



Violence and Power Relations: Patterns and Causes of Violence Against Women in Northwest Syria

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Introduction

Spanning over a decade, the Syrian conflict has resulted in increased risk for women and girls in northwest Syria, exposing them to multiple forms of violence, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. Of particular concern is the alarming rise in rates of early marriage among girls. This research focuses on the dire and complex situation faced by women in northwest Syria, which extends beyond the challenges posed by poor economic conditions. Available United Nations data indicates that a significant percentage of women in the region depend entirely on humanitarian aid.

In northwest Syria, there are approximately 2 million women and girls in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Women's poverty, compounded by the breakdown of societal structures due to waves of internal and forced displacement, has led to the absence of supportive social environments.¹ The high population density in the region has created intense competition for access to resources. According to the United Nations, as of February 2023, the population in northwestern Syria was around 4.6 million, with approximately 2.8 million internally displaced persons. Of these internally displaced persons, an estimated 80% are women and children, with about 1.7 million residing in formal or informal IDP camps.²

Living conditions in these camps are often precarious, particularly for women and girls, who face challenges such as limited access to sanitation and hygiene facilities, basic services like food, water, and healthcare, and heightened rates of violence, exploitation, and sexual abuse.

Furthermore, there is a lack of availability and access to essential health services, including reproductive health services, which are vital for women of childbearing age.³ According to a 2023 report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), an estimated one million women in northwest Syria are in need of adequate reproductive health services.⁴

Within this context, violence and abuse have become widespread and unchecked, with many women perceiving it as a normalized reality in their daily lives. For some young women and girls, exposure to violence is their unfortunate lived experience. This situation is linked to limited access and availability of protection from sexual and gender-based violence, as well as limited opportunities for education and livelihood.

Through our research, we aim to capture the perspectives of participants and shed light on structural violence against women in northwest Syria. Our focus group discussions delve into the patterns of violence that women experience both within and outside of personal relationships, looking beyond the traditional gender binary of "woman" and "man." In our examination of domestic violence, we consider it within the broader context of structural violence, which perpetuates and normalizes such behavior. Additionally, we explore new

¹ She Pays the Highest price, IRC, 2023, <https://shorturl.at/zEJX0>

² UN news, 11-02-2023, in Arabic <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2022/02/1093912>

³ Rapid gender analysis policy brief, Care Int., 08-02-2023, <https://shorturl.at/tu236>

⁴ UNFPA, Whole fo Syria situational Report, 08-02-2023, <https://shorturl.at/pFQR7>

manifestations of violence that have emerged during the Syrian conflict and their connection to underlying structural patterns of violence influenced by legal frameworks, societal norms, and religious discourse.

By gaining insights from this research, we aim to enhance our understanding of how to address the impact of structural violence and the patterns of violence occurring within households. Consequently, we present a contextual feminist analysis that offers a deeper comprehension of gender-based violence within the framework of northwest Syria. This analysis helps us examine power dynamics within households and highlights the existing imbalance in institutional responses to meet the needs of women who are victims/survivors of violence.

Methodology

First: Research background and Objectives

This research forms part of the *Fostering Women-led Spaces for Change* project conducted by the IMPACT organization. The project's overarching objective is to empower local women-led organizations and others focusing on women and feminist issues in Syria to actively challenge prevailing gender equality paradigms in the country.

The purpose of this paper is to present a contextual analysis of the causes and patterns of violence against women in northwest Syria. This analysis serves as the foundation for a policy paper aimed at understanding protective strategies to address the violence experienced by women in this region.

To gather the data analyzed in this paper, the IMPACT team facilitated two "networking sessions" in the form of workshops with an educational component in northwest Syria. These sessions were designed with a participatory approach, ensuring the active involvement of partner organizations and collaborating women-centered groups throughout the research process, from design to data collection. The research team, present on the ground in northwest Syria, established communication channels with local partners to foster dialogue, exchange ideas, discuss women's rights issues, and explore the underlying patterns and causes of violence against women. This collaborative approach enabled the identification of priorities and the focused direction of collective efforts to address these challenges.

Additionally, data collection encompassed five semi-structured individual interviews with Syrian women who are experts working within institutions and contextual programs focused on the study and response to violence against women, specifically in northwest Syria.

Second: Theoretical Framework for Data Analysis

The two networking sessions involved individuals associated with women-centered organizations and local initiatives operating on the ground in northwest Syria.

For data analysis, we employed a relational methodology and a cross-contextual approach that considers all relevant and interacting factors shaping information within the specific context of northwest Syria.

The theoretical framework guiding our analysis was based on intersectional feminist theory, with a gender perspective serving as the foundational framework throughout the examination and interpretation of the data. Our analysis primarily focused on four key aspects derived from the analyzed data:

1. Women's access to resources, including education, information, skills development, income, employment, and other essential factors.
2. Divisions of labor within and outside the home, as well as the shifts in gender roles that occur in conflict situations.
3. The prevailing values, ideologies, societal norms, viewpoints, and subsequent stigmatization targeting women.
4. The distribution of decision-making power, whether in formal or informal settings.

