



# From Marginalisation to Equity

## The Shifting Gender Roles of Women in Southern Syria: beginning of change and challenges of violence

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## Introduction: Overview of the Transformation of Social Roles in Southern Syria

Among the profound effects of historical transformations, such as revolutions, wars, epidemics, and more, is the reshaping of social dynamics to adapt to the new circumstances experienced by society. This entails inevitable shifts in positions and roles that were prevalent in the past, prompting a reevaluation and redefinition of accepted norms. This is what unfolded in Syria, a nation deeply entrenched in a multifaceted conflict,<sup>1</sup> where positions and roles underwent significant rearrangements, accompanied by a reassessment of established value systems. Twelve years after the start of the conflict, these transformations have had a notable impact on the fabric of social relations, leading to the following notable outcomes:

- ◆ The displacement of massive numbers of people from their homes to safer locations. As a result, the number of internally displaced individuals has soared to 6.7 million, including 5.6 million refugees (half of whom are women).<sup>2</sup> Combined, this staggering figure of 12.3 million surpasses over half of Syria's total population.<sup>3</sup>
- ◆ The widespread militarization of men, with many facing direct targeting through arrests, killings, or other forms of violence. Consequently, a considerable portion of men have been compelled to leave the country or relocate to areas where their lives are not directly threatened. Those who were unable to leave have been forced to either engage in armed conflict with one of the warring parties (seeking protection or viewing it as a job opportunity) or hide within the confines of their homes and local communities, seeking the minimal level of safety available to them.
- ◆ Economic production came to a halt, leading to a rapid deterioration in living conditions. An alarming 90% of the population in Syria now lives below the poverty line. And at least 12 million Syrians are grappling with food insecurity, as reported by the World Food Program.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Syrian conflict originated in 2011 as a popular revolution fueled by political demands for change. Over time, external interventions transformed the conflict into a multifaceted internal struggle.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, OCHA (2023), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/syr>

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Syria, Events of 2022", <https://www.hrw.org/ar/world-report/2023/country-chapters/syria>

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, *ibid.*

These dynamics, alongside various other factors, have contributed to the reconfiguration of relationships between men and women, as they adapt to the new realities brought about by the conflict. Consequently, the roles and responsibilities of both men and women have undergone significant changes. Men, no longer able to fulfil their traditional roles within the prevailing patriarchal system, have taken on new positions and responsibilities. Similarly, women have found themselves compelled to undertake diverse tasks and responsibilities, often single-handedly, whether within the confines of their homes or outside of them.

Given the extensive body of research on the subject, it is redundant to ask whether Syrian women face violence or not. Instead, this paper aims to address the following: How has the conflict impacted the various forms of violence experienced by Syrian women in areas under the control of the Syrian government? To answer this question, we will explore the shifts and transformations in the social and economic roles of women within this context. To achieve this objective, we have employed two research methodologies:

- ◆ In December 2022, we conducted two discussion sessions involving a total of twenty participants (16 women and 4 men). The first session focused on exploring common and prevalent forms of violence against women in areas under the control of the Syrian government. In the second session, which included different participants from the first session, we discussed potential mechanisms that can be implemented to reduce the forms of violence identified in the initial discussion.
- ◆ To gain deeper insights into the multifaceted aspects raised during the discussion sessions, we conducted five interviews with a group of activists specialising in women's protection. These interviews encompassed various fields, including law, psychology, social work, and feminism. The interviews played a crucial role in painting a more comprehensive picture of the emerging or intensified forms of violence due to the war. They also shed light on the necessary steps to address these challenges effectively.

This paper falls under the category of comprehensive policy papers, encompassing an analysis of the current state of violence against women in Syria. It aims to provide recommendations that contribute to establishing a shared understanding among stakeholders, facilitating a deeper comprehension of the evolving dynamics within this context. The ultimate goal is to identify and coordinate efforts to bring about transformative changes that promote social justice and uphold the rights of all citizens.

