



In Private and in Public: Gender roles and forms of violence against women in Northeast Syria

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Introduction

Social change is closely intertwined with the societal roles assigned to men and women, which are influenced by several factors. One of the most important factors is the transformation of the social structure during crises and wars, as seen in Syria overall and specifically in the region of Northeast Syria. As the civil war in Syria continued for a decade, different authorities controlled the region, ultimately leading to the establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in 2017. This shift in power brought about changes in the composition of society and the distribution of social roles, particularly concerning women.

Undoubtedly, gender violence stems from unequal power relations between women and men. This disparity is deeply rooted in the prevailing culture and social systems that uphold traditional or conservative values, perpetuating discrimination between men and women. These values reproduce forms of inequality and subordination, constituting a violation of human rights.

As such, protection from violence becomes a matter of human rights and individual security. Those committed to human rights must confront the question: How do we achieve security for society and its institutions while addressing the violence that occurs within families, which should be safe spaces? It is notable that violence against women is often treated as an individual problem confined to the private sphere, despite being a social problem in reality.

This report sheds light on the status of women in northeastern Syria, exploring their social roles, transformations, and the forms of violence they experience. It draws upon the perspectives of women and civil society workers, focusing on the protection mechanisms implemented by these organizations to address violence against women. The report combines two papers into a consolidated report, as the two themes are interconnected, with the second paper building upon the first.

The first paper examines various forms of violence against women across six main themes: the perpetuation of a culture of violence through gender binaries, legal dysfunction or non-activation of laws, violence against women in both public and private spheres, domestic violence, community violence, and hate speech. Additionally, it explores the root causes contributing to the cycle of violence. Meanwhile, the second paper delves into protection mechanisms, organized around four key axes: the expert perspective on the concept of protection, the establishment of safe spaces, protection at the community level, and protection at the legal level. By addressing these aspects, the paper aims to envision mechanisms that can help reduce the prevalence of community violence and violence against women.

To gather data for this research, focus groups were established with 20 participants, including individuals and organizations actively involved in addressing gender and violence against women. These groups were conducted in three key areas: Al-Hassakeh, Deir Ez-Zor, and Raqqa. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with women working in women's organizations who possess firsthand knowledge of the issues faced by women in the aforementioned areas. Furthermore, two in-depth interviews were carried out with protection experts to gain insights into the existing protection mechanisms on the ground.

Gender Roles Binaries Perpetuating a Culture of Violence

Gender roles are deeply intertwined with societal expectations regarding the roles assigned to individuals based on their gender. These roles can vary across societies and regions, influenced by factors such as governance structures, customs, traditions, and levels of awareness. The social status of both men and women is determined by these assigned roles, as they hold positions within the community, such as being a father or a mother.¹

During exceptional circumstances like wars and conflicts, gender roles undergo changes, impacting society as a whole and women in particular. These changes can stem from economic reasons, such as the loss of male breadwinners or a decrease in the male population due to war. Additionally, women's awareness of their own roles and their potential to bring about societal change can also contribute to these transformations. In the specific context of northeastern Syria, including areas like Hassakeh, Deir Ez-Zor, and Raqqa, women's roles exhibit variation based on the level of social acceptance, viewing them not only as consumers but also as contributors to the community. This variation is influenced by different customs, traditions, cultural components, and the governing authorities that shape society's perception of women.

In regions like Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor, which are characterized by tribal and agricultural communities, the predominance of the Arab component leads to a convergence of customs and traditions. Prior to the conflict, women in these areas were primarily assigned roles centered around reproduction and unpaid care work within the family. Often unbeknownst to them, this can be seen as a form of economic violence. Women who have access to education tend to be channeled into stereotypical fields such as teaching and nursing, further perpetuating systemic violence against women. Such limitations restrict their abilities and aspirations, confining them to specific competencies, professions, and tasks.

Following the outbreak of war, the situation and social roles of women in these areas underwent significant changes. Women actively participated in the popular movement and relief work, asserting themselves as a dynamic force in society. They engaged in activities such as street cleaning, joining demonstrations, and providing assistance to the wounded. This normalization

¹ Mohammad al-Hashimi, "Psychosocial Counseling" (Arabic), Algeria, University Press,

of contact between genders was previously socially unacceptable but became a new reality. Consequently, the presence of women alongside men introduced a form of community solidarity that women themselves imposed on society.

