



# From Marginalization to Equity: Protection Mechanisms and Policies for Women in southern Syria

Recommendation Paper\*  
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\* This policy document is the second part of an analysis paper that explores the forms of violence still faced by Syrian women in areas controlled by the Syrian Government after 12 years of conflict. It outlines the mechanisms and provisions for protection that can be implemented based on the findings of the previous paper.

## Introduction

While major societal changes may provide opportunities for vulnerable groups to transition from marginalization to empowerment, it is crucial to address certain points related to women and the systems they navigate, including their fields of work, the specifics of existing social violence, and the necessary procedures for empowerment and protection. Therefore, before discussing protection mechanisms and policies, these points must be taken into account.

Violence against women is a social phenomenon with cultural, economic, social, and political roots that not only cause it but also legitimize its continuation. Therefore, addressing this issue requires more than stereotypical images of perpetrators and victims, despite their significance on an individual level. Rather, systemic change must directly confront the patriarchal system, its structures, and the underlying pillars that sustain it. Only by targeting these factors can we reduce violence and achieve justice and equality in society.

Moreover, gender-based violence (against women in this case) occurs due to an imbalance of power between men and women, which includes decision-making abilities, access to resources, information, opportunities, and services, as well as control. Therefore, protection and empowerment programs must address this power imbalance at all levels.

It is important to recognize that men are also affected by the societal systems in which they exist, just as women are. The system imposes specific positions and roles on men, just as it does with women. Men cannot be excluded from efforts to promote change as they are essential partners in this process. Attempts to exclude them will inevitably slow down the desired progress towards change.

Based on the above, in order to promote the desired change, preserve gains that have been made, and achieve further progress, this paper provides general recommendations on what needs to be addressed. Additionally, detailed recommendations are presented for specific contexts where necessary.

To achieve this vision and advance the presented recommendations, it is essential to urge agencies working on issues of social justice to develop broader-scale recommendations. Furthermore, it is important to refine and tailor the detailed recommendations to suit the specific circumstances, available resources, potential decision-makers, and other factors that contribute to the process of change. This approach will enable effective implementation of the recommendations and promote progress towards the desired changes.

The most important of these recommendations can be formulated as follows:

## First: Protection Mechanisms at the Economic Level

1. The increasing number of women entering the labor market, without adequate legal protection and suitable work environments that consider their biological privacy and support their needs, can exacerbate the challenges facing working women. Economic activity, financial independence, and access to safe and supportive work environments are crucial pillars that reinforce the path towards long-term change and significantly affect the process. Therefore, it is essential to encourage the implementation of mechanisms that establish safe and equitable environments for women to work in fairly, including the following:
2. Update and develop the labor law ratified in 2010 to clarify and specify certain items related to equality and non-discrimination in different work environments, especially concerning work conditions for women. Although this law (Labor Law No. 17) includes an entire chapter dedicated to organizing work conditions for women, it lacks details and specifications, including provisions for suitable conditions for women to work while caring for their children during work, periods of pregnancy, and maternity. Furthermore, it is important to grant special leave during the menstrual cycle, taking into account the biological differences of women and treating them fairly, thereby achieving true equality, and ensuring these laws are compatible with reality and daily lived experiences.
3. Promote the adoption and implementation of codes of conduct, bylaws, and internal policies that clearly define workplace interactions and relationships between male and female workers. These policies should explicitly prohibit discrimination and gender-based violence within the work environment. Moreover, it is necessary to make these documents a mandatory requirement for all companies and factories that employ more than two people.
4. Introduce special legal articles that include specific definitions of all forms of violence that women may be exposed to in work environments, with penalties for all forms of violations and abuses based on gender.
5. Establish special procedures for complaints filed by women in the workplace, in order to protect them from additional potential abuses by complaints recipients.
6. One crucial step towards empowering women, particularly those without prior work experience, is to provide safe physical spaces that are free from gender stereotypes that limit women's roles in the workplace. The creation of such spaces, however, is not enough. We need to focus on empowering women in technical and administrative professions, rather than directing them towards stereotypical "feminine" jobs, such as cleaning or cooking. Encouraging women to explore and participate in new and

unfamiliar professional roles can help break down gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in the workplace, allowing women to exercise their full potential alongside their male peers.

## **Second: Protection mechanism on the Social Level**

Addressing this level can be complicated due to the overlapping of social and cultural norms with legal structures, making protection a complex and difficult matter. However, the first step towards progress can be securing physical protection, which can pave the way for other practical steps to be taken. The following can be considered to deal with the issue:

1. Work to establish protection centers for women and expand them to include most Syrian regions.
2. Pressure the Syrian government to allow associations and non-governmental organizations to open and manage protection centers by granting them the necessary licenses and permissions. It is important to ensure that these centers are not monopolized by the government, and are safe and protected from possible attacks and abuse.
3. Provide protection centers with a set of necessary services for the special cases of women survivors who seek protection there, which primarily cover medical, health, psychological, social services, as well as legal support services to deal with the repercussions of violence on women.
4. Work to establish special centers to shelter homeless women, in a manner that protects them from possible abuse, while ensuring that these centers work according to internal protection conditions that prevent any form of exploitation or violations.
5. Make efforts to ensure that protection and shelter centers are safe spaces for women, and that they have a positive reputation within the community. This can help to challenge prevailing attitudes which may associate such centers with prisons, and other negative stereotypes.
6. Develop manuals of special standards for protection and shelter centers, and receive approval to these standards from the authorities charged with monitoring the work of these protection centers and improving their organization.
7. Expand the scope of psychological, social and legal services centers that support women who are subjected to violence independently and follow up their cases fully, in order to create a supportive environment for women survivors, and a state of deterrence for aggressors.