## First: Economic Role Transformations, Promising Reduced Violence and Advanced Women’s Rights

A significant number of Syrian women have joined the workforce, to the extent that their representation in the labor market has reached seven women for every man, as reported by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor.<sup>5</sup> Initially, this trend primarily involved displaced women. However, as the economic situation worsened, it encompassed all Syrian women, irrespective of their displacement status, compelling them to seek employment.

This transformation in the economic role, initially driven by the necessity to secure livelihoods, has now become a cornerstone of Syrian women’s lives. It holds significance not only due to the economic imperative but also because it has embedded itself in the consciousness of women who have ventured out to provide support for themselves and their families.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the impact of women entering the workforce went beyond mere participation. Syrian women ventured into fields that were previously considered unconventional and even socially unacceptable for them. They took up roles as taxi drivers, delivery drivers on bicycles or vans, employees in car washes, or electronics repair shops. The immediate necessity shattered old norms and established new patterns that catered to the demands of the present, challenging the social pressures stemming from the breach of traditional societal structures.

This change, while it may appear positive as it highlights and harnesses the untapped potential of Syrian women and disrupts the foundations of a patriarchal society, also exposed them to a multitude of forms of violence. The patriarchal mindset remains deeply ingrained, undermining the recognition of women as independent and equal individuals across all domains.

Prominent forms of violence related to Syrian women’s involvement in the labour market during the conflict:

1. **Social pressures:** Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, social pressure was prevalent, dictating what was socially acceptable or unacceptable. However, with the changing economic situation, it became confined to a few conservative groups.
2. **Workplace violence:** Despite the significant influx of women into the labour market, employers still view women as cheap labor, exploiting their need for employment by

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<sup>5</sup>Aks Alser, “Gender Disparity in the Syrian Labour Market: One Man for Every Seven Women”, January 25, 2023, [shorturl.at/clmJL](https://shorturl.at/clmJL)

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a social worker and feminist activist employed by a civil organization in rural Damascus on January 18, 2023.

imposing long working hours for meagre wages.<sup>7</sup> Displaced women face even harsher working conditions, given their urgent need to work after losing their homes and sources of income, coupled with their lack of necessary skills in many cases.

3. **Labor law:** The surge in women entering the labour market necessitates updating the existing Syrian labour law, enacted in 2010, to address forms of violence targeting women and establish regulatory and protective measures for female workers. The current law's deficiencies make it complicit in potential violence against women.
4. **Non-compliance with care standards:** Women's specific needs related to pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and the menstrual cycle are often neglected in workplace regulations, with the exception of maternity leave.
5. **Sexual exploitation:** The most prevalent form of violence, as reported by interviewed women, is sexual exploitation. This includes offering money, shelter, food, goods, or services to vulnerable individuals in exchange for sexual relations or favors.<sup>8</sup> Sexual exploitation is widespread in various spheres of public life that are influenced by connections, power, and influence. Within our research, we found two main spaces where cases of sexual exploitation are particularly common: workplaces and service-related establishments. These groups, who are more vulnerable and lack traditional social protection, are at higher risk.
6. **Forced labor in the sex trade:** Many women, out of desperation to make ends meet, have been coerced (directly or indirectly) into selling sexual services, often ending up in brothels operated by organized criminal networks. This form of exploitation closely resembles human trafficking in its current form.

## Second: The Social Role Battleground and its Impact on Women

One striking example of the transformation in the social role of Syrian women was shared by an activist in the field of protection whom we interviewed. She mentioned that she works long hours in an organization, while her husband, who finishes work earlier, takes up the responsibilities of household chores, cleaning, and caring for the children – a role that was not typically assigned to men before the years of conflict.