However, the status of women regressed in these areas after the control of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) and the declaration of Raqqa as its capital. Women faced severe restrictions on their freedoms, including the right to access education and the requirement of male escorts for street movement. Dress codes were strictly enforced, and women endured physical beatings, arrests, verbal abuse, punishment, and forced marriages to IS members. The religious police of IS, known as the Forces for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, further intimidated women and girls. The violence perpetrated by IS, whether psychological, physical, sexual, economic, moral, or symbolic, affected the entire society but systematically targeted women.

However, with the departure of IS forces in 2017 and the assumption of power by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor, the status of women underwent another dramatic shift. Women we interviewed highlighted the spreading awareness within society and among women about their rights, duties, and gender perspectives. They recognized the importance of women's protection and empowerment. The active social engagement of women, along with their participation in various training programs facilitated by local organizations, contributed to their increased awareness. This highlights the crucial role played by community organizations in raising awareness throughout society, with a particular focus on women and relevant issues.

The presence of women in the labor market has become increasingly noticeable across all fields, including non-traditional sectors such as solar panel installation. This shift would not have occurred without women being informed about their rights and the pressing economic circumstances resulting from the conflict. The difficult economic effects of the conflict made women's participation in the labor market an urgent necessity. However, alongside their new roles, women have continued to uphold stereotypical roles as mothers, caretakers, and housewives. They also engage in unpaid care work, such as farming and cattle ranching, which has been added to their existing responsibilities. While women have sometimes been able to access decision-making positions and actively participate in politics and public affairs, it is important to acknowledge that these additional roles have placed significant pressures on them.

In the al-Hassakeh region, which includes Qamishli and is characterized by cultural and ethnic diversity, the situation before and after the armed conflict had slight variations. Even prior to the war, women in this region were involved in a wide range of professional and social roles. However, they faced consistent stereotyping and were often limited to fields such as education, medicine, and pharmacy.

After the Autonomous Administration assumed control of the region in 2015, a significant shift occurred in women's roles. Women began participating in military and political activities, representing their communities at the negotiating table, and assuming senior positions. In certain areas, women's presence in local administration became more influential, and shared leadership models emerged, where both a male and a female head hold the same functions and powers. However, in other areas, women's presence was merely symbolic, lacking real impact on the ground. The extent to which society accepts and empowers women in leadership positions, as well as their self-belief and ability to prove themselves, plays a crucial role in determining their effectiveness. Furthermore, the geographical proximity to urban centers and the level of marginalization of certain areas can influence the perpetuation of stereotypical roles for women, with tribal values often remaining prevalent.

While women have made notable strides in the media field, they have yet to attain decision-making positions within media organizations. Nevertheless, their presence in the media industry represents a significant advancement in the lives of local communities as a whole.

Furthermore, the communities of al-Hassakeh and Qamishli have witnessed the emergence of new types of businesses, such as e-marketing, where women have actively participated and showcased their abilities in utilizing technology and capitalizing on expanding marketing opportunities. Displaced women, driven by the deteriorating economic conditions, the need to support their families, and their desire to integrate and contribute to society, have taken up work in previously unfamiliar domains. They have engaged in community work, particularly in public affairs and politics, and have ventured into traditionally male-dominated occupations such as electronics and mobile phone repair, driving vehicles, as well as physically demanding labor such as portering.

Legal Gaps or Non-Enforcement of Laws?

The region of northeastern Syria, much like the rest of the country prior to the revolution in 2011, was under the authority of the ruling regime and its laws and constitutions. This included laws specific to women, such as the Personal Status Law, which decided on matters of inheritance, documentation, divorce, child custody, and more. Furthermore, penal codes addressing honor crimes, rape, adultery, and others were also adopted. Despite the criticisms and shortcomings of these laws and statutes, they provided a limited degree of protection for women's rights.

