WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN SYRIAN CITIES TODAY
EMERGING ROLES AND OPPORTUNITIES
A PRELIMINARY SCOPING REVIEW ON GOVERNANCE AND PRODUCTIVITY

Authors
Introduction: Rana Khalaf
Preliminary literature review: Roua Al Taweel
Case studies: Nazi Heme, Sana Kikhia, Ayman Menem, Rand Sabbagh
Content Editor: Giulia Guadagnoli

JULY 2017

Project funded by the European Union
## CONTENTS

Foreword ....................................................................................................................................................... 4  
Glossary of Terms ........................................................................................................................................... 5  
Introduction..................................................................................................................................................... 6  
  I. Overview of the Research Topic and its Importance ............................................................................... 6  
  II. Research Scope, Methodology and Structure ......................................................................................... 9  
  III. The Capability Approach Framework ................................................................................................. 12  
Preliminary Literature Review ....................................................................................................................... 15  
  I. Scope of Work ........................................................................................................................................ 15  
  II. Cities and Women in FCAS: windows of opportunity amidst poverty, violence and insecurity ............ 15  
  III. Women’s participation in the labor market ............................................................................................. 18  
  IV. Women’s participation in urban government decision making .............................................................. 20  
Case Study 1: Women’s Councils in Atareb and Douma ............................................................................. 23  
  I. Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 23  
  II. Women Bureau in Douma Local Council ............................................................................................... 24  
  III. The First Women’s Body in the City of Atareb ..................................................................................... 26  
  IV. Participation in different forms .............................................................................................................. 28  
Case Study 2: Women’s Media in Damascus ............................................................................................... 30  
  I. Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 30  
  II. Radio Suriyyat ....................................................................................................................................... 31  
  III. The Radio Goals and Main Programs .................................................................................................. 32  
  IV. Difficulties and Challenges .................................................................................................................... 36  
Case Study 3: Micro-credit in Homs ............................................................................................................ 37  
  I. Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 37  
  II. SANAD Group for Aid and Development ............................................................................................. 37  
  III. A woman entrepreneur supported by SANAD ..................................................................................... 39  
  IV. The challenges of entrepreneurship .................................................................................................... 39  
Case Study 4: Awareness and Skill Development in Qamishli ................................................................. 41
I. Introduction............................................................................................................................................. 41
II. Shar’s work on women economic empowerment ........................................................................... 42
III. Challenges that prevent women's economic empowerment ..................................................... 44
IV. Proposed Alternatives.................................................................................................................. 46
V. Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 47
Bibliography.......................................................................................................................................... 48
FOREWORD

This report is a preliminary scoping review of the emerging roles played by women in the public sphere in Syrian cities today. It is designed as an evidence mapping exercise that charts the terrain for future research. The main research question was defined as: *What roles and opportunities are available/emerging for women in relation to governance and to their economic participation in Syrian cities today?* But underlying this specific question, the report indirectly explores wider issues, namely: a) identifying new social and political roles exercised by women and men in the public sphere as a consequence of the enduring conflict in the country, b) understanding the transformations in the public sphere of cities and the new forms of social and political agency affecting the governance of that sphere, and c) mapping the transformation of the urban sphere itself as a result of changing demographic and economic realities. The cross-cutting approach to the report is devised as part of ongoing research on Syrian cities. Issues of transition, reconciliation, and reconstruction in Syria are often addressed without specific reference to their localization in their social and economic contexts. Cities in Syria are witnessing major demographic and economic transformations. In turn, these transformations are creating new opportunities and challenges for gender roles that have received little attention thus far in a comparative manner across the different Syrian geographies. Hence, the current research is a fledgling attempt at examining the complexities of the situation.

In its efforts at scoping local realities in different parts of the country, this report may not meet the standards of a research paper and hence should not be read as such. It presents the initial findings of a long-term project aimed at linking different social actors to help them identify for themselves new trends in social agency, and to stimulate dialogue among them with the aim of enhancing collective knowledge and creating shared platforms for their work on the ground. The compilation of this report was designed as a pilot study in participatory research. To this end, it gathers together a range of analytical insights into women’s participation in shaping different Syrian cities today. The main findings have already raised collective questions that go beyond the classical narratives used to describe the Syrian conflict. These questions will form the basis of continuing future research on the issue, and the lessons learnt from the methodology will hopefully be replicated in further studies on other issues related to Syrian cities.

The compilation of case studies purposefully reflects the multiplicity and diversity of the voices which contributed to it, all of whom are Syrian and involved at different levels in current projects and debates on gender equity and women’s empowerment in the country. The language used by the contributors provides perceptive insights into the way in which these issues are being framed today. It thus provides a frame of reference for how gender is being addressed in its local contexts, ranging from academia to the local community. The outcomes will be channeled back into dialogue on these issues at different levels. Three of the case studies were originally written in Arabic. In all cases, the authors were provided with loose frameworks around which to structure their writing. Editing and translation were mindful of preserving the original intentions of the writers. That said, standard English translation of Arabic terminology may not always cover the extent and specific references intended by the writers. Translation choices were often intuitive and arbitrary, and thus could not claim complete accuracy; this is an area of exploration in and of itself, as the gap between gender-related academic language and practice is a wide one.
Nonetheless, the report showcases a richness of registers, pointing to the importance of adopting the language of the actors involved in the reporting process. In this regard, developing the glossary of key terms and concepts below can shed light on some of the variation in interpretation of specific terms, while providing common points of reference at the same time.

**Glossary of Terms**

**Gender Equality**

“This refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women’s issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centred development.”

**Governance**

DFID describes governance as “how institutions, rules and systems of the state—executive, legislature, judiciary, and military operate at a central and local level and how the state relates to individual citizens, civil society and the private sector”. Yet during conflict, the architecture of governance encompasses such government activities but it extends to multiple layers and localities of power, both institutionalised and informal, through which commands flow within goals, directives and policies. As such, this study builds on the work of Brinkerhoff (2005:5) and uses the UNDP (1997) definition, which relates governance to “the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country’s affairs at all levels”.


INTRODUCTION

I. Overview of the Research Topic and its Importance

Investing in Syria’s human resources is critical for its future recovery, reconstruction and most importantly its transition. Sustainability, for instance, will come as a byproduct of an investment in a more enabled and capable society; one in which women and men take ownership of these processes. It is no secret, however, that strong investments target “survivors” and not “victims”; and yet half of Syria’s human resources -women- continue to majorly be perceived and treated as a special interest group mainly in need of protection!4

When not totally ignored, women’s agency -defined as their capacity to make effective choices and transform them into their own desired outcomes5- remains underrated in Syria. It is often acknowledged either just within the private sphere, belonging to traditional gendered roles, or occurring at the micro-scale if in the public sphere, mainly in the microfinance realm. Otherwise, women’s agency has come to be the result of exceptional conditions. Positive cases of a minority of women with strong political and economic agencies are alarmingly being used as gender insensitive excuses to ignore structural power and institutional challenges limiting women in Syria overall. Otherwise, women’s agency continues to be dealt with, both locally and internationally, merely as an appendix to men’s agency. This, for instance, is evident in Geneva’s peace-talks on Syria, which continue to be dominated by men and their priorities regardless of the presence of a Women Advisory Board6.

This representation of women in Syria is to a large extent driven by discourses, studies and work on and in Syria, which lack gender-sensitive readings7. This is especially the case in the economic and political realms, even amongst leading practitioners, researchers and policy makers on Syria. Consequently, the knowledge in regards to urban areas in Syria today remains incomprehensive and in need of an improved understanding of current trends in women's capabilities8 and agency. As this study shall illustrate in its effort to help fill this knowledge gap, despite the back-lashes of militarization, displacement and radicalization, the Syrian uprising and conflict - with the new roles it has been triggering for women9 - is providing a window of opportunity to unlock women’s

---


6 See the preliminary literature review for further information on the Women Advisory Board.

7 This is evident from (Khalaf, et. Al, 2016) and could be observed from literature on Syria in general. It is mainly the literature that solely tackles gender issues and that is produced by feminist groups that is gender-sensitive.

8 Capability in this paper refers to a combination of skills and environment or conversion factors that enable agency.

9 See also the findings of the Care International report (2016), which delves into gender dynamics and the changing roles for women in the Syrian conflict at:

potential, invest in developing their capabilities, and realize what they want to be and do in both the private and public spheres. Alarmed by the risk and cost of losing that window of opportunity, our research takes women’s participation in the governance and in the economy as its entry point of analysis, looking into their agency and capability to shed light at the relevant roles and opportunities available/emerging for women in Syrian cities.

But is unlocking women’s potential in governance and in the economy in cities in Syria really a priority with such an urgent humanitarian crisis? The simple answer is yes. Since reconstruction in Syria is not waiting for the conflict to end but is already ongoing; women need to be there for any real transition beyond just “reconstruction” to take place. The Syrian society is being impacted by the different forms of governance and by an inequitable and fragmented economy shaping its cities. In all its different geographies of control, ranging from those under the regime-dominated central government, to those under the opposition’s control, to those controlled by the PYD’s (The Democratic Union’s Party) as part of its Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA), and to those under extremist groups like Daesh / IS (the Islamic State); governance in Syria is far from realizing women’s capabilities and potential. It remains covered by different shades of military rules intertwined with patriarchal repressive orders and a war economy, all of which trigger further gender inequalities, thus exacerbating Syria’s humanitarian devastation. Women could help alter this situation if they drive this process together with men, since they constitute half of Syria’s potential. As further explained in the preliminary literature review, women’s contribution to conflict-resolution and peace building is widely acknowledged. This study also points at the richness and variety of women’s potential contribution to the transition of Syrian cities, by attempting to document cases of women’s agency and capabilities in different domains.

Unleashing such potential requires freeing women’s participation from essentialist definitions of what women’s roles should be according either to religion, “nature” or biology. It also requires an operational understanding of gender as a crosscutting dimension in every sector of urban development like infrastructure, services, mobility, urban design, local administration, law enforcement, the economy, etc. Operationalizing this approach requires decision making to be gender sensitive to women’s and men’s different needs and priorities. This implies, beyond just having their issues discussed as one “issue” amongst others, women need to be driving the process as decision-makers too. Women need to be at the table and not just on the table.

To date, however, women are often excluded from governance and decision-making in Syria, and even when individual women make it, their appointment is often the result of exceptional conditions, and their voice is limited. This situation in relation to women is structural and geographically spans across the entire country.

During the times when the government was controlling the entire country, between the 1970s and year 2011, women’s participation in the government administration, seemed small but promising (12% in the people’s parliament, 7% in ministries, 3.1% in local administrative
councils). However, in the absence of a functioning democracy, women’s voice remained weak, let alone that they mainly occupied junior positions. Currently, the regime in its government-controlled areas has tried to include women representatives to showcase its modernization efforts, yet it continues to limit women to apolitical causes under discriminatory laws that it has done little to change. These limitations, as shall be illustrated in our Homs Case study, are reflected in the lack of an enabling environment for women’s economic participation.

In opposition-controlled areas, despite its establishment of new local governance systems, women are kept at the back seat. Women activists explain that whereas the regime had “forever waged a battle against [them]”, the opposition groups have been explicit in their “negligence of women’s demands and rights”. As our Atareb case study highlights “No woman has ever run for the position of president of any political body operating under the umbrella of the Syrian opposition. Even in those cases when a woman reached the position of vice-president of organizations such as the National Coalition (الائتلاف الوطني), the Coordination Body (هيئة التنسيق), and the State Building Movement (تيار بناء الدولة), she was still not allowed to run for leadership.”

This situation is accentuated by the fact that the legal frameworks of most local councils totally dismiss women. Thus, women are majorly excluded from membership in most of the local councils, forcing some to create parallel structures and others to fight to take their place in these councils, as our Atareb and Douma case studies feature.

In fact, it is only in PYD-held areas that a legal framework has been made and implemented supporting a 40% quota for women in its public administration and imposing women’s co-presidency in public positions. However, as our Qamishli case study shall illustrate, women’s political and economic participation remains limited and challenged. This, as the case study author highlights, is partly attributed to the lack of community awareness supporting women’s economic and political participation. Another major driver to the challenges in reaping the full benefits of this positive legal development is that real power seems to remain wielded in the hands of specific people dominating local governance under the PYD control – the PYD cadres. Such centralization of power would challenge and delay the local buy-in to its own gender sensitive policies, as the local society, with both its men and women, does not feel ownership of the process. Instead of using local resistance as a reason by some to delay gender mainstreaming until the context is ready, the focus should be on including local women and men in this process.

