposal which emphasized the need for neighborhood-based coordination bodies to organize political protest work and provide daily functions for the community (Aziz 2013). However, the Local Coordination Committees always faced a tense and sometimes outright contentious relationship with the larger and better-funded regional-level and national-level political opposition groups and militias which emerged later in the conflict (Haddad and Wind 2014: 410, Hajjar et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, in one form or another, the Local Councils in Idlib survived through the decade of conflict. They became integrated as part of the governance structures of SIG, which now has control of much of the Idlib province. SIG[13] is an oppositional Syrian government administration founded by the Syrian National Council in 2013 (Chulov 2013). It has indirect influence over various sections of the country, but primarily in the Idlib region, and claims to be the only legitimate government representing the Syrian opposition. It is tied politically to the elements of the Syrian opposition which carry out negotiations at the international level.

But SIG's claim to monopoly power in the Northwest is not uncontested. For several years, the SIG has faced competition from the Islamist SSG[14]; backed by the hardline Al-Qaeda affiliated rebel coalition Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) (Nassar et al., 2017). The SSG has successfully

[12] Omar Aziz was a Syrian economist and a pacifist activist. Aziz was detained and died in detention on February 16, 2013 https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/22/syria-activist-dies-jail-second-feared-dead
[13] https://www.syriaig.net/ar/home
[14] https://syriansg.org/

pushed the SIG out of many areas of the province starting in 2019, even wresting control of the main largest city of Idlib, bringing about the resignation of the SIG's Prime Minister and forcing the reallocation of its headquarters to Azaz in the Aleppo Governorate(al-Khateb 2019). The SSG has established its parallel governance system, forming a Ministry of Justice, a schooling network, and other local services (The Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2022).

On top of this fractured and competing dual governance system, a vast network of international and national NGOs and humanitarian organizations provide services both with and without the coordination and permission of these governing bodies. Many of the services provided are so essential that in almost any other context, they would typically be the purview of the government (such as public housing provisions).

The system described above is the complex world of governance in which women in Northwest Syria find themselves operating. In these local governing bodies, women are not well-represented. Our study sought to identify what they saw as the biggest hurdles to navigating these governance structures and how women could better advocate for their needs in this environment.

Women in the Public Sphere

In discussions on work, public life, and women's roles, it was repeatedly mentioned that while women had come to work in a wide variety of roles, there still existed some spheres reserved primarily for men. In particular, public-facing, politically-oriented work such as the practice of law, journalism, public administration, and elected public office were seen to be almost entirely off-limits to women due to cultural taboos. One participant even reported that the local municipal government would not allow women to run for office there.

Women's absence from the world of politics was not due to their own lack of interest. When asked about their interest in politics on a scale of 1 to 10, a large proportion of women expressed a high level of interest in politics, with the average score being 4.6. Just 24% of participants indicated lack of interest as a reason for their lack of participation in politics. Many women said that they and other women they know would have liked to study and work in law, politics, and

media, but these fields rejected them. Women expressed resentment at the lack of representation in the crucial political decision-making which shaped their lives. Referring to the negotiations between the Assad government and the Syrian opposition, women reported that they felt that no women had been consulted at all. “They just brought us buses and said, go.” Aya said: “No, we did not interfere in the agreements; we merely shared in the suffering.”

Law was the profession most widely cited among participants as off-limits to women. Mai noted, “I would have liked to work in law, but I couldn’t. I would have liked to work in civil defense, but they forbid me, so I worked in early childhood education.” Journalism was also mentioned as entirely inaccessible. Ayla described: “I wanted to study journalism and media, but they didn’t let me because they said that demands a lot of travel and moving around and so it was inappropriate, so I studied early childhood education.”