After 2011, the situation underwent a complete transformation as different authorities succeeded one another in the region, resulting in varying legal and constitutional statuses for women. One notable authority among them was the Islamic State (IS), which did not establish a clear or specific constitution and instead adhered to what it referred to as "Islamic law." This period was marked by severe injustice and extremism, particularly affecting women who were deprived of education and employment opportunities. This situation persisted until the

departure of IS and the consolidation of control by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2014. However, the repercussions of IS rule on society at large, and women in particular, continued, necessitating radical reforms. In response, the Autonomous Administration drafted new laws in the form of a social contract, which guarantees a set of general principles facilitating the work of the AANES in the region. These principles include the assurance of women's freedom, equal rights and responsibilities between genders, and the criminalization of acts of violence, exploitation, and discriminatory practices against women.²

While the stance of the Autonomous Administration on women's rights is clear, there is still a significant lack of enforcement of laws. To illustrate, let us consider the issue of child marriage. While it is prohibited under family law with punitive measures for violators, the degree of application of this law is higher in areas with a Kurdish majority compared to those with an Arab majority. This divergence can be attributed to the self-management's adherence to the laws of the social contract, while also taking into account the sensitivities and acceptance of new ideas within different communities. In Arab-majority communities, tribal values still hold prominence, and the Administration aims to avoid losing support or creating antagonisms by proceeding cautiously in implementing new laws.

Furthermore, the Autonomous Administration has implemented a law that prohibits the practice of polygamy. However, this has generated grievances within society as it contradicts Islamic *Sharia*, and the law has not been universally applied in all communities. To address women's issues and combat violence against women, the Autonomous Administration established the Women's Commission as one of its ten bodies. The Women's Commission, headed by a single woman rather than co-chaired, operates with an all-female staff, emphasizing the importance of addressing women's concerns from their own perspective and working to eliminate the oppressive male mindset.³ One significant achievement of the Women's Commission was the enactment of the Women's Code, a law that criminalizes child marriage, honor killings, forced marriages, rape, domestic violence, and sexual exploitation. The Women's Code also abolished dowries, guaranteed equal pay, inheritance rights, equal access to testimony in courts, and established women's shelters to provide protection for survivors of violence. On the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, coordinated demonstrations were held in Al-Hasakah to denounce the escalating violence against women, particularly under the pretext of honor crimes, organized by the Women's Commission.

² See: Charter of the social contract in Rojava (Syria), link: <https://www.kurdishinstitute.be/en/charter-of-the-social-contract/>

³ See: Syria Untold, "Women in Northeast Syria" (Arabic), link: <https://syriauntold.com/2020/12/16/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%91-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7/>

However, customary laws rooted in tribal values continue to prevail in society. In terms of labor rights, the Autonomous Administration incorporated equal distribution of roles between women and men in the Labor Code. It encouraged the adoption of the co-chair system, creating a supportive work environment for women, establishing daycare centers to assist working mothers, and providing considerations for pregnancy and maternity leave. Despite these provisions, the enforcement and implementation of these laws have been insufficient in several aspects. This inadequacy can be attributed, as previously mentioned, to the specificities of local communities, their relationship with the Autonomous Administration, their attitudes towards women, and their varying levels of acceptance of new ideas. The increased representation of women in various administrative positions has presented a positive image, albeit often in a nominal capacity. Nevertheless, women's participation has contributed to challenging societal stereotypes regarding women's roles, particularly in political engagement and decision-making spheres.

Violence Against Women in the Public and Private Spheres

Violence, in its broadest sense, poses a significant barrier to achieving gender equity, with violence against women serving as a manifestation of unequal power dynamics and the systemic favoritism towards men. The international community has increasingly recognized the issue of gender-based violence, elevating it from individual concerns to a societal problem. Through various conferences and documents, definitions of gender-based violence have been developed, collectively considering violence against women as a violation of their fundamental human rights to life, liberty, equality, and personal security. These instruments define violence as encompassing "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women." It is important to note that these definitions do not assign blame to a specific entity but rather focus on the various forms of violence experienced by women, whether within the confines of their homes, workplaces, or society at large. This also includes symbolic violence, which encompasses attitudes, traditions, and societal values that perpetuate an inferior view of women and discriminatory behaviors against them.