8. Create safe spaces for women using all available means, with the aim of strengthening support networks and compensating for the environments they have lost. These spaces can be managed by organizations or associations as part of their programs, or they can be virtual spaces supported by activists and local workers.

### **Third: Protection mechanism on the Legal Level**

Modernizing the legal structure is crucial for creating a supportive culture for women and deterring the various forms of violence they face. While some progress has been made in amending certain legal provisions that are unfair to women, the majority of laws still bear a patriarchal imprint, treating women as minors in need of guardianship. To advance gender equality, there is a pressing need to address these patriarchal features of the legal system, including specific legal provisions that perpetuate discrimination against women. To this end, concrete and effective steps must be taken to revise and replace such provisions with more equitable ones:

- ◆ Develop a comprehensive and clear penal code that addresses the various types of violence that women experience, and which is not open to broad interpretation.
- ◆ Develop a comprehensive law on domestic violence to address the issue of violence that often goes unnoticed within families, unless it amounts to murder. Such violence, perpetrated by family members, including fathers, brothers, and husbands, needs to be clearly defined in the law, and appropriate penalties should be established to deter and prevent such behavior.
- ◆ Repeal articles in the Penal Code that mitigate sentences related to the killing of women, especially Article (192). This article provides for a mitigating excuse for crimes committed if the motive behind them is deemed "honorable"
- ◆ Advocate for changes to laws that promote gender discrimination and restrict women's rights, beginning with the nationality law to allow women to pass on their nationality to their children. Work to eliminate male guardianship over women, particularly in matters related to civil status, marriage, divorce, and child custody.
- ◆ Push towards finding a special legal mechanism to deal smoothly and swiftly with all personal and civil status incidents that occurred during the war period, especially in areas where state institutions had ceased to function, and their registration in the Syrian civil registry.

As for the level of implementation, a wide range of procedures must be available, the most important of which are:

- ◆ Integrate women into police sectors, and give them priority to receiving complaints from women victims and survivors of violence.
- ◆ Develop and implement mandatory training courses for police officers who receive complaints from women survivors and victims, providing them with the necessary skills to handle statements, assess the psychological and social needs of survivors, and refer them to appropriate support services as needed to ensure their safety.
- ◆ Establish regulatory codes of conduct and severe and compound penalties in the event that any police officer assaults or harasses any woman filing the complaint.
- ◆ At the level of courts, it is important to establish strict codes of conduct and penalties for judges and lawyers who engage in any form of gender-based exploitation or blackmail of female clients or lawyers. Penalties should include dismissal from work or withdrawal of license to practice to ensure that the most important institution in society retains the trust of the public.
- ◆ As for abusers, it is necessary to work on designing special programs for them while serving their sentence, with the aim of strengthening personal accountability, establishing awareness of the crime committed, and reflecting on their consequences and repercussions.
- ◆ Incorporate awareness-raising programs into judicial sentences, requiring individuals convicted of violence to follow special programs that are specifically tailored to address their behavior. These programs should help offenders understand the severity of the violence they have committed and encourage them to take personal responsibility for their actions. This approach may be more effective than simply imposing prison sentences, particularly in cases where the survivor has not suffered significant physical harm.
- ◆ Provide support to associations and non-governmental organizations that advocate for women who have experienced violence in court proceedings. This support can be in the form of funding, resources, and training to help these organizations inform women about their rights and legal procedures, as well as provide legal representation. This support can help remove financial barriers to accessing legal assistance and encourage more women to take legal action against their abusers.

## **Fourth: protection mechanism by Civil Society Organizations and Associations**

During periods of internal conflict, societies undergo significant changes that require civil society organizations to reshape the general social awareness towards the cause of equality and

justice for women. Therefore, it is essential for these organizations to invest their efforts and resources in promoting gender equality and justice for women in society by all available means.

This may be done through:

1. Develop a unified definition of violence, its forms and types, that is specific to Syrian society, and use this definition as a reference to improve the status of women in all fields.
2. Developing draft policies that outline the standards for creating gender-sensitive internal structures within both public and private institutions. This will improve their classification as safe and women-friendly workspaces, and can serve as a reference for other institutions to follow.
3. Establishing a dedicated program to support women activists in civil society and women's issues specifically, providing legal, psychological, and social support to create a nurturing and supportive environment for both internal organization workers and external activists.
4. In the context of the ongoing challenges facing Syrian women, the need for sustained and robust awareness and advocacy campaigns is paramount. Such campaigns must be multifaceted, employing a variety of tools and strategies, and reach all regions of the country, regardless of who holds control in each area.