However, women appeared to take pride in the notable exceptions to this pattern of gendered exclusion from political fields. In particular, the nomination of Dr. Huda Al-Abbasi to the role of the Minister of SIG seemed to serve as a prominent example of a woman who had achieved success in politics. But because she later stepped down, even her story was seen as a mixed example. Khawla said: “Huda Abbasi became the Minister of Education, but because of the challenges she faced from society, she resigned.” In her statement on her resignation released on her personal Facebook page, Dr. Abbasi wrote:

The past period has been difficult for me as a minister of education as I faced many difficulties, hurdles and challenges. Unfortunately, there have been several attempts to thwart [my work] from those who were supposed to support and back me in my work (Abassi, 2021).

Women expressed their strong desire to see more women judges, administrators, legal authorities, and decision-makers. Thuraya pointed out: “There should be women in the Local Councils and the refugee camp’s local council and the administration of the camps and the police stations. There is no female director of the camps - even among the heads of the departments, there are no women.” Participants felt that women’s exclusion from politics was not only a problem simply because it limited women’s employment options. More crucially, they thought

that the absence of women from these fields of employment had much broader consequences for the functioning of law, justice, and public institutions. The lack of women employees in public institutions increased women's hardships, especially for those from conservative backgrounds unaccustomed to mixing socially with men and consulting with men directly. While these women would have previously sent male family members on their behalf, this was no longer possible in many cases. Abeer argued:

> *There is a need for female employees [in the council for the camps] because of how many widows and women who have lost their men come to the council. Some of them end up not coming because of shyness [from men].*

In clarifying what they feared about entering public institutions, women reported anxieties around the possibility of experiencing harassment and being exploited. They said it was difficult to assert themselves without a woman judge present because certain topics were embarrassing to broach with a male judge. Nadia lamented,

> *I wish that there were a woman in a position of authority and strength, who if you went to her, would tell you 'I'm ready to stand up for your rights and protect you,' instead of having to go to a man for your rights.*

Haifaa said: "I am all for women pursuing work in whatever field they desire, whether as a judge, president, or policeman, because that way women's issues can be understood."

Governing Entities

Local Councils

Women reported a range of interactions, both positive and negative, with the Local Councils. Of note, 81% of women reported no interaction with the Local Councils, while one woman in our study reported that she was a local council member. Participants said that there was a minimal presence of women as members of the Local Councils, making it more difficult to access help. Walaa noted:

> *There are no female employees in the Local Council. If there were, my dealings with the Council would have been better. I prefer that there be a percentage of women, even if it's two women out of 10 men.*

Several participants who indicated they had worked with the Local Councils reported positive experiences. One participant noted that she and two other women from her NGO had cooperated with the Local Council on a project at a camp for IDPs, and "It was a very effective experience and the seven men we worked with (from the council) listened to us." Suhaila found them to be open but ineffective: "For me, when I turned to the Local Council for an issue, I found them to be understanding, they listened to my views and my problems, and I received promises of help from them. But not all the promises were fulfilled."

However, far more prevalent in our focus groups were complaints about being unable to use the Local Councils as women. Some women simply never went to the Council because they assumed it would be unwelcoming or they were not comfortable in such a male-dominated environment. Juhaina explained:

> *My electricity was cut, and the municipal employee told me to go to the municipal office to pay fees. How can I go to the municipality?! They're all men, I swear, I didn't go. I don't have a family. I have no one. I looked for a telephone number.*

Daad pointed out that, "Veiled women do not like to appear or vote in front of men. Some men would not send women to the council, and some widows do not go for fear of mixing with men."

But many women did report trying to go directly to their Local Councils and confirming that these assumptions were not unfounded. In Sarmada, one woman who had contacted the council for an issue reported that "men communicated with the council, not us." In particular, women in the sessions in Kafr Takharim had many negative experiences. Hanaa described:

> *If there were a woman in the council, it would have helped us more. One time, I went to the council, and […] we entered the administration room, spoke about the project, and [the employee] said give me your names. We gave our names, and he didn't say anything. We were leaving, and he was holding the papers, and he ripped them up and threw them away. If there had been a woman, she would have sat and talked with us about what to do.*

Rafah said:

> *One of the widows had a complaint about the police… so she went to the council. She knocked on the door and went inside and said, "I have a complaint." They told her, "What are you doing here?! Go, go, bring a man for me to talk to. Why are you here? What brought you here?"'*

Women in Kfar Takharim had already demanded the presence of more women to alleviate these challenges, Jamila explained:

> *The women in Kafr Takharim demanded… that there be a voice in a room that is a woman... It was rejected, and the response was: "How do you as a woman want to come to participate with us and sit and take a seat in the council? By what right do you demand a seat for you in the council?" Even though this is a natural right as long as you are discussing matters that affect the country! Women are part of the country, so how are you not giving us just a seat, a voice? You couldn't offer this simple thing?!*

The Police and Courts

Participants saw institutions associated with criminal justice and the rule of law as essentially off limits to women, even just as citizens trying to access their services. Less than 10% of participants had used any judicial institutions. Lubna noted: "A woman can't go everywhere… For example, instead of going to court or the police, she's ready to give up all her rights just to not go to those places, unlike a man." Most women flat out said they avoided using the court system even when they knew they were in the legal right because of discomfort. "There is no comfort in dealing with the judiciary; they might as well not exist."

There are virtually no women working at any level of the criminal justice system or in the security apparatus. Jinan, a participant from Sarmada said:

> *In the year that I was going to the court, I did not come across any women employees. The only women present were there to do body searches. There were a lot of issues that I could not talk about because only men were present*.

Virtually all women saw the lack of women employed among police forces, legal services, and the judiciary as a significant problem impeding their ability to use them. Randa argued:

> *As for the judiciary, we must demand the presence of a female judge or that there be assistance to the judge so that women can explain their cases comfortably. For example, on the day of my divorce, I could not explain to the judge why I wanted to divorce, and I lost my case because of that.*

The Syrian Interim Government and the Syrian Salvation Government

Of the participants, 17.4% reported interaction with either the SIG or SSG. These interactions essentially took the form of everyday bureaucratic tasks like registering for university courses or finding housing. Comments on either of the governments tended to be more favorable than other public institutions, including their subsidiary Local Councils, with fewer participants commenting that they thought them to be illegitimate or non-accountable. Still, many participants also voiced negative views regarding the government's inability to address pressing issues facing their constituents. Women in focus groups were aware of the presence of women in the SIG, although the only woman referred to by name (repeatedly) was Dr. Huda Abbassi.

Perspectives on the Islamist SSG were mixed. While none of our participants voiced strong support for their ideology, some had come to support them on practical grounds regarding their quotidian work. For example, we heard comments of support such as:"I support the Salvation Government just for education; their education system here is better than in the North," and "I

support the Salvation Government as long as they make factories so that our children aren't obligated to go elsewhere to work."

But for other participants, the practical benefits offered by the SSG were not enough to outweigh their adverse effects: "I previously worked as a policewoman and was a candidate for the local council before my displacement, but the Salvation Government dissolved and canceled all of our work."

Syrian Political Opposition

Of the participants, 11.9%reported interaction with the official Syrian opposition, which had received an average positivity rating of 3 out of 10. Several women commented that they had not interacted with them because they felt they were not interested or knowledgeable about politics or because "women are not included in political discussions." In several sessions, participants expressed a consensus of an antagonistic perspective on the political opposition, saying they are unelected and do not care about what the people think of them.

The Constitutional Committee

Just 4.7% of participants reported any interaction with the Constitutional Committee. Among this percentage, a handful of participants reported in-depth and positive interactions. Many women volunteered that they felt that the assembly was illegitimate, had no political basis among the Syrian people, and offered no space for interaction. Some participants even asserted that "there is no Constitutional Committee ."

Domestic and International NGOs

Half of all participants reported interaction with either a domestic or international NGO, as clients, collaborators, volunteers, and employees. "There are a lot of women in NGOs," reported participant Zahraa. Women across our focus groups held strikingly positive views of NGOs; they received the highest positivity ratings in our surveys.