In the region of northeastern Syria, specifically in the areas of Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor, and al-Hassakeh, which have been subjected to the control of multiple forces and entities during a period of armed conflict, violence against women has been prevalent. These areas have endured the hardships of conflict, which have disproportionately affected vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the elderly. In this context, we will examine the most prevalent forms of violence perpetrated against women, highlighting their variations across different regions.

First: Domestic Violence

The prevalence of domestic violence against women in Syria has remained unchanged since before the war, according to the accounts of the women we interviewed. They attested to the

persistence of a patriarchal and authoritarian community structure that exerts pressure on women across all aspects of their lives, ranging from decision-making to the minutiae of daily existence. One woman from Deir Ez-Zor expressed, "We belong to a deeply conservative and tribal society where women lack agency and are expected to unquestioningly obey men."

Failure to conform to the expectations imposed by men within the family can result in severe consequences, often taking the form of physical violence. Beatings, which may encompass various methods such as kicking, hair-pulling, slapping, or even using household items as weapons, are a common manifestation. Additionally, women are frequently coerced into labor-intensive work in the fields or at home without receiving any financial compensation. This violence extends beyond physical abuse and is often compounded by psychological and emotional mistreatment. The women in our focus group discussions, as well as those we interviewed from local organizations dedicated to addressing women's issues, affirmed that "alongside physical violence, insults, verbal abuse, and mockery are employed by men while subjecting women to such violence."

The women who participated in the discussions also highlighted that violence against women was not solely perpetrated by their husbands. According to tribal customs and within the bounds of what is socially acceptable, violence can be carried out by both the husband's and wife's relatives. This denies women the right to object or defend themselves and underscores the intersection of domestic violence with community violence. The latter reinforces restrictions on women, enforces notions of shame and prohibition, curtails their freedom in society, and exposes them to violence by men.

One woman shared her experience during the focus group discussion, saying, "Unfortunately, this is a common practice in our rural areas. It's not just the husband who has the right to beat his wife; his brother, mother, uncle, and any other person may also subject her to violence. She cannot object because it is considered shameful, and she is expected to respect her husband's family and obey them. We are forced to remain silent and accept our circumstances."

Furthermore, psychological violence is another form of abuse that women endure. This includes the marginalization of women, disregarding their opinions in important decisions, and exerting psychological pressure on them, such as coercing them to accept their husbands' polygamous marriages. The women we interviewed confirmed this, with one woman sharing, "The man forces his wife to accept his marriages to other women, sometimes two or three others. If she objects, he threatens to divorce her and prevent her from seeing her children. It is one of the most severe forms of psychological violence, in my opinion."

These experiences result in significant psychological harm to women, many of whom are unaware that what they are subjected to, regardless of its type, form, or severity, constitutes violence. In some cases, women may even believe that such treatment is normal and should be accepted. Whether it is a man taking another wife, women being subjected to physical abuse,

or being deprived of inheritance, these harmful practices may be seen as commonplace. The woman's own family might perpetuate these ideas by urging their daughters to be patient and adapt to their circumstances. In some instances, a woman's family may blame her for being mistreated by her husband, accusing her of failing to meet his expectations. All of this perpetuates violence against women, leaving them uncertain about whether they are experiencing violence or if their situation is considered normal.

Sexual violence within the family is defined as "any sexual act, attempt, or threat carried out without the victim's consent." It encompasses acts such as rape, sexual abuse, harassment, exploitation, and forced involvement in sex work. This form of violence can occur within marriages, particularly when there is a lack of consent to engage in sexual activity by one of the spouses. According to the women we interviewed and the focus group discussions, approximately 85% of married women in their communities suffer from sexual violence and coercion, along with neglect of their reproductive health. They are forced into repeated pregnancies without adequate spacing between births. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of men in these communities prioritize having sons without considering the mother's well-being or providing proper support during and after pregnancy. All of these issues constitute unaddressed violence, stemming from the nature of tribal society and the shame associated with raising these concerns or voicing complaints. Sex is often viewed as a right for men that should be fulfilled without any rejection or resistance.