---


12 This is not to mention that in areas controlled by extremist Islamist groups, the mere voice of a woman is considered a source of shame (3oura) and her movement beyond the private sphere designated for her without a male family member (mouhram) has become forbidden.


14 See Case Study 1 below and (The Syrian Feminist Lobby; 2016)

Postponing gender mainstreaming throughout all sectors of urban development has in fact a very high cost. There is hardly any reliable data that could currently estimate such cost in Syria. However, world statistics regarding the cost of women’s economic exclusion are relevant too. UN Women highlights how gender inequalities relegate women at the bottom of the global value chain, and in the lowest paid and least secure jobs, if employed at all. It estimates: “If women played an identical role in labor markets to that of men, as much as US$28 trillion, or 26 per cent, could be added to the global annual Gross Domestic Product by 2025”. Thus, if one is to take only one economic aspect – the GDP - one would realize that women’s economic and political exclusion is not only impacting women themselves, but also entire cities and countries. In light of current conflict related losses incurred on Syria today, especially at the human, social and economic levels, losing the opportunity to invest in women’s potential, even if only at economic level, is unaffordable. The developments that gender equality provides on these and other aspects, advocate for unlocking women’s potential. They prove gender equality matters for everyone. **What if peace and transition for Syria lied in a young woman’s head?**

II. Research Scope, Methodology and Structure

A. Scope

Overall, this paper remains a working document, which will go through several stages of review and further research. At this stage, it is meant more to raise questions rather than provide answers, to encourage further research to cover gaps in knowledge and practice on women’s participation. The paper takes governance and the economy as a starting point to improve a gendered understanding of urban development in Syria.

This paper mainly aims to shed light on available and emerging roles and opportunities for women to participate in governance and in the economy in Syrian cities. This spans the period between March 2011 and March 2017 and covers Syria as one country.

This paper proposes a capability approach framework to understand women’s agency and potential. The framework looks into their self-perceived functioning/role, and the means available for them to achieve it within a limited set of assets and contextual and institutional opportunities and obstacles.

The paper takes five case studies from different geographies and areas of control in Syria, aiming to cover the country as a whole. However, contributions from IS controlled areas are not available due to limited access to them. The paper’s case studies also provide insights on how their authors, themselves local practitioners, perceive these roles and opportunities, and what questions do they trigger to fill the relevant knowledge and practice gaps in this regards.

---

Box 1: Research Questions

It is important to highlight again that this paper remains a working document, thus, it forms only a first step to tackling the research question and to posing other questions, as below:

**The research question**

- What roles and opportunities are available/emerging for women in relation to governance and to their economic participation in Syrian cities today?
- How are these roles and opportunities perceived by:
  - … these women?
  - … local practitioners?
- What are the critical gaps in knowledge and practice regarding women’s participation in governance (at the political and economic levels) in Syrian cities?

**What questions are our case studies triggering in this regard?**

1. Do these emerging roles for women really impact gender equality and challenge the existing patriarchal order to start with, when women are in the driver’s seat?

   In the case of Radio Suriyat in Damascus for instance, one is left questioning women’s leadership, if emerging media outlets are serving as an advocacy platform for women, or as a commercial activity covering news by women but as per the dominant gender perceptions. Another question mark stands on the impact of this advocacy. Also for this case, questions arise as to what extent Syrian women’s voices are promoting gender equality and how successful are they in reaching all stakeholders (men and policy makers) in this process to ensure they are not just “only talking to each other”.

2. Is women’s leadership in these emerging roles the result of exceptional conditions allowing individual women to exercise various forms of leadership, or of a progress towards systemic change?

   Most of the case studies reflected the centrality of women leaders in driving the process: cases were often centred on one woman leader, even if it is suggested that an organization is sustaining this role. In half of our cases, the cited women leaders attributed women’s success to their character (by referring to her “confidence”, “strength”, etc.). These women stressed that a strong character is critical to confront the societal pressures that see them primarily as home-makers, thus hindering their career prospects. This was evident in the case study of SANAD in Homs and Shar in Qamishli, both of which tackle women’s economic participation. The question that follows here then is, within the Syrian context, what interventions and policies are needed to overcome the Public/Private and Productive/Reproductive binaries relegating women’s traditional space to the family and the home, while limiting inclusion in the public sphere and in the labor market to women with a “strong character”? What evidence can be collected to highlight the limitations of such an approach that only looks at women’s inclusion in times and terms of purely financial need (if men are not there), and in positions that leave essentialist gender conceptions unquestioned? What factors will determine if women will not step back once the conflict
impact on men is alleviated, and that they will preserve the degree of participation achieved in men’s absence?

3. What tools are needed to change the local perceptions and practices hindering women’s economic empowerment, so that this will not be limited to the micro-finance realm or to traditional jobs?

“The first women’s body at the city of Atareb contributed, over around a year since its establishment, in training and women economic empowerment projects, through illiteracy courses, sewing and nursing workshops”. This approach to women’s economic empowerment was also mimicked in our case study about SANAD in Homs, where yet again, the local understanding of women’s economic empowerment was micro and mostly limited to traditional jobs. When questioned about this, practitioners suggest, “this is what the local context imposes, let alone that it is a war situation, we can’t compare our case to other countries now”. However, it remains important to ask, how could this context and power structure be challenged if women stay confined in this micro, traditional framework? When is the right time to challenge these gender power inequalities, with extremist and misogynist groups already filling the governance void and the new economic reality in Syria?

Other case-specific questions are:

In the case of Douma and Atareb women’s bodies:

- What are the pros and cons of the different models of women’s participation in the local council (within the council or as a parallel structure)?
- Beyond looking at just quotas and numbers, what recommendations can these cases inform on how to increase women’s participation in local councils in Syria?

In the case of Sanad in Homs:

- What is the impact of the economic crisis on women? Or in other words, does the economic crisis have a gender specific impact that differs between women and men?
- What are the gendered challenges to women’s enterprises in Syrian cities today?

In the case of Shar in Qamishli:

- What do gender-sensitive legal reforms need to influence social norms and behaviours and achieve local buy-in?
- What local examples are there of women’s economic participation being an indicator of societal change in the presence of a gender sensitive legal reform?

B. Methodology

This paper draws heavily on participatory elements. As they form part of the Syrian practitioners’ community, the case study authors were both the drivers and the subject of their own research. As they impact and are impacted by similar factors affecting gender conceptions on women’s roles
in Syrian cities, their perception and reading of the roles and opportunities available for women in the governance and the economy is in itself a key entry point for analysis.

The research also relies on both primary and secondary data. The case study authors have extracted primary data in the form of testimonies from Syrian civil society activists and local council members residing in five Syrian cities (Damascus, Douma, Atareb, Homs and Qamishli). The testimonies were collected via both qualitative in-depth online interviews (via Skype, WhatsApp voice calls, audio records and instant messages) and qualitative in-depth in-person interviews. This occurred in different periods within a time frame of around 8.5 weeks from mid January 2017 until mid March, 2017. Secondary data sources came from books, academic reports, articles, publications, and social media sources when accredited by credible activists. Theoretical knowledge and expertise is drawn from feminist research and from the political economy, anthropology and sociology fields.

The main strength of this research is its access to local civil society groups inside Syria, benefiting from the authors’ background as Syrians and their wide networks within local civil society trust circles. Meanwhile the main limitation is that the situation in Syria and its key actors continue to change drastically. This has made it extremely difficult to triangulate data or to hold any evidence-based impact assessment of the cases.

C. Structure

This paper is divided into five parts. In the first section, its introduction, the paper lays out the research aim, assumptions and questions; it then introduces the capability approach proposed as an analytical framework to help answering these questions in the following stages of this participatory research. The second section reviews available literature on the roles and opportunities for women and youth in conflict, particularly in relation to governance and economic empowerment; it also identifies critical knowledge gaps in this regard. The third section culminates with testimonies and cases from five cities experiencing varying governance systems controlled by different actors across Syria today: Damascus, Douma, Atareb, Homs and Qamishli. The final section summarizing the key report findings and providing policy and programmatic recommendations will follow the circulation of this draft, and will be based on the outcomes of dialogues which this draft will contribute to inform.

III. The Capability Approach Framework

This paper proposes looking into the capability approach in assessing women’s agency in Syria. In doing so, the UNWomen report “Progress of the World’s Women 2015-2016” provides the background to better understand the 3 pillars of the framework, especially vis-à-vis the conversion factors (pillar II) that affect women, their choices and agency. This pillar for instance evaluates the incidence of biological, social, economic, cultural and political obstacles to women’s

participation in decision making in governance and the economy. It also tackles women’s agency in legal frameworks, societal representations and cultural norms.

The Capability approach this paper is trying to construct is based on three notions: I. Choices/Freedoms; II. Conversion Factors and III. Functioning. The capability framework sees development as a “freedom of choice” (pillar I) which through a set of “conversion factors” (pillar II) can achieve valued “functionings” a person aspires for (pillar III). (See figure 1)

Freedom of choice (pillar I) is intrinsic to the approach and involves: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective securities (Sen 2000, 38). To pursue these freedoms, several conversion factors (pillar II) need to be put in place. These include factors such as enabling institutions and financial security that grant “access” to the sought after “functionings” (pillar III). Functioning’s here refer to what people aspire “to be and do” rather than what they aspire to “have”.

Figure 1 highlights the dynamics between what functions or roles women in Syrian cities aspire for (pillar III), what choices they have (pillar I) and what contextual and institutional conversion factors (pillar II) support or hinder them in this pursuit. In terms of their functioning, in line with its research aim, this paper has chosen to focus on two of them: participation in governance and in the economy. Meanwhile, towards upcoming dialogues and their analysis of findings, this paper suggests a focus on pillar II to understand what factors are important to focus on in terms of policy and programmatic work to enable women’s choices (pillar I) that would result in their improved agency.
Figure 1: The Capability Approach as a Framework

Source: Author’s elaboration based on the work of (Sen, 2000), (Johannsen, Zeller, & Klasten, 2007) and (Frediani, 2007)\(^8\)

---

\(^8\) See:
PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

I. Scope of Work

This section provides an overview of literature on the role that women play and the opportunities that are available to them in cities, with a focus on fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) like Syria, looking at two major issues for gender equity and urban governance: participation in government decision-making and in the labour market.

II. Cities and Women in FCAS: windows of opportunity amidst poverty, violence and insecurity

While urbanization has generally been associated with the availability of multiple opportunities that are otherwise unavailable to individuals in rural areas, it has also been marked by significant challenges, including social differentiation, poverty, conflict and environmental degradation (Avis, 2016; Beall et al., 2010). As a result, there is growing inequality on how people experience urban opportunities and benefits. Evidently, women, youth, urban poor and people with disabilities (considered for their distinct characteristics as well as for the intersectionality among them) face tremendous barriers in accessing social, economic, and political opportunities - when available (IWPR, 2015; UN-Habitat, 2016). With respect to gender, women and girls continue to be the majority of the world’s most vulnerable people (UN-Habitat, 2015). Consequently, as the gap between the rich and poor widens and poverty rates rise (OECD, 2011), they are still more likely to suffer from poverty, discrimination, and marginalization in urban governance processes (IWPR, 2015).

With the aim to bridge these gaps, taking an active role “in the judiciary, policing, human rights monitoring, the allocation of funds, free media development, and all economic processes” (Al-Ali 2005, 477) may enable women and girls to benefit from the social, economic and political opportunities that cities potentially bear. And yet, regardless of a sizeable body of literature highlighting the importance of gender mainstreaming or of the existing political framework to eliminate gender-based discrimination at all levels of peace and security policies and programmes (ICRW, 2004; Harders, 2011; Stewart, 2010; UN Women, 1997), most of related measures fail to ensure the participation of women and also to accommodate their experiences and needs in urban governance planning and decision-making processes (UN-Habitat, 2016). For the most part, this might be due to a general lack of understanding of, and widespread misconceptions around, women’s roles and position in urbanization processes in general, and in fragile and conflict-affected contexts in particular.