Undoubtedly, there have been real changes in the traditional roles of women. However, accurately observing and monitoring these changes becomes challenging due to the absence of

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<sup>7</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a social worker who previously worked in protection programs for women on January 25, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR, "What is sexual exploitation and abuse?" <https://help.unhcr.org/ecuador/ar/bienvenido-a/explotacion-abuso-sexual/que-es-la-explotacion-y-el-abuso-sexual/>

well-established customs and the lack of a unified work system that applies to the majority of workers in Syria. Additionally, the prevailing social situation is far from stable, unlike societies without conflict. In the case of Syria, each family seems to have its own unique social system, adapted to their current circumstances. For instance, some husbands embrace the importance of their wives working outside the home and cooperate with them to distribute roles both inside and outside the household, as exemplified in the previous case. On the other hand, there are men who are unable to work due to the fear of conscription or arrest, confining them to the house or a limited geographic space. Such situations may lead some men to direct their discontent and anger towards their children and wives, using their paternal authority, while others may strive to understand the changing circumstances and find cooperative solutions with their wives.

These diverse cases exist, and it is not a matter of favoring one over the other. However, what can be noted is that despite these changes, women continue to bear the greater burden within the framework of the prevailing patriarchal hierarchy that shapes the models and dynamics of relationships. In this context, numerous forms of violence at the societal level can be observed, including the following:

1. **Partner violence:** The courts are witnessing a surge in divorce cases due to discord or consensual separation, which is indicative of the profound changes occurring in family dynamics after the conflict. One prevalent reason for the widespread divorce is partner violence, as highlighted by a social worker at a women's protection center who stated, "Among the group of women I work with at the protection center, 12 out of 20 are divorced, 6 are widows, and 2 continue to endure partner violence".<sup>9</sup> An important and noteworthy indicator in this context is the increasing number of women who seek divorce through legal channels. It is noteworthy that a growing number of women have become empowered to initiate divorce proceedings in a society where it is often stigmatized. It is crucial to remember that a significant factor motivating women to seek divorce is the extended absence of their husbands due to the conflict, leaving them responsible for managing affairs, property, and children, which the law prohibits them from doing without the presence of a husband. Consequently, they are compelled to pursue divorce – representing a form of legal violence against women.
2. **Domestic violence:** One concerning trend that has been increasingly observed in recent times is the threat of or even outright killings carried out with military-grade firearms. This can be attributed to the proliferation of weapons among civilians and various groups. Disturbing incidents such as fathers or brothers killing their own female family members have been documented, often camouflaged as accidental deaths resulting from weapon

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<sup>9</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a social worker who previously worked in protection programs for women in As-Suwayda governorate on January 25, 2023.

cleaning or similar circumstances.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is not uncommon for young women to face threats or even fatal violence from men who reject them. An example reported by Syria Direct involved the tragic killing of a 25-year-old woman named Maha (a pseudonym) in a suburb of Damascus. Her brother, who was associated with the Syrian regime, was responsible for her death. Instead of publicly acknowledging her demise, rumors circulated within her narrow social circle suggesting that she had “disappeared after returning to Syria”, as described by one of her relatives named Iman (a pseudonym). Prior to her tragic fate, Maha had sought refuge with a family she had been in contact with. However, upon discovering her whereabouts, her mother had promised her safety upon returning home, but it was her own brother who ultimately took her life.<sup>1</sup>

3. **Child marriage:** Child marriage has experienced a resurgence after a significant decline in the past, primarily affecting displaced individuals who were previously considered burdens on their families. Displacement stripped these families of the protective layers they once had, both economically and in terms of women's welfare. While the cultural heritage previously dictated the responsibility of "marrying off daughters," it was the family's duty to transfer this concern to another man who could bear it. Religious and legal references have traditionally supported and allowed the marriage of minors. However, it is worth noting that the prevalence of underage marriage expanded further as the economic situation deteriorated, encompassing all segments of Syrian society, including both displaced and non-displaced individuals.