Child marriage represents a distressing form of gender-based violence that exposes young girls to significant risks. Various factors contribute to the prevalence of early marriage, including poverty, the belief that marriage will provide protection, the desire to uphold family honor, and societal adherence to social and religious norms that may endorse such practices. The spread of this phenomenon is further exacerbated by inadequate legal frameworks and the occurrence of wars and disasters.

According to UNICEF, child marriage encompasses any formal or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child. The agency emphasizes that child marriages predominantly stem from deeply ingrained gender inequality, which disproportionately affects girls. Globally, the incidence of child marriage among boys is only a fraction of that among girls, highlighting the profound impact on girls' lives. Such marriages deprive these girls of their childhood, education, and opportunities for personal growth, rendering them unable to make decisions or participate in decision-making processes.

UNICEF also highlights that girls who marry before the age of 18 are at a heightened risk of experiencing domestic violence. They also face greater economic and health challenges compared to their unmarried peers. Early pregnancy in adolescence further compounds these difficulties, as it increases the risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth. Moreover, it hinders their ability to assume new responsibilities, particularly in caring for an infant, while depriving them of empowerment in various aspects of life.

Statistics reveal the alarming scope of child marriage worldwide, with approximately 12 million girls marrying before the age of 18. Moreover, over 650 million women alive today were married as children, and approximately one in every five girls across the globe becomes a child bride. These figures underscore the urgent need to address this pervasive form of violence and protect the rights and well-being of girls globally.

The issue of child marriage is prevalent in Syria as a whole, with specific concerns existing in northeastern Syria. In this region, the incidence of underage marriages has increased due to a combination of factors, including challenging living conditions, insecurity resulting from armed conflict, forced displacement of the population, and the influence of prevailing customs, traditions, and social norms. During a focus group discussion, one participant shared a personal account, shedding light on the situation: "Women often suffer the consequences of war without actively participating in it. When families were displaced from Deir Ez-Zor, they would marry off their young daughters to people smugglers at the ages of 13 and 14. My cousin was one of them. They resorted to such marriages due to the pressures of war, bombings, and the desperate circumstances they faced, torn between life and death, between the risk of abduction and rape."

A woman affiliated with a civil society organization also highlighted the situation in certain rural areas, such as the countryside of Raqqa, where societal norms dictate that if a girl reaches the age of 16 without being married, she is considered "old" and compelled to marry a significantly older man who may already have other wives.

Symbolic violence is a concept of great importance in modern sociology, as it encompasses various forms of power exertion over individuals within a society. Coined by Pierre Bourdieu, it refers to the means by which dominant groups enforce their own ideologies and interests onto others, using symbols and cultural practices as tools of control. This type of violence operates through the manipulation of language, imagery, signs, and meanings, and often remains invisible yet profoundly impactful.

At its core, symbolic violence serves to reproduce the existing social order by shaping the beliefs, values, and behaviors of individuals. Its effects are particularly severe for women, as it perpetuates an inferior view of women, fosters gender discrimination, and diminishes their worth in various aspects of life. One stark example of symbolic violence is the denial of girls' education, which is often justified by parents who prioritize boys' education and perceive limited value in educating their daughters. In many rural areas, where women are primarily engaged in agricultural work or household chores, parents often believe that basic literacy skills are sufficient for girls, as their future is believed to be either in farming, domestic responsibilities, or early marriage.

The severity of symbolic violence varies across regions, as highlighted by the accounts of women interviewed. In the countryside of Al-Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor, and Al-Hassakeh, this phenomenon is exacerbated by the prevalent notion that "a girl belongs to her husband's house."

This perspective may stem from the more conservative nature of rural environments, where a girl's role is often confined to reproduction and conforming to traditional gender norms. In particular, Al-Hassakeh faces additional challenges due to the multiplicity of educational curricula and the uncertainty surrounding the recognition of certificates issued by the Autonomous Administration, particularly at the preparatory and secondary levels, which hinders the feasibility and future prospects of the educational process.

The issue of duality in education systems further compounds the challenges faced by girls in certain areas, such as Amuda in al-Hassakeh. The presence of two distinct educational systems, one administered by the Autonomous Administration and the other by the Syrian government, creates a situation where certificates issued in one system are not recognized by the other. This lack of recognition significantly impacts the willingness of families to send their children, particularly their daughters, to pursue education.