These positive ratings were accorded for by two reasons. First, NGOs were seen as the public institutions most closely connected to the community and concrete work. Second, women explicitly attributed their positive experience as clients of NGO aid to those in which there is the presence of women employees in these organizations:

> *In the arena of NGO work, if men come, for example, they see "oh a pretty girl" or "she wears makeup," they're like "give me your number,." Seriously, there's a lot of exploitation going on in NGO work. But when it's women dealing with women, it's more honest.*

Women's Advisory Council

Of the women in our focus groups, 19% reported having interacted with the Women's Advisory Council. Among women who had interacted with the Women's Advisory Council, they rated their experience as 5.6 on a ten=point scale, with ten being the most positive. Women's degree of knowledge and interaction ranged from insisting that such an institution does not exist to reporting "constant following of their activities" (with responses tending much more towards the former). However, many women who believed that there was no such thing as a Women's Advisory Council expressed their support for its concept and their hopes that someone might establish such a council in their local area.

Armed Groups

The vast majority of women had no interaction with armed groups and held a negative opinion of them. The militias were seen as disconnected from the rest of society and uncaring. Amira had a particularly intimate story:

> *I'm against the armed militias, I interact with them 0%. My son was with them, and he was injured. No one treated him. I waited a year for them to treat him. They didn't care; they didn't help with anything. It got to the point that he died, and they didn't help.*

Najwa saw them as a necessary but unfortunate reality of life. "I am originally with the peaceful revolution, so I do not have a clear position towards them, but I acknowledge that it's just

reality." They didn't have any especially harsh criticisms except when armed groups had left the front lines and entered urban and residential areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through our analysis, we ended up with a set of recommendations for all stakeholders.

Local Governance Institutions

Local governing entities, whether we agree with them politically or not, are the institutions that have emerged from the Syrian conflict. All these entities have responsibilities to be borne at all levels of administration, justice, and services. We call on all local governance entities, whether Local Councils, provincial councils, SIG, or SSG to:

- Encourage the training of women for fields related to governance such as law, criminal justice, and public administration. Public awareness of the need for women in these roles and the appropriateness of these fields for women is needed.
- Set hiring quotas for women for administrative roles at all levels of local politics and government services in order to facilitate women's ability to access these institutions.
- Pay special attention to infrastructure failings that may limit women's freedom of movement -- good lighting, clear paths to schools and other essential facilities from residential areas, and visible walkways that allow for communities to watch out for the safety of all passersby.
- Provide accessible (close to residential centers) community meetings to discuss governance issues with women in their local communities.
- Put in place official policies to combat all forms of harassment and discrimination against women and girls in their local communities and hold violators accountable.
- Train their staff members and contractors on anti-harassment and gender discrimination policies.
- Create an ombudsman for gender discrimination in government services.
- Ensure that women are present at the core of decision-making on all levels. Simple numbers about the number of women present is merely a baseline standard which may not adequately capture the *quality* of women's participation. Special attention must be

paid to ensure women's input is actually incorporated into the final outcomes of decisions.

Non-Governmental Organizations

Participants in our study noted that they have a good experience in interacting with the NGOs operating in their local communities; thus we believe that these organizations have a crucial role to help in making the situation in their local communities better and more equal and accessible to women. However, our report did reveal some complaints about the exploitation of women around humanitarian aid, such as demands for sexual favors in exchange for relief packages. We call on NGOs operating in Northwest Syria to:

- Conduct strategic training programs to empower women with concrete skills training and knowledge related to public administration, governance, and political advocacy to facilitate their participation in the political arenas.
- Create physically accessible and welcoming spaces for women to gather to work, discuss, and organize collectively on what they see as their most pressing issues and to strategize about how to bring these issues forward to the local governing structures in their communities.
- Design their programs based upon women's expressed needs and engage them in the planning phases of all projects.
- Facilitate discussions with all stakeholders in their communities about women's effective engagement in public affairs and peace and security.
- Engage men from the local and national communities in the discussions around women's participation in public spheres and peace and security.
- Target women with economic development projects and help them to build their skills in finance, economy, technology, and management.
- Put in place policies to combat harassment and discrimination against women and girls in their organizations and hold violators accountable.
- Assign a number to receive women's complaints about their organizations' services or any form of abuse.

