



# In Private and in Public:

Mechanisms for protection and combating violence against  
women in North East Syria

Recommendation Paper\*

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\* This recommendation document is the second part of an analysis paper that explores the forms of violence still faced by Syrian women in Northeast Syria 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:

The issue of violence against women, particularly in humanitarian contexts, necessitates a gradual shift towards achieving equality in positions of authority, fortifying protective measures, and minimizing risk factors for women and girls. To foster a society where women are regarded as equals to men, it is crucial to lay the foundation of social, economic, and political empowerment. This stance is affirmed by various international agreements endorsed by the United Nations, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),<sup>1</sup> as well as the Sustainable Development Goals, which encompass gender equality.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the four Geneva Conventions and their supplementary protocols serve as vital instruments in this domain, particularly during periods of war and armed conflict.

## Protection from a Specialist Perspective

Protection is an inherent right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations in 1948. It entails safeguarding individuals from any harm inflicted upon them by others and is defined as “all endeavors aimed at upholding the rights of individuals without discrimination, in accordance with relevant laws and frameworks”.<sup>3</sup> Thus, protection stands as a central objective in all humanitarian endeavors. In this context, the protection of women constitutes an integral part of safeguarding individuals within society, necessitating the elimination of gender-based discrimination.

At times, certain societal responses towards women are misconstrued as forms of protection, even if they entail restricting their freedom of movement, denying them access to education, or imposing dress codes upon them. This was emphasized by a participant in one of the focus group sessions who remarked, “As women, we often feel compelled to go out late at night accompanied by men to shield ourselves from unwanted attention. Such practices are prevalent among us”.<sup>4</sup> However, such actions do not constitute genuine protection; rather, they perpetuate societal violence rooted in a particular perception of women.

Authentic protection must be ensured through legal guarantees provided by the state. If, for any reason, the state fails to fulfill this role—as is the case in Syria presently—local and international organizations can assume the responsibility of ensuring protection for individuals in society, including women.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information: [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women | OHCHR](#)

<sup>2</sup> For further information: [Sustainable Development Goals | United Nations Development Program \(undp.org\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> For further information: [What is the protection? \(openrepository.com\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> Information sourced from focus group discussions conducted with civil society organizations in northeastern Syria in January 2023.

Protection is based on providing material, moral, and psychological support to the most vulnerable and at-risk groups in society. It can be broadly categorized into two main types: preventive assistance and response aid. Preventive assistance encompasses psychological and social support, as well as activities such as counseling, awareness campaigns, and sessions aimed at relieving psychological distress. These initiatives address sensitive topics like raising awareness about the perils of early marriage and its impact on women's rights, for instance. On the other hand, response aid is geared towards addressing violence by focusing on the enactment of laws that safeguard women's rights, prevent discrimination and violence against them, establish monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with these laws, and hold individuals accountable for any breaches. Additionally, providing support and responding to affected women's needs through material assistance, such as funding small-scale projects or establishing secure spaces suitable for women and children, is crucial.<sup>5</sup>

Fundamental principles should underpin all protection activities. These include prioritizing safety and dignity, minimizing unintended negative consequences to prevent harm, ensuring equitable access to aid and services without discrimination, and giving special attention to individuals and groups who are particularly vulnerable or face difficulties in receiving assistance and services.

## Safe Spaces for Women

Safe spaces for women are defined as “formal or informal environments where women and girls feel both physically and psychologically secure”. In this context, “safe” implies the absence of psychological trauma, undue pressure, violence (or the fear of violence), or abuse. These spaces serve as havens where women and girls can freely express themselves without apprehension of prejudice or harm. Given that most public spaces tend to attract more men than women, safe spaces actively strive to engage women from all backgrounds within the region, regardless of whether they have experienced abuse. They particularly prioritize women who have endured violence, providing them with essential and immediate services they may require.

The primary objective of these spaces is to create an avenue for women and girls to foster connections with their surroundings, facilitate the integration of displaced women or returnees from camps into various communities, offer social support and skills development, and grant access to secure services such as legal, healthcare, and psychological assistance. Moreover, these spaces aim to equip women with comprehensive knowledge about their rights. As affirmed by the interviewed protection expert, safe spaces host a wide range of activities, including raising awareness, life skills training, formal vocational education, economic empowerment initiatives, family counseling, and recreational and preventive programs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Information obtained from an interview with a protection expert in northeastern Syria on February 19, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Information obtained from an interview with Nashwa al-Hamidi, a protection expert in northeastern Syria, in February 2023.

In this context, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights highlights the existence of a village in al-Hassakeh governorate called Jinwar, known locally as “Women’s Village”. Jinwar serves as a unique haven for women who have experienced violence, akin to institutional safe spaces. It was established in 2016 by a group of women who had survived violence or fled their homes due to fear of violence. The women resided in brick and mud houses until the village’s completion in 2018, when it was inaugurated on International Women’s Day, symbolizing the fight against violence targeting women. Currently, the village comprises 30 houses and 20 families consisting solely of women and children. Men are prohibited from residing within the village, but male children are allowed to live with their mothers until they reach marriageable age. The women of Jinwar village engage in agriculture and livestock rearing to attain self-sufficiency. The village also features a school for children, playgrounds, a bakery, a few shops, and an academy dedicated to women’s issues – all of which are managed by the women residing in the village.<sup>7</sup>