In some cases, girls who are determined to continue their education face the option of taking only the final exam, known as "free secondary," as a means to obtain a certificate. However, the reluctance of parents to send their daughters to school severely limits their employment prospects and independence. This, in turn, increases their vulnerability to various forms of violence, including the risk of early marriage.

One woman from al-Hassakeh shared her perspective, stating that girls in the region do not attend schools due to the dual education system and the lack of certificate recognition. As a result, women face challenges in accessing job opportunities that require educational qualifications, leading many families to believe that the effort of pursuing education is not worthwhile. Despite the aspirations of many girls to receive an education, their parents often refuse to allow them to attend school, pushing them towards alternative paths such as preparing for standardized tests without formal education.

In contrast to other areas, some of the women interviewed highlighted that al-Hassakeh, particularly Qamishli, has a distinct context shaped by its diverse religious and ethnic makeup, including Christian, Yazidi, Islam, Kurdish, Arab, and Syriac communities. This diversity has fostered a sense of social openness, which has positively influenced girls' access to education. Despite facing obstacles, many girls in this region are pursuing higher education.

Economic violence, on the other hand, refers to the financial exploitation of women by their husbands or families. This form of violence manifests in various ways, such as the denial of inheritance rights, unpaid work, or the appropriation of women's financial earnings from agricultural or other forms of labor. The participants in the focus group discussions reiterated the prevalence of such cases.

When a woman asserts her right to inherit, she often faces social resistance, even from her own family, who may pressure her to relinquish her share in favor of her male siblings. In some

instances, if a woman insists on claiming her inheritance, she risks being ostracized by her family. Participants also emphasized that women are frequently denied the opportunity to work outside of traditional sectors such as agriculture or household chores, as a means to maintain control over them. When women are allowed to work, they may be compelled to surrender their entire monthly salary to their husbands. Additionally, some families restrict their daughters' mobility and employment opportunities, citing concerns about reputational damage associated with women leaving the house.

Second: Community Violence

The term "community violence" encompasses societal violence against women, which is perpetuated through social norms, traditions, stereotypes, and discrimination in various domains such as the workplace and women's rights and responsibilities. The participants in the focus group discussions highlighted the role of social norms, traditions, and the social stigma associated with women, emphasizing how they contribute to community violence. One civil society activist emphasized the significant impact that social norms and traditions, whether negative or positive, have on women in their societies. They also pointed out the prevalence of slander, defamation, and hate speech against women, which have a particularly detrimental effect on them.

The prevalence of violence and insecurity in the region has severely affected women's freedom of movement, especially during the evening. Women often fear physical or psychological harm, as well as verbal and physical harassment on the streets. The lack of adequate services, including street lighting, coupled with the increase in incidents such as kidnappings, has created a climate of terror within the community, with women being particularly vulnerable to theft and rape. A civil society worker in al-Hassakeh shared in an interview the challenges faced by girls who find it increasingly difficult to safely return home due to widespread harassment and the darkness prevailing in the streets. They also expressed concern about the number of reported cases of kidnapped girls whose fate remains unknown.

Despite some positive measures introduced by the Autonomous Administration in work environments, such as paid maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, and the establishment of the Women's Economy Committee, women still face social stigma and discrimination in employment. Certain types of work are considered unsuitable for women based on physical attributes, leading to limited job opportunities and barriers to career advancement. Negative perceptions of women's productivity compared to men's contribute to this discrimination, and women are often at risk of being laid off from work.

Work environments generally lack support for women, as employers are responsible for creating a conducive professional atmosphere by providing childcare facilities, ensuring equal pay, and enforcing laws that protect women. However, these measures are still insufficiently

implemented in the region. Women face gender-based discrimination when seeking employment or are dismissed solely due to pregnancy or maternity.

The focus group participants highlighted the preferential treatment given to men over women in civil society organizations, where women's representation in leadership positions is often nominal, with men holding the actual decision-making power. This not only hinders women's participation but also perpetuates violence against them.