In addition to the contextual factors that contributed to the spread of this phenomenon, the legal framework also played a role in its increase. Despite the amendment of marriage contract-related articles in 2018, the resulting penalties remain relatively lenient. Even after the revision of Article 469 of the Penal Code through Legislative Decree No. 148 of 1949, the text still reads as follows: 1) Anyone who arranges the marriage of a minor virgin outside the competent court without the court's consent shall face imprisonment ranging from one to six months and a fine ranging from fifty thousand to one hundred thousand Syrian pounds. The minor's guardian has jurisdiction. 2) Anyone who arranges the marriage of a minor outside the competent court with the consent of the guardian shall be subject to a fine ranging from twenty-five thousand to fifty thousand Syrian pounds. Furthermore, law enforcement authorities are often weak in many regions, significantly limiting the capabilities of the judicial police responsible for executing court orders.<sup>1</sup> The practice of child marriage leads to a chain of violent acts, starting with sexual violence and its health ramifications for the minor girl. It also

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<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a lawyer working in an organization dedicated to advocating for women's rights within the legal framework on January 23, 2021.

<sup>1</sup> Afaf Jagmur, “Domestic violence against women in Syria is a crime protected by mitigating excuses”, Syria Direct, August 8, 2023, [shorturl.at/cjsTX](https://shorturl.at/cjsTX)

<sup>1</sup> Presidency of the Syrian Council of Ministers (2018), Law No. 24 of 2018, amending some articles of the Penal Code promulgated by Legislative Decree No. 148 of 1949 related to the conclusion of marriage contracts outside the competent courts, [shorturl.at/bgEJ4](https://shorturl.at/bgEJ4)



encompasses psychological violence, the effects of which persist throughout the girl's life and beyond. Additionally, child marriage deprives girls of completing their education and hinders their professional empowerment, consequently limiting their access to better employment opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

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### **Third: Additional Marginalization of Displaced and Detained women**

The condition of displacement brings about a general state of vulnerability, as it strips the displaced individuals of the social protection networks they once had as well as their economic resources, making them more susceptible to abuses and mistreatment. In Syria, a country embroiled in civil war, displaced men and women often face accusations from certain loyalist groups, branding them as “country ruiners” or “terrorists”, along with other inciting and stigmatizing labels. These accusations typically stem from the displaced individuals’ regional or sectarian affiliations. This situation reflects a scarcity of resources and intense competition for businesses, goods, and services in an extremely tense environment.

One feminist highlights a discriminatory example she observed, stating, “In Jaramana, a suburb of Damascus, conflicts of this nature are common in some of the bread bakeries. To mitigate these conflicts, some bakeries have started to allocate specific roles to the displaced individuals. Nevertheless, you can often hear comments like: you’ve ruined our homes, and now you’re competing with us for our livelihood”. In addition to the verbal, psychological, and discriminatory violence faced by displaced women, protection workers note that there are even more prevalent forms of violence within the displaced communities themselves. These forms of violence include:

1. **Sexual exploitation in exchange for services:** For instance, a worker at a bakery may offer a displaced woman more bread than her allocated share or expedite her access to bread in exchange for services, often of a sexual nature. Similarly, some landlords exploit vulnerable displaced women by offering them a room in exchange for a temporary and unregistered marriage contract. These are just a few examples.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, sexual exploitation can occur within the realm of relief services provided by civil and international agencies. Disturbing incidents of sexual exploitation, including cases that amount to rape, have been documented, leading the United Nations to initiate investigations and implement strict measures against those found involved. Establishing a comprehensive protection framework requires a combination of procedures, laws, and severe penalties, along with education for both beneficiaries and service providers about various aspects of protection.

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad al-Jasim and Jumana al-Salman, “Girls, But...” (Field Research on the Marriage of Underage Girls in Displacement Camps within Syria), Center for Civil Society and Democracy, Gaziantep, 2016  
<https://www.ccsd.ngo/ar/?p=691>

<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a Syrian feminist activist based in Damascus on January 19, 2023.