Furthermore, gender and urban governance in FCAS has to be considered in relation to violence. There are divergent perspectives on the cause-factors of violence in urban contexts, including poverty, exclusion and ‘othering’19 (Moser and Rodgers 2012; Muggah, 2012; Feuerschutz, 2012). Urban violence, politically, socially or economically motivated, is considered a growing phenomenon. In the words of Kees Koonings, it is “the most serious form of lethal violence in the

---

19 Those reproduce and naturalize the inequalities that fed into conflict in the first place creating a vicious cycle.
world”, posing serious humanitarian and policy challenges (EUISS-ICRC, 2012). Thus, only by scrutinizing the ways in which the different forms of violence interact and measuring their consequences, we are better able to understand violence and governance in future cities (Gupte and Commins, 2016: 7; Beall et al., 2011; Moser, 2004). As urban violence in FCAS correlates with weak institutional capacity or legitimacy (OECD-DAC, 2010), basic services are often provided by international organizations, local NGO’s or non-state actors. In Lebanon, for example, sectarian-based militias provide basic services in exchange for political power (Shami, 2001; Cammett, 2011). In this context, urban governance is a useful framework to conceptualize the complex relationships between various urban actors, governments and transnational organizations (Ghannam, 2001). Likewise, Avis (2016:1) points out that urban governance goes beyond “the formal structures of city government” to include “a host of economic and social forces, institutions and relations, formal and informal” (see also UNDP, 1997 and Brinkerhoff, 2005). Significantly, a gender perspective to urban governance in FCAS is necessary, as Feuerschutz (2012) emphasizes, “gender has important connections to and intersects with poverty and marginalization with regard to (in)security” in ways that limit the potential of women and other discriminated groups in feeding into those forces and relations. Indeed, lessons from attempts to tackle the ‘urban dilemma’ indicate that without inclusive and non-discriminatory local responses, sustainable improvement of security situation of urban inhabitants is well-nigh insuperable (Feuerschutz, 2012).

To further understand women’s experience in FCAS, feminist literature has shed light on the gendered dimensions of conflicts (Enole, 2010; Valji, 2007; Boesten, 2014, 2015; Chinkin, 2014; Strachan and Haider, 2015). There has also been formal international recognition (Beijing 1998, UNSCR 1325) of the devastating ways in which conflicts affect women’s lives and experiences. Acknowledging and addressing the impacts that conflicts have on women’s lives is a crucial component of urban governance processes. However, the tendency to portray women as merely passive victims is misleading. Not only does this view fail to consider the important contributions in conflict and post conflict made by women, but it also undermines their future potentials as key participants in the determination and implementation of effective solutions (ICRW, 2004). In these terms, Boulding (2000: 109) writes:

“The constraining effects on women of their relegation to the household and the private spaces of society have been overstated. What tends to be ignored is the historical reality that women’s work of feeding, rearing, and healing humans---building and rebuilding communities under conditions of constant change, including war, environmental catastrophe, plague, and continual push-pull migrations---has produced resources and skills within women’s cultures that have been critical not only to human survival but to human development.

A growing body of literature considers wars and armed conflicts as a site of potential opportunities for women (Bop, 2001; Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002, Handrahan, 2004, Bauer and Britton, 2006; Wright, 2008; Hughes, 2009; Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cohn 2011; Cohn 2013). Among this, it is mentioned that conflicts change the social order, increase economic demands and broaden activism spaces and claims, creating in turn social infrastructures and foundations that encourage women’s economic, militant, and civic engagement (Bop, 2001; Hughes 2009). Such changes may
lead to broader discussions on gender politics and relations and, eventually, to the cultural transformation of gendered norms in post-conflict periods “[building] more inclusive and gender balanced social, economic and political relations.” (Harcourt, 2009: 13; Pankhurst 2002; Burnet, 2008). Examples include case studies on Uganda, Chad, Sudan, Rwanda, and Liberia (Fuest, 2008; Pankhurst, 2002; Turshen and Twagirimariya, 1998; Debusscher and Ansoms, 2013). The case of Syria seems to offer the same potential, as the “scattering of families and the expansion of families headed by women have created situations where women had either to participate in decision making or to make decisions themselves” (Bop, 2001: 23). It is, therefore, crucial to focus, rather than to ignore, women’s agency in FCAS.

Among the causes of the 2011 uprising in Syria are urban informality fed by rapid population growth and rural-urban migration; poverty; youth unemployment; inequalities in decision-making as well as in access to services and resources; and governance failures (Mulderig, 2013; Kelley et al., 2015; Kilcullen and Rosenblatt, 2014; CSIS, 2013; Cinar and Gocer, 2014). Features generally considered as common risk factors for urban conflict and violence (Muggah, 2016; Beall, Goodfellow, Rodgers 2011). Today, Syria is a site for political, institutional, economic and social violence, affecting Syrian women and girls through the gendered dimension of displacement, violence, kidnapping, restricted access to services and political exclusion. Meanwhile, many women’s groups and civil society organizations20, that have emerged since 2011, stepped in to fill the ‘social void’ (Bauer and Britton, 2006: 16; Khalaf et. al, 2014; Khalaf, 2015; Ghazzawi et. al, 2015) in service provision, while at the same time advancing conflict resolution and peace-building processes (Ghazzawi et. al, 2015; Gambale, 2016). The available data, although limited, is indicative. Nevertheless, information is still inadequate, and sometimes absent, to cover the different aspects of Syrian women’s experience of the war. Examples include the cost of GBV, of inadequate health and education systems, of discriminatory legal frameworks; and the impacts of women’s economic exclusion together with their engagement in the informal sector, of displacement and of dwelling in informal settlements on development prospects in Syria. Further research also needs to consider mass displacement and its impacts on both Syrian and non-Syrian women in neighboring countries. Importantly, attention should be payed to the ways in which women experience and maneuver the multiple restrictions imposed on their education, movement and public participation to access sufficient information, as this is a key to understanding and measuring the ‘positive’ windows to gender transformation for Syrian women, and fill above mentioned knowledge gaps.

Such a knowledge is needed to guarantee “security” for women and the whole urban population in FCAS, understanding this not only as safety from violence but also the possibility of creating and maintaining a livelihood (Commins, 2011; Feuerschutz, 2012). Notably, the term ‘security’ has also been referred to having a political voice (UN-Habitat, 2012: 4), and is often considered a precondition to obtaining access to adequate and reliable services such as transportation and health care (UN-Habitat, 2009: 14), based on “fair distribution of resources to enable people’s

20 An informal mapping conducted by the Common Space Initiative in 2016 has already tracked over 135 organizations and groups
access to livelihoods and to ensure political and social justice regardless of gender, race, class, religion” (Al-Ali 2009, 19).

III. Women’s participation in the labor market

One of the common forms of discrimination against women is found in the labor markets as these are still both bearers and reinforcers of binary gender roles (Grimshaw and Rubery, 1995; Elson, 1999), given the unresolved dependency on women’s unpaid work which increases women’s time poverty and restricts their ability to engage in formal workforce21 (SIDA, 2015). The gendered division of labor and responsibilities intensify during conflict, with women struggling to provide livelihood for themselves and their families in the absence of justice, security, and services (Sweetman and Rowlands, 2016). Nevertheless, economic demands during armed conflict also bring in opportunities for women to engage in the productive sphere (Bop 2001: 20-25). “Timing, contestation and scale” are, according to Hughes (2009: 181), crucial factors when it comes to measuring variations in how wars affect women’s empowerment. Ideological and institutional change is more likely to occur in larger and prolonged wars due to the large scale of disruption they bring about (Hughes, 2009:181).

In a study on Iraq, Giacomo Frateschi (2015) explored the effects that the conflict had on women’s economic participation by looking at the conflict in terms of its presence, duration and intensity. The study concluded that conflict leads to an increase in women’s economic participation in the formal sector and more widespread participation in the informal sector. As women engagement in employment increase, the beliefs that customarily stigmatize women appear to be suspended (Frateschi, 2015). Hence, while it is widely acknowledged that women’s paid employment positively correlates with poverty reduction, growth and human development (SIDA, 2015), fragile contexts show that it also correlates with the reduction of gender inequalities in societal beliefs.

Similarly, conflict and displacement have triggered fundamental shifts in gender roles and responsibilities, both in Syria and neighboring countries (Haddad, 2014; CARE, 2016). Today, female-headed households constitute 12-17% in Syria (NRC et. al, 2014) and up to one-third22 in refugee-hosting communities. CARE data indicates that, compared to pre-conflict women’s economic participation23 in a context with multiple socio-cultural restrictions, Syria has seen an increase of women’s participation in generating and decision-making on income and expenses. In addition to their household and voluntary work, women got involved in paid employment with community based organizations as teachers, and nurses and started to enter fields of first-aid, search and rescue, and (para-) medical practices (CARE, 2016).

21 The association of economic participation with productive work has generally meant that the contributions of the reproductive economy (unpaid care work) goes unrecognized, which, in effect, disadvantages women, as they carry out most of such economic activities, spending two to ten times more on unpaid care work than their men counterparts (see OECD, 2014; Buvinic, Furst-Nicols and Pryor, 2013; Elson, 1999; Stiglitz et al., 2007).

22 Refugee female-headed household constitute one quarter in the region (in UNHCR, 2014, ‘Women Alone’); 28 percent in Jordan (in CARE, 2015m ‘Five Years into Exile’); and 34.6 percent in Jordan (in UNHCR, 2015, ‘Living in the Shadow. 2014 Home visit report’).

23 Estimated as 12.9 percent by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research based on data from the Central Bureau of Statistics indicate (SCPR, 2013) and by 22 percent by World Economic Forum (WEF, 2011).
The absence of adequate measures for legal protection, however, is still a major factor of inequality and continuous pressure on women to seek employment in the informal sector, where most of their economic activities range from “domestic or socially necessary and voluntary work (cash rarely exchanged and no regulatory institutions) to secondary ‘shadow and irregular’ activities, where some form of enterprise and payment is expected, but regulation is either too difficult to enforce or avoided and evaded” (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009: 47). Building on women’s new economic roles during conflict and identifying their potential contributions to strategic development goals is thus essential not only to counteract the impacts of war, but also to achieve effective urban governance with regard, for example, to labor regulations.

Entrepreneurship and employment have been common practices used to strengthen women’s position as economic actors. Examples include microfinance and home-based work. Although there have been cases of success and the improvement of women’s livelihood through microfinance (Buvinic, Furst-Nicols and Pryor, 2013), home-based work has not passed without critical examination. Many have raised concerns around such programmes noting that they are generally small-scale and of limited and infrequent profit, (Casier, 2010; Chant 2014; Sweetman, 2010). Others have pointed out that such home-based work is often very hard to achieve where women lack the resources they need to achieve successful entrepreneurship such as property of land, real estate and other assets (Chant, 2007; COHRE, 2004).

In fact, the connection between paid work, economic empowerment and gender equity is not straightforward. The question of real empowerment and equality, as CARE report (2016) emphasizes, remains open since the data indicates an increase of workloads for Syrian women; they continue to perform their care duties in addition to ensuring basic needs for their families through income generation, while men, who no longer be the breadwinners, are reluctant to take other responsibilities. Furthermore, school drops out forced adolescent girls, inside Syria and as refugees, to take livelihood responsibilities early (CARE, 2016). Gender-sensitive policies, therefore, also need to address the multifaceted barriers to gender equity in terms of personal and professional development and economic participation. Economic empowerment, for example, should entail that women have full control over their income. As Agarwal (1994) points out:

> We need to examine not just the fact of earning, but also a number of related factors which are likely to be important, such as the period over which such earnings are sustained, the level of earnings, community attitudes and norms about women’s needs and rights (i.e. the social legitimacy of women’s claims) and, most importantly, the process by which an improvement in women’s earnings has been achieved (Elson, 1999).

---

24 A gradual transition for women into the formal economy has also been inspected as a possible way to tackle the long term impacts suffered by those working in the informal sector (UN-Habitat, 2015; ILO and WEIGO, 2013), through better regulation of jobs, income and productivity to protect rights and ensure gender sensitive forms of accountability and state protection (Chen, 2012: 17-19).
Furthermore, and equally crucial, is an understanding of the changing dynamics of economic roles in conflict, as well as to critically decide on best methods to support these without reinforcing essentialist discourses on women’s roles in society.