One participant in the focus group discussion shared their perspective on the situation, stating, "We often observe that men dominate organizations that are supposedly led by women. They hold all the decision-making power, while women are silenced and their voices are not heard. This is a form of violence against women. As a woman, I want to be informed, engaged in meaningful work, and contribute to economic empowerment. However, even after achieving economic empowerment, I am dismayed to see men in the workplace threatening women, demanding they quit their jobs or forfeit their wages. How can we find solutions when faced with such circumstances?"

Third: Hate Speech

Hate speech encompasses derogatory and offensive language targeted at specific groups or individuals based on their inherent characteristics, posing a threat to social harmony. In recent times, hate speech against women, particularly those involved in public affairs and local organizations, has been on the rise. This includes various forms of aggression, ranging from social bullying to death threats, aimed at discouraging their continued work. A worker from a local organization shared her experience, stating, "I was taken aback when our women's organization received threats and found bullets at our doorstep. I was told to return to Deir Ez-Zor and cease working in Raqqa."

Furthermore, hate speech has proliferated through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Women workers in these fields are subjected to vilification, insults, and demeaning comments, with perpetrators accusing them of promoting Western ideologies that undermine societal customs and traditions, and portraying them as a threat to women's well-being and moral values.

The women we interviewed confirmed that they have faced various forms of harassment, including privacy invasions, social media hacking, threats to expose private photos, and sexual blackmail. When asked about their response strategies, some shared that they were compelled to disengage from public affairs on social media, while others chose to distance themselves from social media entirely. These experiences have had significant economic consequences for the affected women and their families, as their ability to concentrate and maintain productivity at work has been compromised due to the distress caused by such incidents.

Hate speech on social media has severe psychological and moral implications for women engaged in public affairs. It is crucial to acknowledge the significant role that visual media plays in shaping the perception of women in society, whether positively or negatively, across social, economic, political, and creative realms. Unfortunately, the media often falls short in adequately representing women, offering limited attention to women leaders and professionals in various fields. Instead, there is a focus on consumeristic portrayals of women in advertising and programming. This lack of representation hinders the visibility of successful and influential female role models in domains such as politics and education.

Furthermore, visual media indirectly perpetuates hate speech against women through the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. Many TV series and films continue to reinforce outdated portrayals of women as mere objects confined to domestic settings. Additionally, advertisements often commodify women rather than showcasing their achievements or influence. A study conducted by the Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN) highlighted the importance of balanced and fair portrayals of gender roles in visual media, stating that "quantitative success in achieving this balance is only a partial step towards fair representation." The study, titled "Who Makes the News?" emphasized the need for gender-sensitive and balanced representations that integrate qualitative and quantitative elements. It also drew attention to the ongoing gender gap in traditional news media, with a report indicating that it will take approximately 67 years to bridge this gap.

Conclusion: Causes of Violence against women

Violence against women stems from multiple factors, rather than a single cause. Many of these factors are deeply rooted in cultural and social structures that perpetuate the subordination of women and give rise to various forms of discrimination and violence against them. These factors are often reinforced through socialization within families, media representations, and institutional practices, creating a social climate that reinforces male authority and the subordinate position of women.

The phenomenon of violence is influenced by educational, economic, social, and legal factors that marginalize and diminish the role and participation of women in society. Additionally, social norms and traditions play a significant role in exerting pressures, imposing restrictions, and erecting barriers to women's education. They also contribute to the persistence of harmful practices such as child marriage, forced marriage, and polygamous unions. Social norms and cultural legacies further contribute to the harassment and surveillance of girls, limiting their freedom to visit friends and family. The prevailing societal perception of divorced women, shaped by social norms and cultural beliefs, discourages women from seeking divorce due to the fear of social stigma.

Women's silence and compliance with pressure, violence, and discrimination, as well as their reluctance to seek help from official authorities such as the police, courts, and women's

organizations, can be attributed to complex reasons. These include the fear of going against prevailing customs and the potential consequences of legal intervention, such as losing custody of their children or facing social ostracism. These factors perpetuate a cycle of violence and its recurrence.

The worsening economic conditions, including increasing poverty and unemployment, contribute to the reinforcement of patriarchal ideologies. Some participants in our interviews highlighted the link between the rise in drug abuse and the escalation of violence and insecurity, which disproportionately affects women.