The UN has implemented these practices, resulting in a reduced prevalence of sexual exploitation within the humanitarian services sector, as reported by a protection worker involved in a UN project designed for this purpose in Syria.<sup>1</sup>

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2. **Forced sex:** One of the specialists we interviewed shared a disturbing case involving a man who married four women and coerced them into prostitution as a means to generate income. This is an example of the methods being increasingly employed to force women into the sex trade. Another case highlighted by a female lawyer involved the abduction of a young girl who was subsequently forced to work in a brothel in Damascus. Fortunately, the girl managed to escape, and an activist lawyer took the initiative to file a complaint and pursue legal action against the individuals known to be involved. Shockingly, it was later revealed that these individuals had connections to government officials who exerted pressure on the lawyer and relevant judges to close the case. These two cases shed light on the emergence of new forms and tactics used to coerce women into prostitution, with little to no oversight or follow-up from official authorities. What further complicates matters is the involvement of security and government officials in managing these illicit networks. This obstruction hinders the dismantling of such networks and the accountability of those responsible, eroding trust in government agencies and discouraging victims from coming forward to file legal complaints.
  
3. **Women's release from detention:** Violence against women detainees is a complex issue, primarily due to the notorious reputation of the detention centers operated by the Syrian security services. These centers are known for their inhumane treatment of all detainees, regardless of gender, which poses significant challenges for women detainees when reintegrating into a patriarchal society after their release. There is a tendency to easily stigmatize women who have been in detention, often accusing them of having experienced sexual assault during their captivity, even if such incidents did not actually occur.<sup>1</sup> It is perplexing that the stigma attaches to the victim, rather than the perpetrator, in these cases. Equally surprising is the stark contrast in how male detainees are received upon their release, being celebrated as heroes and courageous individuals. Apart from societal stigma, some families even disown the released female detainee or subject her to further forms of violence, such as restricting her freedom of movement and confining her to the home. These circumstances render the former detainee highly vulnerable to various degrees of violence. Not only does she face gender-based violence, but she also endures social stigma from her immediate surroundings, as well as political stigma if she resides in areas under the control of the Syrian government.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted via social media<sup>5</sup> with a social worker who previously worked in protection programs for women in As-Suwayda governorate on January 25, 2023.

<sup>1</sup> According to the patriarchal system<sup>6</sup>, numerous taboos are associated with women, the most significant ones being related to sexuality. It is important to highlight that women are often condemned and blamed, even when they are the victims of such circumstances.

## Fourth: Deprivation and Psychological and Emotional Abuse

Within the information management system, gender-based violence is categorized into two main types:<sup>1</sup>

1. **Denial of resources, opportunities and services:** In the past, the entire social system discriminated against women, denying them numerous opportunities and resources, while favoring men in various spheres such as family, work, and the public domain. However, in the present context, which is a decade after the onset of the conflict, interviews reveal a significant shift in the dynamics of deprivation and scarcity. The economic downturn, the halt in productive activities, and the rise in poverty rates have affected both men and women, exacerbating deprivation for all individuals. Nevertheless, in accordance with the patriarchal structure deeply rooted in society, women continue to face greater levels of deprivation compared to men. This is primarily due to their pre-existing disadvantage and long-standing marginalization. On the other hand, the increasing participation of women in the labor market and the evolving economic and social roles they have undertaken have enabled them to regain agency and access to resources. Consequently, women are now more empowered to challenge situations of deprivation and assert their rights. A notable example of this is women asserting their right to inheritance, which traditionally has been denied to them in favor of men without any avenue for protest. In a surprising shift, some women have taken legal action by filing cases in court to claim the inheritance that has long been unjustly withheld from them, challenging societal expectations.<sup>1</sup>

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“Women are often subjected to immense pressure and denied their rightful share of justice. There is an expectation that women should relinquish their inheritance to their brothers. Interestingly, a girl who selflessly surrenders her inheritance to her male siblings is praised as authentic, while those who assert their rights are unjustly labelled as greedy. The law perpetuates gender discrimination by favoring men and treating inheritance as their exclusive entitlement.”

(Intervention from the discussion sessions).