International Policy Makers

International actors have many important roles to play, not only on the funding and advocacy levels, but also on the political level. International pressures encouraged the presence of more women in the peacemaking process, but similar pressures could help expand the scope of women's policy making involvement. Women are not only peacemakers, they have a role to play in all aspects of the policy process. Therefore, we call on the international community to:

- Empower women to participate in all aspects of the public spheres. Women should be promoted to play an equivalent role beyond women's issues and women's committees. All issues are women's issues. Qualitative and not only quantitative evaluations, should be carried out to determine the extent of women's influence in core decision making processes.
- Among domestic Syrian partners, encourage the inclusion of women not only at the national and international levels in the peacemaking process but also at the local and municipal levels of governance, both as bureaucratic staff and decision makers at the middle and executive levels.
- Devote more funds and attention to infrastructure needs which affect women's essential freedom of movement, such as paths between residential areas and schools or government offices.
- Devote more funds and attention to the cause of women and girls' education, particularly in sectors related to public affairs such as law, journalism, and public administration.
- Prioritize the accountability of crimes against women and girls in the course of conflict.
- Emphasize the need for a democratic transition to ensure women and all people have true political representation and accountability as part of a comprehensive roadmap to gender equity and justice.

CONCLUSION

Syrian women in Northwest Syria face myriad daily challenges to their basic well-being. Asking women in these areas directly about what they considered their biggest obstacles, we heard that patriarchal norms and traditions, poor infrastructure, community divisions between IDPs and hosting communities made it harder for them to find work to support their families, to access education for themselves and their children, safely and comfortably move through public spaces,

and to freely make use of various public institutions like courts, local governing councils, and aid agencies.

While these constraints existed even before the conflict in Syria, they have become exacerbated by new needs driven by the dynamics of the conflict and displacement. With male breadwinners absent, women must now take on the role of providing financially for their entire household while juggling the load of household management and the raising of children. Conflict and displacement has heightened the presence of danger and violence in everyday life, making commutes and public spaces more fraught.

Despite all these new intense challenges, and the high percentage of women in the Northwest of the region, women found it difficult to access political institutions to help improve their situations. While new governing institutions have emerged in the Northwest in recent years, purporting to offer accountable representation of residents, the half of residents who are women report that they are poorly represented in public life. They do not see themselves in their public institutions, as leaders, administrators, or even lower-level bureaucrats. They are discouraged from and pushed out of educational training which would allow them to access these roles. While much has been written on the role of women's employment as a tool for economic participation, our study found that women's lack of employment in public institutions serves to significantly curtail women's political participation and ability or willingness to access public services. Women's employment and women's broader quality of life are connected in more ways than the obvious.

While women report better experiences interacting with NGOs, the reliance on international NGOs and donors for women's representation is a double edged sword. As humanitarian organizations slowly withdraw from Syria with the decline of hostilities, this reliance raises questions about the sustainability of these policies after the completion of these projects.

Much of the focus on women's participation in Syrian politics has concerned their representation at the national level, but our study found a disconnect at the local level of politics. Yet this is the level that most affects women's daily lives, the allocation of resources that shapes their futures,

and the futures of their children. More work needs to be done to empower women in their local communities, so they can participate effectively in public spheres at all levels, building not only from the top down, but from the grassroots up. At the same time, it is important to remember that women's participation is not only measured in numbers, but in quality. For this reason, continual monitoring of women's experiences as they attest to them will be an important tool moving forward in the building and rebuilding of political life in Syria. Lastly, local governance structures can only make good on their claim to democratic representation when they represent the whole of society, including addressing both the particular and shared needs of women.

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