IV. Women’s participation in urban government decision making

Beall (1996) notes that “both the substantive representation of women in urban decision making, and an enhanced awareness and understanding of gender-specific needs within the governance structure” are prerequisites for achieving effective urban governance. The benefits for including women in policy and decision-making processes are multiple, whether through direct participation in the political sphere, or through community organizing, advocacy, or lobbying. Women’s involvement in policy making has largely resulted in better outcomes in terms of state funds allocated to childcare and social welfare programmes as well as level of transparency (Braton and Ray, 2002; Holman, 2014; IWPR, 2015; Sundstrom and Wangnerud, 2014; Araujo and Tejedo-Romero, 2016)\(^25\). Of course, a critical overview on this has to be considered, especially to avoid essentialist discourses.

Meaningful involvement of women in the political realm and decision-making should not be a matter of merely making space for women or as Nadjie Al-Ali (2005: 476) has put it, “just add[ing] women and stir[ring]”. Instead, the different ways in which patriarchal societies typically subject women to violence, exclusion and inequality need to be addressed and eliminated (ActionAid, 2013), enabling them to implement change within the complex landscape of “governance-as-practiced” (Williams et al., 2015). As such, women’s full political, social and political participation in urban life requires simultaneous changes in laws, policy, and sociocultural norms (Pozarny, 2016).

Building on this idea, in a study conducted on the political implications of women’s participation in social movements in Thailand, researchers found that women, whose confidence and agency have been increased through political socialization, go further to create new types of informal political representation. Most significantly, their alternative political organizations have acted as a focal point between their own communities and formal political actors and institutions (Buranajaroenkij et al., 2016). Women’s involvement in and influence on government decision making, therefore, can be achieved through serious engagement with and representation of women’s movements and civil society groups that actively advocate for women’s rights and gender equality (Beall, 1996; UN-Habitat, 2008; Buranajaroenkij et al., 2016).

Likewise, conflict paves the way for women’s participation in formal and informal political spaces previously restricted to men due to multiple and overlapping factors, including social norms, legal and citizenship status, and class (Dersnah, 2013). For instance, Amy C. Alexander & Rebecca Apell (2016) argue that the revolution in Egypt resulted in some positive gains in women’s empowerment. Without ignoring the drops in women’s percentage in the Parliament, their

\(^{25}\) Using data from 18 European countries, Aksel Sundstrom and Lena Wangnerud (2014) concluded that levels of corruption are higher in places where there are less women elected. Women’s political participation, therefore, has been recognized as having a positive impact on the level of transparency; increasing information transparency and reducing information asymmetry (See also Araujo and Tejedo-Romero, 2016).
findings indicate an increase in the political participation of women, while the introduction of
quotas also features among post-2011 improvements (Kandiyoti, 2011); others have identified
changes in laws in ways that offer more financial and medical assistance to women-headed
households (Morsy, 2014: 218); there have also been constitutional changes through which the
government has committed to “the protection of women against all forms of violence” and the
enhancement of legal protection of women’s bodily integrity (Carlstrom 2014). Not in their
‘essential’ role as women but in their capacity as citizens, women’s activism during and after the
Egyptian revolution opened up a space in the public sphere for gender-sensitive policy making

In other contexts, post-conflict settlements provided opportunities to incorporate women into
political processes. Rwanda, for instance, has 49% of seats accounted for women in 2003 and its
constitution grants 30% minimum female representation in parliament. Efforts have also been
made to increase women’s participation in Burundi, Mozambique, South Africa, Timor Leste
(Stewart, 2010). Researchers and practitioners have both emphasized the importance of including
women in the various aspects of conflict resolution and peacebuilding operations (Al-Ali, 2005).
Examples of women’s role in working towards peace and reconciliation are multiple. The
involvement of women is especially important when it comes to post-conflict agreements and the
formation of transitional justice mechanisms (Valji, 2007), including specific protocols on gender
based violence.

By the same token, and although still under-researched, public sphere in Syria has witnessed an
increased and strong female participation between 2011 and 2014, with female political
participation “taken root in the non-government-controlled areas of the country” (Khalaf et al.,
2014). As for peace negotiations, the Women’s Advisory Board was formed in late 2015 by 12
independent Syrian women civil society representatives with support from UN Women to advise
the UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan De Mistura, being the first of its kind to gain such a status
within a formal negotiation (UN Women, 2016a/b; Gambale, 2016). The remarkable roles Syrian
women have played during the war, as protestors, civil society leaders, organizers, and civil
defence volunteers as well as their commitment to peaceful non-violent civic engagement “sets
them apart as advocates for an inclusive society” (Haddad, 2014) and as a major asset for
sustainable peace and effective urban governance. Although there has been a huge body of
literature on Syria in the past few years, women’s efforts, whether taking formal or informal forms,
have been rarely addressed or made visible. Gender-aware research is needed to help us
understand not only the barriers Syrian women face to access decision-making positions through
their social and political participation, but also their creative methods to voice out their concerns,
needs and rights.

The visibility of women’s experiences and contributions to urban development is crucial to build
on the openings brought about by conflict towards gender equality. Proposed measures to
increase women’s voice and agency include (IWPR, 2015 cited in Avis, 2016):

- Collective actions: through unions, CBOs, social justice movements and the
  use of technology and social media to enable women to access social,
  economic and political resources;
- Gender quotas at local, regional and national levels;
• Well-resourced and strategically located governmental bodies, such as parliamentary caucuses or bureaucratic offices, dedicated to the advancement of women’s interests;
• Political literacy training for women;
• Increased financial resources and support for women running for public office;
• Improved social support such as childcare.


\textsuperscript{26} Defined by the following major characteristics; participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law (UNESCAP, n.d.; Ali, 2015; BIOA, 2009)
STATEMENT OF SYRIAN CITIES 2016-2017 – Draft 0

GENDER

CASE STUDY 1: WOMEN’S COUNCILS IN ATAREB AND DOUMA

I. Introduction

No woman has ever run for the position of president of any political body operating under the umbrella of the Syrian opposition. Even in those cases when a woman reached the position of vice-president of an organization such as the National Coalition (الائتلاف الوطني), the Coordination Body (هيئة التنسيق), and the State Building Movement (تيار بناء الدولة), she was still not allowed to run for leadership.27 Yet, the authorities linked to the Syrian opposition did not address the factors that prevent women’s political participation, nor they acknowledged their own role in working towards eliminating these factors in the future of Syria, by taking actions such as:

- Committing to work on removing reservations about the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW);
- A constitution securing full gender equality, and reconciling all personal status, nationality and social security laws as well as the penal code (as a counter example, the Democratic Union Party considered amending the personal status law).
- Implementation of Security Council resolutions 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 1206 and 2122 relating to women in armed conflicts, their role in peace building, their active participation in negotiations, and to gender mainstreaming in the formulation of peace agreements.
- Establishing quota as a temporary positive discrimination (the Democratic Union Party stands out as a counter example in this regard).

Local councils in Syria, established to constitute an alternative to the absent civil state in areas outside of the Syrian government’s control, stated among their objectives the creation of a nucleus of future municipalities that will be linked to the interim government, and later to the elected government, to build and strengthen the national bond within society through civic engagement work, and away from any ideology, party line or political affiliation28. Local councils’ propositions did not mention in any way the need for women participation in their structures or the importance of addressing this issue. For example, the bylaws that regulate the work of these councils did not refer to gender equality, equity, or to women’s quota. In addition to the inherent legislative flaw in the formation of the councils, armed factions inspired by religious ideologies contributed to the consolidation of a generally reticent environment concerning women’s agency and freedom.

As conflict challenges the very principle of the sovereignty of law to the benefit of de facto laws, it reinforces gendered restrictions on women’s safety and participation, making more and more difficult for women to approach the historically male dominated field of political action, and to

27 From the report entitled “‘an Thairat Mughayyabat ‘an Son’el Qarar” al-Musharaka as-siyasiyya lil mar’a wa wusouliha ila Marakez son’el Qarar fi Ba’d Quwa al-Mu’arada as-Suriyya munthu ‘Am 2011” [About rebel women forcefully absent from decision-making: political participation of women and their access to decision-making positions in the Syrian opposition since 2011.” http://syrianfeministlobby.com/
28 According to the bylaws of local councils

23
challenge the pattern of conventions based on the patriarchal distribution of roles between the two genders. Hence the interest of the two cases of the Women Bureau in Douma and the Women’s Body in Atareb to denote the ability of women to participate and catch opportunities regardless of the circumstances.

II. Women Bureau in Douma Local Council

The personnel in the women bureau in Douma began their work in early 2015. The first fruit of their activities has been a conference, organized in cooperation with “Sham” legal center and held under the auspices of the city’s Local Council. It brought together various organizations either managed by women or employing many women in their staff. These included relief organizations and civic actors such as “Maktaba Beit Al-Hekmeh” foundation (مؤسسة مكتبة بيت الحكمة), “Zad Al-Masir” association (جمعية زاد المسير), “Haraer Ash-Sham” (جمعية شام الخبر), “Sham el-Kheir” association (جمعية شام الخير), Charity for the Relief of the Needy in Douma (إغاثة المحتاجين في دوما), “Al-Amal al-Mushreq” association (جمعية الأمل الشرق), “Namaa” foundation (مؤسسة نماء), “Sawaedna As-Suriya” (سواعدنا السورية), “Dar al-Rahma for Cancer” center (مركز دار الرحمة لأورام السرطان), and “Hurras” network (شبكة حراس).

This initiative aimed at promoting the role of women in institutional work within local councils. The Council, when first established, sponsored management and human development trainings for 24 women, one of whom has been recruited in the council’s civil registry secretariat “Birth Registration Office”, while other two have been recruited in the education office.

In 17 June, 2015, the Bureau launched the project “Wahat Thaqafa” (cultural oasis) with the aim of addressing issues relevant to women in the city under siege. The project consists of a number of lectures given by representatives of women’s bodies and independent activists, with the aim of addressing issues women face under the current circumstances. Lectures addressed topics such as women and politics, the right to education, and the volunteerism culture. The project aims to develop a work mechanism to achieve the ideas proposed in the lectures, in order to activate the role of women in the public arena, and to educate them about their full rights and the mechanisms to access these, by “enabling them to take the right decision”, as put by a research interlocutor. The Bureau also works in education and advocacy in partnership with different parties, the most prominent of which is the campaign “Sahtak bi idak” (Your health in your hands), launched under the auspices of Douma Local Council, and with the participation of a large number of women volunteers. The campaign continued over a month (April, 2016) and targeted schools, women centers and mosques. Different organizations joined the campaign, such as the Civil Defense Directorate, the Red Crescent Association, and the “Al-Nisaa al-Aan” (Women today) and “Al-Yawm at-tali” (the following day) organizations.

All activities organized by the Women Bureau are funded by the Douma Local Council that depends on two main funding sources: in-kind and financial external support by donors, and

29 The reference to this interview shall be specified in upcoming drafts.
30 ‘inab Baladi, 25-09-2016: (Eastern Ghouta rife with women centers and lacks qualified staff [Al-Ghouta al-Sharqiyya Taghussu bil Marakez an-nisaiyya wa taftaqiru lel-kawader al-muahala]).
support by the official opposition bodies, such as the National Coalition, and the Syrian Interim Government. In addition to external support, the Local Council has been able to secure internal resources from local taxes and fees, and revenues from development projects that it had established. Nonetheless, the major portion of funding remains through external support.\footnote{Imran Center for Strategic Studies, October 31st, 2016, “So that local councils do not transform into local agents”. \url{https://www.omrandirasat.org/}}

Moreover, the Bureau organized periodic visits for the female students of the “Intermediate Institute in Eastern Ghouta” (Business department) to the Local Council, to acquaint them with its activities. It also organized meetings between the students and the head of the council to train them to enter the public affairs arena.

In early 2016, the Local Council signed a memorandum of understanding with the “Tamkeen” program. This assigned to the Women Bureau its own dedicated seat within the committee that oversees the preparation and development of projects funded by “Tamkeen” on behalf of the Local Council.