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2. **Psychological and emotional abuse:** This encompasses a range of harmful behaviors that inflict mental and emotional pain on individuals, including threats of physical or sexual violence, verbal harassment, deprivation threats, rape threats, forced isolation, intimidation,

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<sup>1</sup> The information management system mentioned is a comprehensive tool designed to facilitate the collection, storage, analysis, and sharing of data on incidents of gender-based violence. It was established in 2007 through a collaborative effort between the United Nations Population Fund, the International Landmine Center, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.gbvims.com/gbvims-tools/classification-tool/>

<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a lawyer working in an organization dedicated to advocating for women’s rights within the legal framework on January 23, 2021.

and menacing gestures, among others. It is important to recognize that psychological and emotional abuse is closely intertwined with other forms of violence and often precedes, coexists with, or follows them. This insidious form of abuse inflicts significant psychological and emotional damage on women. In fact, the prevalence of anxiety and depression resulting from such abuse has become alarmingly common among women, comparable to the frequency of a common cold, as expressed by a female protection worker.<sup>1</sup>

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## Fifth: Alarming Absence of Legal Protections

**No legal definition of violence against women:** One of the glaring indications of the lack of legal protection for women is the absence of a clear definition of violence against women, and the same holds true for domestic violence.

The absence of a precise definition makes it exceedingly challenging to address and combat violence, and it contributes to the legitimization of violence against women. Furthermore, Syrian legislation has historically included mitigating circumstances for honor killings, although these have recently been abolished, and it even exempted the perpetrator from rape charges if he marries his victim.

This represents one facet of the problem. The other facet lies in the persistence of a “patriarchal mentality” among judges, which influences their thinking and judgement. Despite the Syrian legislature’s elimination of the legal provisions that previously allowed for reduced sentences in “defence of honour” crimes, some judges still rely on Article 192 of the Penal Code when issuing their rulings. This article states that if the judge deems the motive as honourable, alternative penalties are imposed, such as life imprisonment instead of execution, life imprisonment or fifteen years instead of life hard labour, temporary detention instead of temporary hard labour, and simple imprisonment instead of imprisonment with labour.<sup>2</sup> Bringing about change must start with amending the legal framework, and subsequently permeate through to the judges who interpret and enforce these laws.

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“The law is very important and necessary. It is true that we are working to raise awareness, but it is the law that provides the necessary regulations, ensuring justice and equality for everyone.”

(Intervention from the discussion sessions).

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<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a social worker and feminist activist employed by a civil organization in rural Damascus on January 18, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Syrian Penal Code, Book One, [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/sy\\_penalcode\\_49\\_arorof.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/sy_penalcode_49_arorof.pdf)

**Violence on the part of law enforcement:** The patriarchal mindset sometimes manifests as violence within law enforcement agencies, including judges and the police. A female lawyer, actively advocating for women’s rights, highlighted this problem, stating, “Courts are not safe spaces, neither for female lawyers nor for female clients. We have often experienced harassment from judges, which can be quite severe, especially in closed offices where hearings and proceedings take place”. She referred to a specific incident where seven female lawyers filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor in As-Suwayda Governorate against a judge who had harassed them all. However, due to the lack of a clear legal provision, the judge was simply transferred without facing any disciplinary action.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to directly reporting incidents at police stations, the lack of professional handling of violence complaints submitted by women is a major deterrent. The primary reason women hesitate to file complaints with law enforcement agencies is the fear of being further victimized by some of the police officers working there. A female protection worker shared a case where a woman went to a police station to report marital violence she had endured. However, once the officer responsible for registering the complaint learned about the woman’s social status, he asked her to move to another room inside the station and attempted to assault her.<sup>2</sup> The weakness of the legal system in protecting women and deterring offenders, combined with the lack of professionalism among those responsible for law enforcement, are significant factors contributing to the reluctance to seek help from these institutions. This perpetuates a cycle of violence and further solidifies the entrenched masculine structure of society.

**Registration of marriages and childbirths:** Following the withdrawal of civil government institutions from areas not under the control of the Syrian government, all civil status-related procedures came to a halt. Upon the reclamation of these areas by the Syrian government, numerous issues arose regarding the registration of marriages and births. Failure to address these issues would result in depriving a significant number of individuals of their fundamental rights. Despite the government’s efforts to streamline the process, the judicial system continues to face challenges, including sluggish and bureaucratic procedures, a scarcity of courts and judges, and the unavailability of sufficient documentation from regions that individuals needing to verify their civil status hail from. This issue is further compounded in areas that remain beyond the control of the Syrian government, where the functioning of courts and institutions has ceased.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a lawyer working in an organization dedicated to advocating for women’s rights within the legal framework on January 23, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a lawyer working in an organization dedicated to advocating for women’s rights within the legal framework on January 23, 2021.