## Protection at the Societal Level

Realizing effective protection at the community level necessitates the concerted efforts of the following elements:

1. Collaboration among local organizations and civil society institutions that target the broader society. Their role is to raise awareness about feminist issues and empower women across various domains. This can be achieved by developing comprehensive short and long-term plans aligned with specific goals.
2. Implementation of systematic psychological and social support programs. These initiatives should include targeted psychological sessions for women over a specified period, aiming for lasting impact. These sessions should address a range of women’s realities and concerns.
3. Integration of protection principles into humanitarian work within both formal and informal institutions. This entails organizing awareness sessions for staff members, with a specific focus on women's rights and related issues. These sessions should introduce principles of protection, humanitarian action, non-harm, and non-discrimination based on race, religion, color, or gender.
4. Conducting gender perspective analyses of the social, economic, cultural, and political contexts. Such analyses are fundamental in initiating the process of change and reflecting upon necessary measures, procedures, ideas, and needs to achieve justice and equality. As highlighted by the protection expert in our interview, “A gender analysis should precede any protection program. Understanding how to view and address issues through a gender lens is vital. Recognizing that the needs, causes,

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<sup>7</sup> For further information: [The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights: Jinwar... a village for marginalized women in Syria - The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights \(syriahr.com\)](#)

structures, contexts, and their impacts differ between genders is crucial for achieving true equality. A fresh perspective is essential in approaching these issues.”<sup>8</sup>

## Protection at the Legal Level

To actualize protection priorities at the legal level, the following measures are essential:

1. Rectifying the imbalance in the implementation of laws that safeguard women's rights and ensure their protection. This includes addressing issues such as the prohibition of child marriage and polygamy, in accordance with international agreements like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women. The focus should be on both the content of the laws and their effective activation and enforcement. Given the unique regional circumstances and adherence to social contracts, family law, and prevailing norms, the degree of imbalance in law implementation may vary across different regions. Additionally, effective implementation of the quota system should be ensured, enabling genuine inclusion of women in co-leadership positions and other political roles.
2. Reforming discriminatory laws against women in Syrian legislation, including those applied in certain regions of northeastern Syria. Key areas for reform include the personal status law, granting women the right to confer nationality to their children, achieving equality in legal testimony, inheritance, and the penal code, as well as equal punishment for both women and men involved in adultery.
3. Bridging the gap between laws recognizing women's rights and their practical implementation. It is vital to ensure fair application of laws, pass enabling legislation, establish mechanisms that enable women to exercise their rights, and create structures and institutions that assist women in claiming and defending their rights.
4. Promoting knowledge-building within society at large, with a particular focus on women. This involves disseminating a culture of human and women's rights, fostering a culture of equality, establishing monitoring frameworks, implementing mechanisms that facilitate access to justice for battered women, and providing training to law enforcement personnel to handle complaints in a manner that respects women's rights. A legislative framework criminalizing all forms of violence against women is necessary to ensure the achievement of justice.

There are several challenges that hinder women's access to protection in northeastern Syria. These include customs and traditions that prevail in the region, women's fear of expressing themselves, the lack of specialized centers to effectively manage cases of violence against women, the lack of sufficient awareness among women about protection laws and related policies, the shortage of dedicated resources and support services, the limited access women

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<sup>8</sup> Information obtained from an interview with a protection expert familiar with northeastern Syria, based in Turkey, on February 12, 2023.

have to safe spaces, which in turn restricts their ability to seek the necessary assistance and support. To address these challenges, organizations often relocate safe spaces from one region to another, to ensure that a larger number of women across different regions have access to them.

## **Strategies for Mitigating Societal and Other Forms of Violence Against Women**

### **Recommendations for bodies and departments in autonomous administration areas:**

1. Strengthening systems for accountability and ensuring the enforcement of laws in all areas.
2. Developing and implementing a compulsory educational policy with penalties for parents who fail to send their children, both girls and boys, to school.
3. Enforcing the law that sets the minimum age for marriage for girls to prevent early marriages.
4. Promoting community awareness and actively reviewing legislation and laws to remove discriminatory provisions against women.
5. Establishing additional shelters and care facilities for women and girls who have experienced abuse.
6. Ensuring the protection of both male and female workers, whether they are employed within self-administration institutions or local organizations.

### **Recommendations for civil society organizations:**

1. Advocate for increased enforcement of laws by exerting pressure on local authorities.
2. Highlight the urgency of addressing the education crisis and emphasize the significance of education through continuous advocacy efforts.
3. Establish accessible and inclusive safe spaces that cater to the needs of women, ensuring their comfort and security.
4. Set up child-friendly areas within safe spaces to enable women to participate in sessions or training courses without worrying about their children's well-being.
5. Enhance awareness among both women and men regarding rights, responsibilities, and the consequences of violence against women.
6. Incorporate pre-marriage awareness programs that provide guidance for girls and their families, or offer standardized marriage contract forms to safeguard the rights of girls.

### **Recommendations for donors:**

1. Provide support and funding for projects that promote equality, protection, and empowerment of women.

2. Conduct training programs for employees of local organizations to effectively address cases of violence against women.
3. Integrate a gender perspective across all areas, indicators, and planning policies.
4. Simplify the process of granting small loans to women and prioritize their projects, with a particular focus on women facing challenging family circumstances.