Concerning the most difficult obstacles and hindrances faced by women, specifically in eastern Ghouta and Douma, Bayan Rayhan, who currently serves as head of the Women Bureau, explained in an interview with Geroun media network on November 23rd, 2016:

> The main difficulties that face women in general are the deteriorating security and economic situation, as a result of the continuous bombardment of civilians by the regime and the tight blockade the regime forces impose on Eastern Ghouta. This situation has negatively impacted the ability of women to achieve their ambition in social or political life.

She noted that working women “neither are welcome nor privileged compared to how men are treated in certain social institutions, due to internal cumulative factors that make women’s work more complex.”\footnote{Geroun media network- an article entitled (woman are looking forward to a greater presentation at Douma local council [Al-maraa tatatalla ila tamthilen akbar fi majles Douma al-mahalli]).}

Bombardment and blockade remain in the forefront of the obstacles faced by women in general in Syria, since they threaten the very right to life to which other rights are linked. However, this is not necessarily the only obstacle: where stability prevails in the country, women still have to face a range of complex social and economic hindrances.

According to Rayhan, the Women’s Bureau offers rights and legal consultations to women: for example, she offers, in her personal capacity, lectures on detention, forced disappearance inside the Syrian regime’s prisons, on the types of tortures and related detention centers, and also on the societal representations of women, and the social reintegration of the detained women suffering from trauma after their release.
As Rayhan told to “Al-Sawt al-Souri” website\textsuperscript{33}: she started her engagement after receiving an invitation by engineer Akram Tohme in late 2014 to work at the Local Council of the city of Douma. Subsequently, she established the Women’s Bureau at the council, which aims at coordinating work among women actors, offering services to women at the council, finding them job opportunities, organizing conferences to raise women’s awareness, and running projects that interest women in cooperation with concerned organizations.

This suggests the existence of a political will to include women in local councils prior to the donors’ pressure or request.

The most important breakthrough might have been the attempts by women actors in Eastern Ghouta to raise their representation in the city council, amid a conservative society that objects women’s work, and their entering the public sphere. A significant milestone in this regard occurred when the Women’s Bureau at Douma local council proposed raising the representation of women in the council, through a discussion that began in mid-November 2016. The discussion will continue until the next round of elections.

\textbf{III. The First Women’s Body in the City of Atareb}

On February 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2016, the establishment of the Women’s Body in Atareb district\textsuperscript{34} was announced, constituting the first precedent of its kind in the northern region of Syria, and preceded country wise only by the Douma Women Bureau in Rif Damascus province.

The Women’s Body began its activities as a joint initiative between the “Ana Hiya” women’s network and the “Aman” network, with the support of the “Salam Atareb” circle that collected a large number of signatures from civil women’s groups and from the majority of women in Atareb. It conducted transparent elections in the presence of civil observers, where one coordinator and a number of officers were elected to manage the following departments: “Family, social care and psychological support”, “Child and health care”, “Education and teaching”, “Media”, “Communication”, “Widows and orphans”.

According to Aysha Bakour, the Body’s general coordinator, in an interview on February 19, 2016, with the “Sourya Hurra” news network, the idea of forming a women body was to

\begin{quotation}
back women in general, especially those who have lost their bread winners and their husbands, to help them realize their rights, and educate them about their duty in particular, and to stress their role in the construction and the advancement of the society, through visits, meetings, and consultative sessions
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{33} Al-Sawt al-Suri Website-27-10-2016: (In Easter Ghouta “women are more than half-society” and an increased interest in their political and leadership role [Fil-Ghouta al-Sharqiyya “al-maraa akthar men nesf al-mujtama” wahtimam mutazayed bidawriha as-siyasi wal-qiyadi]).

\textsuperscript{34} An administrative area in the Aleppo province, with the city of Atareb as its administrative center. It counts 76,873 people according to the 2004 census.
addressing various groups, as well as various cultural communities and social classes.

She added:

“We visited schools, the Local Council, medical bodies, social and military leaderships, active and influential social figures, and civil organizations and groups, and raised with them the main problems faced by women. The response to the idea has been quite good as a necessity that needs to be secured.

It is worth noting that certain men remarkably contributed in supporting the participation of women in the initiative, and promoted the acceptance of the idea among the local community. Among others, the head of the Local Council and director of the civil platform in Atareb has been one of the most prominent supporters of the initiative from the outset.

This has been confirmed also by the coordinator of the Women’s Body in Atareb, Mrs. Asmaa Sayed Hassan, to “Al-Souri al-Jadeed” website, indicating the activities through which the group identified needs and developed strategies. She said:

This is the reason we organized seminars and dialogue sessions, to learn about the needs of widows, orphans, and the disabled, and to help them as much as possible. We also uncovered the role of women in light of the Syrian revolution as a key actor in society, where society’s wellbeing is linked to women’s wellbeing, because she is a homeland.

The Women’s Body acts as an independent organization and aims to partner with the Local Council. Although it did not achieve a breakthrough in terms of women participation in the council, it did create a parallel institution concerned with women’s issues, paving the way for women’s participation in future decision-making.

The Body, despite all the challenges it is facing under the Russian aviation raids on civilian targets, in addition to the security chaos, well exemplified by what has become to be known as “Tashweel” (invented term for kidnapping), organized several field activities, most important of which is a social survey of 100 households. The survey aimed to identify the main issues households are facing, uncover their causes, and try to resolve or limit them through awareness and guidance programs, focusing on marginalized groups.

Moreover, the Body and the “Nidal al-Maraa” team organized, under the sponsorship of “Ana Hiya” network, a seminar entitled Early Marriage. The seminar was attended by a number of students from the city’s teacher preparation center. It shed light on the dangers of early marriage, and on its negative impacts on the society. The seminar also addressed perspectives of common

---

35 The “Ana” organization is affiliated to the Civil Society Center for Democracy that was established in 2013, and is working in 25 circles inside Syria and in neighboring countries.
law and Islamic law, as well as the repercussions of early marriage at the psychological, social and health levels.

On the International Women’s Day on March 8, 2016, the groups organized a women dialogue session to honor women and their sacrifices in times of both war and peace. The seminar featured the Body and the “Nidal al-Maraa” team. A large number of influential female figures in the city participated, including teachers, the school principal, and lawyers, in addition to NGOs and revolutionary figures. The event received an enthusiastic response by women in the community. During the seminar, a movie entitled “Suleima” was screened, reflecting the reality and suffering of women during the period when the uprising was still peaceful. Also, the households’ living conditions were addressed, discussing the issues of health, education, and aid conditions in the city, and proposing solutions.

The “Kulluna Shurakaa” website addressed a question to the head of the local council in the city of Atareb, Jamil Abdul Khaliq concerning the council approving the participation of women in decision-making. He answered: “This is a wonderful and distinctive step. Since we are a conservative community, women often cannot access the local council to directly present their needs and solve their problems. This is why we can seek the help of one among them to represent them in the local council and participate in the decision-making”.

IV. Participation in different forms

The Women’s Body in Atareb presents itself as a complement to the Local Council, rather than a part of it. It kept the door open for participation in its discussion and decision-making, albeit not directly. The body contributed, over around a year since its establishment, in training and women economic empowerment projects, through illiteracy courses, sewing and nursing workshops, in addition to the previously mentioned activities. With these activities, it raised the level of social acceptance to the engagement of women in the public sphere, although it did not take part in the actual decision-making, unlike the Women Bureau in Douma that gained membership in the Local Council, and moved lately to claiming seats in its executive committee. This difference might be associated with the fact that the Women’s Body activities in Atareb, and its related perception of women’s role, remains within the framework of a patriarchal perception that limits the public role of women to charity and aid. Nonetheless, this does not deny the possibility to develop the present experience in the future toward a more effective participation of women in decision-making.

We can summarize in three points the difference between the two experiences, and explain the Women’s Bureau success in Douma in actually accessing the Local Council, whereas the Women’s Body in Atareb remained a complementary NGO:

- A political will is involved in the imposition of women representation in Douma local council. This is something positive that might be possible to generalize throughout the experiences of other local councils.
- Eastern Ghouta’s social nature is a conservative one. However, given its contact with the city, and a great number of Damascus residents moving there earlier, in addition to a good number from other provinces, to work as government employees, a timid acceptance of
women’s work and participation and attention to women’s education emerged, which does not exist in Aleppo rural province.

- The contact of the city of Atareb with ISIS and the Nusra Front almost directly is also to be taken into consideration, while Jaysh Al-Islam and other factions in control of the Ghouta can be considered relatively moderate, leaving a larger margin of openness to the participation of women.
CASE STUDY 2: WOMEN’S MEDIA IN DAMASCUS

I. Introduction

Media plays a major role in modern life, with its capacity to convey messages to wide and varied audiences, contributing to the creation of a conducive environment to establish a public opinion and develop new trends and behavioral patterns. While the media in developed countries tend to provide daily services as well as opinions, in developing countries that are witnessing social transformations, media play a big role in supporting these transformations.

Syria was introduced to the women’s press forty five years after the issuance of the first newspaper in the country. However, this does not mean that Syrian women are far from journalistic work. That is, the Syrian media included such journalists as Mariana el-Marrash, the first Arab women to publish a newspaper article in 1870, in Al-Jinan magazine. She has been followed by Warda el-Yaziji and Mary Ajami.36

Al-Aroos, a newspaper owned by Mary Ajami was the first women newspaper to be published in Damascus in 1910, and was mainly of literary content. The newspaper stopped being published with the outbreak of WWI, but resumed after the war, only to stop permanently in 1925. In 1920, Al-Fayhaa magazine was published, but was not meant to continue. In 1928 and 1935 the Homs-based Dowhat al-Mayyas and Al-Rabih magazines were published respectively. However, women publications stopped soon, and until 2011, there has been no women-dedicated magazine, except for al-Mar’a al-Arabiyya (The Arab Woman) that was first published in August 1962, by the General Union of Syrian Women.37

During the last five decades, the reality of Syrian women was inconsistent with their beginnings in the nineteenth century with the printed press. This might have been somehow a reflection of women’s political, economic and social reality causing their absence from influential positions. However, women were present in all forms of audio-visual journalistic work, since the launch of the Radio and Television Corporation in Syria. Nonetheless, they were not offered the chance to access decision-making positions in the media, except in rare and exceptional circumstances.

If we are to review the media positions held by women, we will find that, during the past decades, these did not exceed ten positions, whether a director of a media department, a TV channel, or a radio, or an editor in chief of a daily or weekly newspaper, or an electronic website. In such cases where a woman journalist occupied a leadership position, appointment stemmed from an exceptional circumstance. For this reason, none of these women held such position for a long time before being replaced, also for exceptional reasons.

According to a 2016 report:

36 Dr. Omayya Rahbi, “Al Marra fil Mashad Al-Thaiqafi Al-Suri” (Women in the Syrian Cultural Scene), http://musawasyr.org/?p=2511
The media sector [in Syria] was monopolized and owned by an authoritarian state for decades, and its discourse was dedicated to serving one-party Baathist rule. There was some opening up in the last decade, but the media remained heavily controlled. This resulted in the treatment of women’s issues as a background topic. When the topic was covered, a stereotyped image of women was the norm. This meant that women were associated with a limited range of topics, such as beauty and health issues and the family. Men outnumbered women in media professions, both as journalists, and in decision-making and publishing.\(^{38}\)

**II. Radio Suriyyat**

In December 25th, 2014, the Radio Suriyyat project was launched as an initiative of the Syrian Women Forum for Peace. In December 2015, the Radio dissociated from the Forum and established its own administration and budget. The Radio presents itself as “an independent media project that aims to create a free, interactive platform that discusses the issues of Syrian and Arab women”\(^{39}\). They propose thematic programs, in an interesting and simple manner that reaches everyone, and use social media in addition to traditional means of communication for a wider outreach. Radio Suriyyat relies on a number of professional correspondents, program makers and presenters, reaching up to 12 staff. They are all based inside Syria and they address women’s issues with high professionalism. Radio Suriyyat also uses youth and volunteer experiences to encourage the youth and to spread the spirit of volunteerism. The number of volunteers varies from time to time given the instability in the country, and they do not receive any bonuses or transportation allowances.

Radio Suriyyat (Syrian Women Radio) constituted an exceptional breakthrough in the nature of modern Syrian media, as well as in media outlets emerging since 2011 onward. It was established in the capital, Damascus, under the control of the Syrian government and in conditions of instability. In this regard, an important lesson from this experience is that it highlights the possibility to catch the opportunity to pursue one’s own rights, no matter the conditions.