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Men in this country enjoy significant legal privileges and their rights are extensively protected, unlike females. They have the authority to act as guardians and custodians for women and children. While the constitution guarantees equal citizenship, the reality is far from equal implementation, resulting in the oppression of women."

(Intervention from the discussion sessions)

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## Sixth: Forms of Violence Associated with Social Media

Due to the fragmentation experienced by Syrian men and women across different areas of control within Syria and in diaspora countries, social media has emerged as a significant platform in their lives. However, along with its widespread use, certain forms of violence have surfaced, which are not new except in the tools with which they are practiced. These manifestations include:

1. **Electronic extortion:** Usually targeting female victims with the threat of exposing a “scandal”, electronic extortion’s purpose is to extract material or sexual gains. The consequences of such extortion can be severe, with some cases even resulting in murder. An activist shared a tragic incident where a girl was killed by her own family simply because a picture of her without a veil was posted.<sup>2</sup> 4
2. **Bullying and hate speech:** Women who make their presence known or express their opinions are frequently subjected to targeted attacks solely based on their gender. These attacks tend to focus on their bodies and personal lives, rather than addressing the substance of their actions or ideas.

In this context, it is crucial to highlight a significant development. Following the implementation of Law No. 20, enacted by the Syrian government to regulate communication channels and combat information-related crimes, cases of extortion have witnessed a remarkable decline. This can be attributed to the proactive efforts of law enforcement agencies in enforcing the law and addressing complaints with seriousness.<sup>2</sup> Such outcomes serve as evidence of the effectiveness achieved through the adoption and implementation of this law by government authorities.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a social worker and feminist activist employed by a civil organization in rural Damascus on January 18, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Interview conducted via social media with a Syrian feminist activist based in Damascus on January 19, 2023.

## Conclusion

- ◆ Syrian women are experiencing gradual yet significant changes in their social and economic roles, albeit at a somewhat accelerated pace, primarily influenced by the consequences of the conflict and the prevailing economic challenges.
- ◆ These evolving roles play a vital role in women's knowledge accumulation and empowerment on a practical level. Moreover, they contribute to raising community awareness about the significance of women's involvement in public spheres and various aspects of life.
- ◆ Despite the ongoing transformations in social roles, the political and legal framework still upholds and safeguards the traditional patriarchal system. The changes that accompany this framework fail to keep pace with the evolving circumstances and roles of women.
- ◆ Consequently, women bear the heaviest burden amidst the conflict, lacking a proper legal system or protective institutions to turn to when confronted with violence associated with these changes.
- ◆ Despite the report's portrayal of the prevalent forms of violence in Syrian society and the heightened vulnerability of women, two noteworthy points should be acknowledged. Firstly, the ongoing changes are gradually reshaping the balance between men and women in Syrian society. Secondly, feminist activists, with whom we conducted interviews and discussions, agree that despite their shortcomings, these changes mark the beginning of the desired path towards transformation. The signs of this change are beginning to emerge through the societal acceptance of practices that were previously refused.

## Annex 1: Bibliography

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## Annex Two: List of Interviews

- ◆ Interview conducted via social media with a social worker and feminist activist employed by a civil organisation in rural Damascus on January 18, 2023.
- ◆ Interview conducted via social media with a Syrian feminist activist based in Damascus on January 19, 2023.
- ◆ Interview conducted via social media with a lawyer working in an organisation dedicated to advocating for women’s rights within the legal framework on January 23, 2021.
- ◆ Interview conducted via social media with a social worker who previously worked in protection programs for women in As-Suwayda governorate on January 25, 2023.
- ◆ Interview conducted via social media with a lawyer and civil activist dedicated to advocating for women’s rights on January 30, 2023