Although this experience relied on long-term media practice, it brought on air ladies from various backgrounds, such as business, arts and humanities

so that it presents a women’s voice that supports women’s rights in Syria, and encourages the establishment of the concepts of citizenship and social justice, highlighting the role of women in peace building and democracy, and stressing the fact that Syria is colored with its diverse Syrian citizens. The Radio also holds the principles of impartiality and non-subordination, stressing honesty, objectivity,


\(^{39}\) From the Introduction of the Radio Code of Conduct.
and the need to stay away from everything that raises rancor, and sectarianism, and from generalization.  

The Radio constitutes the first media experience dedicated to women in Syria and neighboring countries. This means that it offers a different content having higher chances to raise its followers’ curiosity. It also focuses on “ordinary women”, as, according to the Radio staff, this can break the top-down perception of media as an elitist domain, and replace it with horizontal communication from people to people, encouraging every woman to feel concerned with what the Radio has to offer, as she can see herself in it. Moreover, programs do not promote a model image of women. These rather try to represent every “ordinary woman” as a unique model based on her personal experience.

According to those in charge of the project, the Radio also plays a complementary role in support of associations and organizations concerned with women issues, seeking to unify their efforts by shedding more light on their activities, and providing a platform that conveys their voices and gives visibility to their work. Those in charge of the Radio also confirm that they will not slacken from cooperating with any party that believes in and seeks to develop the same goals. The Radio also seeks to network with NGOs to be an alternative media outlet covering initiatives that might otherwise remain in the shadow.

III. The Radio Goals and Main Programs

- Representing all Syrian women from various political, ideological, cultural, confessional and regional backgrounds, making their voices heard, and presenting their daily problems as a reminder that Syrian women are the ones who pay the heaviest price of the war.

Amira Malek, manager of Radio Suriyyat says:

> The role of Syrian women became greater during the crisis. There are Syrian women who have a key role in society, but one can say that they are behind the scenes; unseen through the media. For this reason, Radio Suriyyat works on making Syrian women seen, shedding light on their work, and addressing issues from a women perspective through radio programs that raise various topics that concern society.

- Raising awareness about women suffering in Syria during the war, shedding light on the creativity generated through their pain, and focusing on the importance of enabling women, economically, socially and politically.

---

40 From the Radio Code of Conduct, Mission, and Vision.
41 As mentioned in the Radio Code of Conduct.
42 The goals presented below reflect the list included in the Radio Code of Conduct.
“Let’s talk”, an interactive program, focuses on the role of Syrian women in the current situation, inviting the audience to talk about their experiences and their ability to devise solutions, and to discuss any social issue faced by young girls and women. This program is characterized by a wide variety of topics covering a broad range of cases Syrian women daily life.

- Radio Surayyat also aims to improve the media representations of women in general and of Syrian women in particular, by changing stereotypes about them.

“Ashtariyat”, a series of reports about women’s poetry and literature, proposes women’s voices accompanied with music, to promote new or known talents and encourage women to cultivate their interest in literature. Among the remarkable talents hosted by the program, Mrs. Iman Sharabati joined the radio team as the maker and presenter of the program “Fi Hadrat al-kalimat” (In the Presence of Words). She then published her first novel “Bint el-‘arrab” (the Godfather Daughter).

“Ahlamuhunn” (The dreams of women) report series focuses on broadcasting stories by Syrian women, addressing the dreams of young girls, and the potential girls have to change the course of their lives in the present situation.

- The Radio works on spreading awareness “concerning discrimination between genders”\(^{44}\), but also legal awareness of women’s rights, and international agreements that protect them, providing information on Syrian law, and on other laws such as the CEDAW convention and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

“Women and Law”, a program run in cooperation with the women protection center “Sawtik Masmou’ w haeq alayna”\(^{45}\) (Your voice is heard and we owe you), tries to benefit from the issues and cases followed in the center, to examine the mechanisms according to which the Syrian law deals with these cases.

Another program, “Women and Numbers” begins with stating a specific number; and it presents its connotations for women’s issues, such as the number “584” which is the number of the article on honor crimes in the Syrian penal code, or the number “1325” which is the Security Council resolution on women and peace and security.

- The Radio aims to promote women leaders who can contribute to political decision making. It focuses on the role of women in decision making and their participation in political life, as well as on the tools they use in doing this. It also works on activating the role of women in peace building, through programs that shed the light on Syrian and international experiences that would stimulate women to take active roles. These

\(^{44}\) As mentioned in the Radio Code of Conduct.
\(^{45}\) The center is in the Sweida province, and includes a number of male and female volunteer lawyers, focusing primarily on issues of family violence. It has a hotline offering immediate legal advice. It also offers free legal support in cases where judicial recourse is needed.
programs open the debate, provide a space for thinking, and encourage participation through different reports.46

- The Radio focuses also on women’s health in general, as it dedicated certain broadcasts to raise awareness about breast cancer, or reproductive health, which occupies an important place in the radio programs.

The “Kouni Mumayyaza” (Be special) program addresses medical, social and life issues that concern women. It also provides health advice and natural healing recipes from the local tradition.

On October 29th, 2015, in the framework of the “Damma Wardiyya” (Pink bouquet) awareness campaign on breast cancer, Radio Suriyyat organized a music event in the Dar Al-Assad for Culture and Arts, with the participation of the singers Ali al-Khalqi and Tania Maria Saqqal, and a group of young musicians. The proceeds of the event were used to fund early cancer detection for women, and chemo-therapy treatments for affected women.

- The radio also aims to motivate women to act, and to make their voices heard by sharing their experiences and their suffering, in a way that stresses success stories of women’s resilience, rather than evoking pain.

The program “Hunna Suriyyat” (They are Syrian Women) hosts Syrian women who have been successful, or have made a difference in different domains. The program aims at answering the question of what has war changed in every woman. It focuses on success stories of women during or before the war. Among these stories is that of Manal, who challenged her community and pursued her higher education until she completed her PHD in Sciences.47

- The radio also seeks to shed light on women’s action and its importance in Syria, along with civic engagement. This also entails echoing women’s concerns and campaigns, and inviting women to participate effectively.

Among these campaigns, one focused on raising awareness of Resolution 1325, and another on fighting violence against women.

- The Radio also works on promoting economic empowerment by covering women success stories in managing their businesses, and also by offering training in journalism and establishing partnerships with other organizations to organize bazars and workshops, and to train women on handicrafts.

On economic empowerment specifically, journalist Aman Al-Bezra, a co-founder of the Radio, said “Radio Suriyyat sought to achieve economic empowerment, first by providing opportunities to non-professional women, training them in journalism, radio programming, content development, and management.”

46 This goal features in the Radio Code of Conduct, but the authors did not find any directly related program broadcasted by the Radio.

47 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T73hNeIHzBM
As an independent project, the Radio is the nucleus of a media institution with no political or religious agendas. It discusses, mainly, the issues of Syrian women, along with social issues from a women’s perspective, “given that the administration and those in charge of the work and of the formulation of the media discourse are women, also the targeted audience are women. This can be easily noticed from all the programs previously mentioned”\textsuperscript{48}. Issues are addressed with high professionalism and commitment to professional criteria and ethics. The women in charge of the project rely on a media code of conduct that governs the work of the Radio.\textsuperscript{49}. Issues are addressed with high professionalism and commitment to professional criteria and ethics. The women in charge of the project rely on a media code of conduct that governs the Radio structure and its processes. The Radio is keen to providing Syrian citizens (and Arabs and foreigners in general) with accurate and highly reliable information that focus on respecting women and presenting them as core elements in society who should not be exploited by the media in any way.

“Introduction of Resolution 1325” Campaign

The Radio, along with its focus on the role of women in national reconciliations as an essential element for peace building, launched many awareness and social campaigns, among which one was entitled “Prevention, Protection, Participation”. This campaign illustrated the basic concepts of the 2000 Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, as one of the important tools for gender equality in conflict and post-conflict periods.

By focusing on the social dimension, along with the political and security disputes plaguing the country, and by promoting the principles of state, citizenship, human rights, and especially women’s rights, the campaign constituted a point of strength in the work of the new media outlets present in Syria today.

The goal of the campaign looked beyond awareness rising to put pressure on relevant state institutions to take charge of the issue, and to adopt the suggestion to develop a national plan to implement the concepts in Resolution 1325. The commitment of state institutions is expected to lead to a positive change in society concerning the perception of women and their rights, and to acknowledge and promote the role of women in peace, security and political decision-making.

The “Forgive Each Other for Peace to Prevail” Campaign 2015

On the occasion of the International Day of Tolerance set on November 16, the Fraternity Foundation for Human Rights, in cooperation with Radio Suriyyat, launched a campaign entitled “Forgive Each Other for Peace to Prevail”. The campaign raises banners with forgiveness expressions in Arabic, Kurdish, and Syriac. It includes dialogue seminars among Syrians of various descent, and other media events to open bridges of love and cordiality that have been torn by the

\textsuperscript{48} As stated by Aman Al-Bezra.
\textsuperscript{49} From the Radio code of conduct: “The Radio is keen to providing Syrian citizens (and Arabs and foreigners in general) with accurate and highly reliable information that focus on respecting women and presenting them as core elements in society who should not be exploited by the media in any way”.

35
ongoing war\textsuperscript{50}. It also discusses the concept of forgiveness, transitional justice, and accountability of perpetrators of war crimes and major violations in Syria.

IV. Difficulties and Challenges

- One of the major challenges that faced Radio Suriyyat has been to procure a stable funding source through which the Radio founders and workers would be able to develop programs, and expand the audience base, in addition to training Radio staff that comes from different backgrounds, such as arts, business, architecture, and to build their capacities.

- The security situation that limits women political participation and the exposure of violations against women and girls constitutes another challenge to the work of the Radio. This had a practical effect on the ability to work “where those in charge of the work have been prohibited from renting an office, because they have not obtained security approval. The work continued from houses or through broadcasting online.

- The frequent absence of electricity and internet connection in the capital Damascus constituted a major impediment to the work of the team.

- One social obstacle are the negative or adverse unexpected reactions of women vis a vis the Radio, based on religious or political reasons, and their rejection of its way of thinking concerning their social and political participation.

In conclusion, Radio Suriyyat offers an example of the importance of catching opportunities to increase women’s participation at different levels, to have women in decision-making positions, and to prepare the ground for an enabling environment at the national scale. This in turn can contribute to the development of gender-sensitive policies and legislations, through the involvement of different state and non-state actors in women empowerment processes, given that this challenge concerns the society as a whole, rather than a single sector or group, thus shall not be addressed by women bodies or individual women only.

\textsuperscript{50} As mentioned in the Radio’s introduction of the campaign according to the link on their webpage. https://www.facebook.com/RadioSouriat/posts/862156400573079
CASE STUDY 3: MICRO-CREDIT IN HOMS

I. Introduction

This case study illustrates the experience of a Syrian woman named G, who started her own business in October 2011 in Homs. It focuses on economic opportunities provided by micro-credit services for women entrepreneurs, delivered by a voluntary organization in the Syrian regime controlled areas of Homs city.

Background information on employment rates and gender roles in Syria during the conflict

According to the 2015 Human Development Report, the war in Syria have plunged 80 per cent of the Syrian people into poverty between 2011-2015, and led to economic losses estimated between over 200 billion dollars since 2011 (UNDP, 2015). As a result, more than three million Syrians lost their jobs. Almost twelve million people lost their primary source of income (UNDP, 2015). Meanwhile Syrian women and men are seeing their traditional roles and responsibilities shifting: while women increasingly participate in decision-making on household finances and assume responsibilities outside the home, men are losing their traditional role as breadwinners (Buecher, B., & Aniyamuzala, CARE, 2016). In Syria before the crisis, 22% of Syrian women were labor force participants whereas the rate for men was 82% (Hausmann and Tyson, 2010). The low percentage of women participation in the labor market stems from legal barriers and mainly sociocultural norms, defining women’s roles and responsibilities inside and outside the home (Buecher, B., & Aniyamuzala, CARE, 2016). It is thus important to understand how these barriers and norms interact with the currently shifting gender roles in the ongoing crisis, and how are women bypassing the barriers towards their economic empowerment.

II. SANAD Group for Aid and Development

SANAD Group for Aid and Development (SANAD) is a voluntary non-governmental organization, one that is independent and not connected to any political party. It started in 2011 as a group of Syrians offering humanitarian aid to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in different cities like Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Latakia and Daraa. In the first few months, SANAD was only facilitating connections between private donors with the families in need, without receiving itself any financial contribution. Initially donors were mainly households and individuals living in the hosting cities, like residents of Damascus who sheltered displaced from Homs. The expansion of the network of donors, in parallel with the increase in membership from 3 to 80 members between 2012 and 2014, required SANAD to manage its own funds. The main source of funds still comes from individual donors, mainly friends, relatives and personal connections of the members, and Syrians living all around the world with different educational levels, ages, religious backgrounds.

51 By the end of 2013, the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR) has announced that the total economic loss since the beginning of the conflict was estimated at USD 143.8 billion, which is equivalent to 276 per cent of the GDP of 2010 in constant prices. Damaged capital stock of USD 64.81 billion accounted for 45 per cent of this loss (Nasser 2014)

52 Besides, the unemployment percentage has increased from 14.9% in 2011 to 57.7% at the end of 2014 (UNDP, 2015).
and communities. The members living inside Syria are responsible for visiting potential beneficiaries, assessing their needs and distributing aid.

SANAD project “Loans and Grants to Start Again” and women economic empowerment

Confronted by lack of resources and the requirement to register as authorized NGOs in Syria, SANAD has minimized its humanitarian activities and, in 2014, it started its development project titled ‘Loans and Grants to Start Again’. Many NGOs had started offering food baskets and other non-food items in massive amounts. Therefore, it was the time for SANAD to focus on filling the gap on the development side.

According to its Facebook page, current SANAD objectives are:

- Contribute to the economic recovery of the country by supporting local investments
- Decrease aid dependency and offer alternative type of support to the families which have the capabilities to work again.
- Increase opportunities for Syrians to find a sustainable source of income by offering them long term loans with no interest or grants.
- Reducing the number of civilians engaged in the armed fight by offering alternative source of income.

SANAD is offering its zero interest loans/grants to anyone with the ability to work. However, when the beneficiary is a man, SANAD prioritizes offering the loan/grant to beneficiary with previous experience and encourages him to establish a business similar to his previous one. With women beneficiaries, previous experience is not required. The reason is that the majority of women beneficiaries are housewives with no previous experience who became bread winners after losing their husbands. The standard amount of the loan does not exceed 400 USD, and in the case of SANAD, which in SANAD’s experience is more likely to attract women than men, who usually request loans higher than $600. Overall, most of the beneficiaries of SANAD project are women receiving small loans between $150- $400. In 2016, 60% of the beneficiaries were women from different backgrounds. The majority have primary school educational level, while approximately 20% women are university graduates.

Since SANAD is not authorized to work in the areas controlled by the central government, the members are advertising the project among their trusted closed circles. The beneficiary receiving the loan doesn’t know that it comes from SANAD. One of the most important sources of information SANAD has in terms of reaching new beneficiaries and establishing relations of trust is G, a woman name here as such for privacy concerns. Eligible beneficiaries need to be backed by a guarantor who could repay the loan in case somebody stops paying back. Moreover they have

---

SANAD members in Syria are working in the areas controlled by the central government. Attempts to intervene in the areas controlled by the opposition faced many obstacles, with beneficiary businesses closing because returns were insufficient to keep the business going. Beyond the loss of contacts caused by migration, the higher instability affecting those areas implies higher prices, particularly in besieged areas, and the lack of security in shopping areas often targeted by air bombing, posing high risks of losing SANAD seed money.
to contribute their incomes to their household overall expenses. The larger the household, the higher the priority. Applicants for loans are invited to present their proposal, and in case of educated people, to prepare a short business plan.

Embroidery is the most common activity among women beneficiaries, whom SANAD provides with the raw materials, or with opportunities to sell their products by acting as intermediator. Most beneficiaries run individual businesses except two cases. In one case, five ladies joined forces to open one embroidery workshop in Damascus. They received the loan in summer 2016, at a time when the wool price is low, and they will pay back the loan after the end of winter 2017 all at once. The second case concerns the stationary shop opened in Homs by G and a partner of hers, who prefers not to feature in this report. Their work entails buying and selling the products, marketing the business, dealing with customers of different genders and ages, and doing accounting. G is responsible for managing the supply chain and dealing with the customers.

**III. A woman entrepreneur supported by SANAD**

G was born and raised in Homs. She is an Arabic literature student, planning to graduate this year, and a Syrian Red Cross volunteer, which gives her access to a network of young people whom she tries to link with families in need of support. G also teaches French, and SANAD used to help her by connecting her with potential students before she started her own business. G faced many challenges in the last five years. She lost her previous job as a secretary at a dental clinic, after her boss closed the business and moved out of Syria because of the war. Meanwhile, one of her brothers also left the country to avoid military recruitment. Another brother of hers also lost his job at a pharmacy four years ago, after intensive shelling caused the pharmacy to close. G also faced internal displacement. Between 2011 and 2013, she fled Homs with her aunt and her sick mother for security reasons, and during this time their house was destroyed by shelling. Her aunt has been living with them for a long time, offering financial support, as she is receiving retirement pension from her 25 years work as a school teacher. Nonetheless medicines for her mother were unaffordable for their household budget, and she eventually passed away last year.

Before 2011, G’s dream was to become a big trader or importer. Her uncle was the accountant of one of the bigger Syrian importers, and she used to join his visits to his boss. Hearing about big numbers she couldn’t even understand fascinated her, triggering her interest in trade. G believes that dreams are one thing, but reality is something else, even though in fact she is now pursuing her dream.

**IV. The challenges of entrepreneurship**

G paid back her first loan after five months, then she asked SANAD for another loan to expand her business. After few months of receiving the second loan, G’s business begun to suffer because of the Syrian currency inflation. G tried to overcome this challenge by buying the goods for her shop several months earlier to the schools’ season in order to cut the expenses. For the same reason, even though she finds physically challenging to move and carry the new goods into the shop, she did not hire anybody to do this for her. So far, G has received four loans from SANAD.

The biggest challenge for G is that her income does not match her living costs, given that every month she pays back SANAD’s installment. She is trying to increase her income by giving private
French classes, although working different jobs exhausts her. Another challenge is the small equity capital the business has. Sometimes, she waits to sell the goods in the morning to use the returns to be able to buy more goods in the afternoon. The lack of experience in this domain causes many challenges in matching customers’ requests. In some cases G’s lack of experience led her to sell low-quality goods which caused customers dissatisfaction. However, G and her partner are gradually building their knowledge, which naturally costs them time and money. Lately, G is facing some health problems which are having a negative impact on sales. The business limited profits do not allow G to hire someone to deal with the customers, while her partner has another job which does not allow her to increase her opening hours. G and her partner have the same vision and dedication toward growing the business. Therefore, the two partners are the first supporter for each other. This partnership has also helped in growing the capital of the business as they are both receiving SANAD’s loans. They are also sharing the financial risks.

G relies on her strong personality to face the social challenges that entering the job market can pose to women in Syria. Therefore, she is not sensing underestimation or discrimination as a working woman from the surrounding community. G refers this to the fact that she started working since she was 18 years old, thus she started dealing with these challenges when she was young.

How these barriers and norms currently interact with the trends towards shifting roles in the ongoing crisis, and how are women bypassing them towards their economic empowerment.

G’s trajectory provides some clues on the shift in gender roles in a context of crisis, with women occupying the main bread winner role after men left to avoid military service. It also represents an example of how women in Syria today can bypass discriminatory legal barriers and socio-cultural norms, in addition to deprivation, war, displacement and dispossession, on the steep hike towards their economic empowerment. G’s account focused on the socio-economic challenges posed by the war, and she did not express particular concern for gender specific social challenges she faces in her current business. Nonetheless, she showed awareness of the challenges posed by social norms, claiming that she learnt to deal with these at a young age.

G’s case also points to the importance of acknowledging the capabilities of Syrian women, in order to support them in the right way. As exceptional as she can be, her case highlights Syrian women’s entrepreneurial potential, putting into question a common assumption among many NGOs, prototyping women by limiting their support to activities run inside the home, such as handmade crafts.
CASE STUDY 4: AWARENESS AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN QAMISHLI

I. Introduction

Women’s economic participation in the city of Qamishli continues to be weak. Women’s occupations are limited to traditional professions and administrative functions. Meanwhile, their participation lacks audacity and the ability to embark on new economic experiences that effectively meet the demands of the labor market.

This observation comes in the context of the focus of the Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA)\(^54\) on activating the role of women through the laws\(^55\) it issued and projects\(^56\) it planned, to guarantee women’s rights and to benefit from their potential in both the labor market and in public administration. Under this administration, women are granted a 40% quota of participation in all councils and bodies formed. Each body is co-administered by a man and a woman, starting with the commune, which is the smallest administrative unit in the community, and ending with the joint governance of the Jazira/Cezire province. Article 2 of the DAA’s Women Act provides for equality between men and women in all spheres of public and private life.

These provisions come in parallel with the opening up of the region to civil society work mainstreaming equal citizenship and other gendered concepts at all levels, social, economic and political\(^57\). Some feminist organizations in the region note an increase in the proportion of women involved in civic life and the public sphere. Mehwesh Sheikhi, an electrical engineer and activist working on women and political issues, and one of the founders of Shawishka Association for Women and Children (جمعية شاويشكا للمرأة والطفل) in Qamishli, explains: "Women have become aware of the need to get out to the public sphere and to work to get to know their rights."\(^58\)

However, all of this has not contributed adequately to the expected changes in women’s economic participation within the Qamishli community, where women are confined traditional pre-determined roles in the private sphere, or in specific and limited professions within the public sphere. Laila Khalaf, the director of the women’s programs at Pêl - Civil Waves organization (منظمة (بيل - موجة) explains that “a field visit to the Qamishli market is enough to show that women are barely present, and that women’s employment is limited to a few clothing stores.”\(^59\)

In Qamishli today, the gap between societal resistance associated with customs, traditions and gender-sensitive social norms on the one hand, and the work toward women’s economic participation on the other, is widening. For example, while much attention is paid to the military participation of women and their noticeable presence in public administration institutions, there

\(^54\) The Administration of Northern and Northeast Region of Syria, led by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) other national parties, which was announced on December 21, 2013 in accordance with the "Charter of the Social Contract.”

\(^55\) For instance, the autonomous administration has worked on the Social Contract Charter which is available at: https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/ . Also see http://encumenacibicker.info/قوانين-المرأة-新城-الجزيرة/

\(^56\) See http://www.hawarnews.com/?s=اقتصاد+المرأة+الجزيرة


\(^58\) Skype interview, 3/2017

\(^59\) Interview in Qamishli, 3/2017.
is hardly any focus on creating a culture of women’s economic empowerment to meet labor market demand in the city. Hence, transformations in social roles in Qamishli, particularly with regard to women’s economic participation, remain contested.

Nonetheless, there are also positive attempts that need to be studied. In this perspective, the aim of this paper is to examine a civil society organization’s attempts to achieve a daring objective, supporting the empowerment of women and youth in Qamishli specifically in terms of economic participation and management responsibilities. It also aims to identify the main challenges facing the work on women’s economic empowerment and to envision some solutions that would contribute to this.

II. Shar’s work on women economic empowerment

Shar (شار) is a civil society organization established in 2014. Shar works in the field of development, and it seeks to advocate for women and youth in many of the projects it proposes\(^60\). One of its currently active projects is “Moutasharikoun” (مشاركون) that aims at addressing women's questions and their participation in the political, economic and social fields.

According to Shar management, this project was implemented through three stages\(^61\):

1. It focuses on working towards replacing the perception of men as rivals with that of men as supporters and partners, through joint training and dialogue workshops for both men and women addressing the issue of violence against women, especially sexual, since most victims of sexual violence are women and youth. Discussion sessions were conducted addressing cases of sexual violence, in order to form a database on women and youth exposed to sexual violence in the eastern part of the city of Qamishli, towards laying the foundations of a center for battered women\(^62\).

2. It introduces, through training workshops, concepts supportive of women empowerment, such as political participation, quotas, gender as well as economic empowerment. The introduction of such concepts has been accompanied by educational campaigns for women and their participation in elections, as well as by sessions discussing figures from the DAA regarding the implementation of the laws they proposed on women. These sessions focus on the new proposals which contradict the prevailing societal customs in Qamishli, such as issues related to inheritance and divorce.

3. It focuses on women's economic empowerment and their participation in the labor market, through training on emerging professions that do not require physical effort (such as laptop and mobile phone maintenance). These professions are relatively new to women in Qamishli, as they are usually for men in a society where the division of labor remains determined by the traditional roles of males and females. The project targets, over three months, 60 women, from both original residents and new arrivals, in four areas

---

\(^{60}\) See https://www.facebook.com/Shar4Development/

\(^{61}\) Interview at the office of Shar organization in Qamishli with Rojin Hbbo, 27/2/2017.

\(^{62}\) The idea of opening a center for battered women was postponed due to the lack of financial support.
of the province. Selection is then made from among the participants for a $1000 grant to buy equipment, rent a place and participate in the labor market.

The advantages of this project lie in its introduction to the idea of empowering women in a gradual and logical way, from awareness raising through training sessions to advocacy empowerment through discussion sessions, to economic empowerment exemplified by the trainings on the maintenance of mobile phones and laptops.

However, this project lacks the focus on the empowerment of the same target group of women in all three aspects. The project also requires a clear plan to face the social attitudes and expectations in terms of women's roles. For instance, people’s disapproval of or lack of trust in women working in the city’s market within any new domain affects women’s economic integration.

Addressing these challenges still requires the support of all parties and leading personalities fighting against gender stereotypes. Rojin Hbbo, director of the Shar Women's Project and a human rights activist, explains that she sought to integrate women into professions that correspond to the changing circumstances and to the labor market needs. She thanks the advocacy mechanisms that supported her at this level, stressing that "the tendency of the majority of organizations to target women recently has been helpful in easing the obstacles faced by the project." More generally, the openness of the region to civil society organizations also contributed to Rojin’s leadership within her organization; enabling her to raise questions on women’s roles in government and management within the prevailing community culture. This was done through a number of projects that advocate for women socially, politically and economically, such as the project “Haq wa Wajib” (Right and Obligation), where she worked on the development of a manual on the legal framework in the DAA, and made comments on the proposed laws on women. Rojin also moderated dialogue sessions on topics related to gender mainstreaming, to the role of women in elections, honor killings and violence against women, as well as on women’s mobilization and advocacy.

The overall challenges faced by “Moutasharikoun” in general and Rojin in particular within her work, both as a human rights and civil activist, boils down to the prevailing perception of the areas in which Rojin chose to work as a male domain. But these challenges are not limited to managing an organization such as Shar mainly by women, as they also face the beneficiaries of the project. Rola, one of “Moutasharikoun” beneficiaries, offered her story as one case in point.

Rola, a 25-year-old resident of the city of Qamishli, was forced to drop out of school due to the lack of financial resources and the need to search for a job. Rola managed to participate in the project “Moutasharikoun” and sees in it an opportunity to satisfy her economic and social motives. She states that "in terms of training, it could be, on the one hand, a gateway to future

63 Interview at the office of Shar organization in Qamishli, 27/2/2017.
64 Gender mainstreaming is used here to translate a phrase in Arabic that would literally mean “dissemination of gender culture”.
65 See http://sormey.com/?p=479
jobs that help me become economically independent during the current crisis vis-a-vis the general rise of living costs. On the other hand, it also allows me to live a daring new experience."

Rola stressed that she faced much societal pressure on the path towards her professional future, while taking her first steps, and that without her strong confidence in her ability, she would have stepped back. She comments that:

> There is no natural law that prevents women from practicing a profession that does not require physical work, such as the maintenance of laptops and mobile phones; however, community laws that measure women's capability for these professions as per male standards, contradict the presence of women in the Qamishli market.\(^56\)

To put it in Rola’s words, this study shows that:

> The essence of the idea of empowering women economically lies not only in offering them training and financial support, but also in women’s ability to break traditional chains and to confront the stark societal stance that opposes all that is new in the process of women’s self-assertion outside community-imposed social roles.\(^67\)

### III. Challenges that prevent women’s economic empowerment

#### Social beliefs about discrimination between men and women

Women’s work in Qamishli is regarded with disrespect and sarcasm as per cultural practices and historical legacies that stem from the rejection of the idea of gender equality, often leading to public opposition and threats faced by working women. This perception restricts women’s work to professions that do not require time and effort, given the responsibilities and burdens that women assume within their families. Women thus remain economically subordinate to men, according to the social concept prevailing in the city of Qamishli. As Mehwesh Sheikhi sees it:

> The lack of societal trust in women’s ability to perform and achieve, and women's lack of confidence and their reluctance to engage in any new experiment that may contravene social norms, stem from the prevailing social culture which constitutes an obstacle to women’s economic empowerment.\(^68\)

#### Differences in the status of women between rural areas and the city of Qamishli

Historically, women in rural Qamishli have been able to work in agriculture and other rural work on an equal footing as men. They have proved their ability in this domain. However, community's

---

\(^{56}\) Interview at the office of Shar organization in Qamishli, 3/2017.

\(^{67}\) Interview at the office of Shar organization in Qamishli, 3/2017.

\(^{68}\) Skype interview, 3/2017.
acceptance of women’s work remained confined to rural areas, so that the same woman who would be able to work in a rural area would not be able to do so in the city due to the prevailing customs and traditions. Leila Khalaf explains that "a contradiction continues to exist within Qamishli between the commonness of women’s work in rural areas and the difficulties they face working in the city."  

The limited number of projects supporting women economic empowerment

The region lacks women and feminist organizations that specialize in support and empowering women economically. In 2011, women’s work in Qamishli was limited to the Women’s Union associated with Syrian regime. Most of the attempts were related to small and limited civic projects, usually training women in traditional professions, such as hairdressing, sewing and agriculture. After 2011, women’s participation in economic development expanded, but their work continues to be subject to stereotyping and left without economic support. At the same time, most women’s associations have limited access to social and economic resources and to opportunities for awareness raising, due to their subordination to political or religious lines for support and social coverage.

The economic situation and lack of basic services

The general economic situation is considered one of the obstacles to women’s empowerment and self-assertion. Mehwesh Sheikhi states:

"The devastating economic situation and lack of real economic development in Qamishli, as a result of the war and the siege imposed on the region, limit the opportunities of empowering women because empowerment is linked to the economy in Qamishli. Women in Qamishli are seeking jobs; the problem is the lack of opportunities."  

Sheikhi also notes that the power outage has brought the situation in the region back to a primitive state, that often requires time and exhausting efforts considered unsuitable for women under prevailing societal norms in Qamishli.

Moreover, safety is a major challenge to women’s participation in the labor market and in the development of the community, and to women’s mobility and more specifically access to public transport.

Establishment of autonomous administration institutions

The need of institutions and administrative bodies formed by the DAA for employees constituted an incentive for the economic participation of many women and girls. However, this also poses an obstacle to their own economic empowerment. Women, usually, prefer administrative

---

69 Skype interview, 29/4/2017.
70 Skype interview, 3/2017.
occupations that do not require physical effort, but provide a good salary. At the same time, these institutions relied mostly on women for their staff. Leila Khalaf notes that "administrative functions confine women to a defined mold and prevent them from thinking about their own economic empowerment."\(^71\)

### IV. Proposed Alternatives

**Introducing non-traditional job opportunities**

Innovative ideas and projects to take women out of the stereotypes imposed by society and its common culture can be based on the needs of the labor market in light of its changes at global level. The project “Moutasharikoun” created an unconventional case in the path towards women’s empowerment in Qamishli, and an incentive to put forward other new ideas.

**Supporting women’s organizations whose aim is to promote women rather than those that use the issue of women to serve political agendas**

Linking the work of women to religious and political agendas prevents them from winning societal trust within a society such as that of Qamishli, which is characterized by its religious and political diversity. Independence of women associations and actors from these agendas is therefore an essential aspect. Along the same lines, it is also necessary to address women’s issues from a community perspective.

**Community awareness**

This issue is the direct responsibility of civic and community activists, who can bring about change in community perceptions, especially with regard to women and youth.

This can be achieved by increasing the participation of women in the public space, by providing programs for women’s empowerment as well as awareness sessions, and by organizing mobilization and advocacy campaigns aimed at educating the public opinion on the importance of women involvement in all fields. Rojin Hbbo stresses the importance of the community’s participation in awareness raising, since, as she puts it,: "raising awareness is not a responsibility confined to women activists, but a duty of the entire Qamishli community in light of the proposed laws on women."\(^72\)

**Activation of the role of the media: through educational and awareness programs**

The role of the media is not only to cover women’s and youth’s activities, but also to showcase successful examples of these, encouraging already empowered women to implement educational and awareness programs that explain women’s concepts, how to disseminate these and how does empowerment come about. These shall focus on the importance of women empowerment and

---

\(^71\) Interview at the office of Pêl - Civil Waves organization in Qamishli, 4/2017.  
\(^72\) Interview at the office of Shar organization in Qamishli, 27/2/2017.
participation, and introduce ideas that contribute to community development, and that take women out of the framework of competition with men.

The media, especially broadcast media, is considered a key platform for those working on community awareness due to the large group it reaches out to especially in Qamishli. It is therefore recommended to focus specifically on the broadcast media.

**Imposing laws on the flexibility of women's work**

Job creation is not enough to maximize the added value of women and youth potential contribution. In times of social and economic recession, activating and investing in citizens' potential in the reconstruction process becomes essential.

This requires the implementation of the part-time work system that is commensurate with social roles, giving women and youth a degree of flexibility in participation, and taking into account women’s conditions associated with maternity and breastfeeding, in a context where women’s multiple social roles are considered an obstacle to their practical participation.

**V. Conclusion**

The city of Qamishli witnesses a rise in the engagement of women in the public space. As the movements of men are currently constrained by the security and military situation in Syria, the contribution of women to the labor market has increased, many of them playing the role of breadwinner and the main supporter of the family economy. This case study confirms women’s economic participation in Qamishli, in spite of the many social and economic challenges and obstacles they face, including local community’s perception of women’s roles on the one hand, and the subordination of women’s organizations to political and religious agendas on the other. This also holds true in spite of the impact of the general economic situation.

Today, women in Qamishli participate in the labor market. They are present in administrative departments and bodies, but their attempts towards economic empowerment are still poor. However, this endeavor to empower women economically includes some positive models, such as the project “Moutasharikoun”.

This experience, which tries to break the stereotypical image of women's work through modern ideas and professions, is one of the viable alternatives to improving women's economic participation. Other alternatives include: supporting women as civic actors, and keeping them aside from political and religious agendas; raising community awareness on the importance of women empowerment; activating the role of the media in this area.

The challenges and alternatives illustrated in this case study show that working on raising awareness about social concepts is not impossible in a community such as that of Qamishli. The latter is possibly more open than its neighbors in trying to engage women as important and effective elements of the community. However, women remain excluded from the economic and developmental realms. This should therefore motivate the entire society to recognize the need to raise awareness on expanding women’s participation at all societal and economic levels.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Al-Sawt al-Suri Website, 27-10-2016: “Fil-Ghouta al-Sharqiyya “al-maraa akthar men nesf almujtama” wahtimam mutazayed bidawriha as-siyasi wal-qiyadi” (In Easter Ghouta “women are more than half-society” and an increased interest in their political and leadership role). Retrieved from: /syrianvoice.org/في-الغوطة-الشرقية-المرأة-أكثر-من-نصف-


Geroun media network, 23-11-2016 "Al-maraa tatatalla’ ila tamthilen akbar fi majles Douma al-mahalli" (Women are looking forward to a greater representation at Douma local council). Retrieved from: http://www.geroun.net/archives/69306


The Syrian Feminist Lobby. “‘an Thairat Mughayyabat ‘an Son’el Qarar” al-Musharaka as-siyasiyya lil mar’a wa wusouli ila Marakez son’el Qarar fi Ba’d Quwa al-Mu’arada as-Suriyya munthu ‘Am 2011” (About rebel women forcefully absent from decision-making: political participation of women and their access to decision-making positions in the Syrian opposition since 2011). Retrieved from: https://syrianfeministlobby.com