The opinions of the women who participated in the networking sessions and individual interviews served as our primary and central source of information, providing valuable insights and authentic knowledge. We also included the voices of men in the sessions, recognizing the importance of their perspectives in assessing the situation and finding collaborative solutions that foster sustainability and effect meaningful change to address the underlying patterns and causes of violence against women.

As this research examines violence against women in northwest Syria from a feminist perspective, we focused on understanding the relationships, both visible and invisible, and the power dynamics that women experience in the home, workplace, and public life. Throughout this research, we ensured that women were not solely viewed as victims of violence but also recognized as capable individuals who comprehend their contextual reality and possess the agency to seek solutions and navigate power dynamics. In choosing to conduct individual interviews with women, we aimed to create spaces that allow for their free expression and minimize potential constraints that may arise in mixed-gender discussions or networking events, where women's ability to voice their opinions might be hindered. Through these interviews, we gained deeper insights into the various forms and patterns of violence against women in northwest Syria while considering women's security and social concerns.

In this research, we employed a social environment model to examine the causes and dynamics of violence against women in northwest Syria. This model facilitated a comprehensive exploration of how various factors interact at multiple levels, contributing to women's vulnerability to violence and its perpetuation. By dividing violence into four distinct levels—systemic/structural, societal/community, relational, and individual—the model allows for a more nuanced understanding of the interconnected causes that give rise to and sustain violence against women.

This theoretical framework recognizes the intricate interplay between individual experiences, relational dynamics, societal influences, and structural/institutional factors. It is represented visually as loops in Figure 1, illustrating how factors at one level can impact and influence the other levels. The model emphasizes the importance of addressing violence against women holistically and simultaneously across multiple levels to effectively prevent and combat it.

By adopting this social environment model, we gain insights into the complex web of factors that contribute to violence against women in northwest Syria. This understanding enables us to develop comprehensive protection strategies that acknowledge the intersecting forms of violence women face and consider the combined causes that fuel the emergence and perpetuation of such violence.

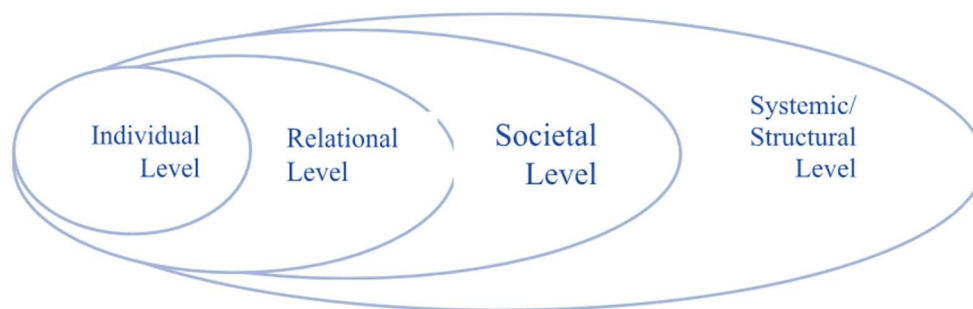


Figure 1 Social Environment Model

Third: limitations

A major challenge to this research emerged in analyzing the patterns of violence that Kurdish women are exposed to. Although Kurdish women were included in the two networking sessions, this topic was avoided by the participants, for reasons that may relate to their security conditions in northwest Syria. Moreover, the data for the two networking sessions were collected before the earthquake that hit northwest Syria and southern Turkey on 6 February 2023. Therefore, this paper does not address new patterns of violence that affected women as a result of the combination of the two humanitarian catastrophes – protracted conflict and natural disaster.

Main Findings

In our research, we engaged in discussions regarding the causes and patterns of violence impacting women in northwest Syria, emphasizing their positionality within various levels of violence and the ensuing consequences. Our focus encompassed different spheres where violence occurs, including within families, society, Syrian legal frameworks, alternative governance structures, civil society organizations, and humanitarian entities that emerged in northwestern Syria due to the absence of state institutions in the region. We also examined both rooted and systemic causes of violence, as well as newly emerging forms of violence resulting from prolonged conflict, forced displacement, and the deterioration of livelihoods and social welfare in the region. Our aim was to understand how these intersecting patterns of violence contribute to heightened vulnerability among women.

Our findings indicate that the rooted causes of violence against women in Syrian society stem from imbalanced power dynamics, societal norms, and gender role distributions within and outside the home. Additionally, we observed interconnectedness between these underlying factors and the patterns of violence that have emerged during the conflict. These patterns include direct violence resulting from exposure to war crimes, internal and forced displacement, the presence of de facto authorities, and shifts in social and economic well-being. Throughout our discussions, participants emphasized the importance of not isolating the causes of violence but rather recognizing the intricate connections and overlaps among them. It is these interconnections that have placed women, both individually and collectively, in a situation of extreme fragility.

The following table shows the causes of violence against women in northwest Syria and the levels of those causes.

<u>Systemic/structural level</u>	<u>Societal level</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Poverty – Persisting manifestations of hyper-masculinity (heightened in times of conflict) – Loss of contact with primary social environment – The existence of unequal power relations – Social norms and patriarchal practices that discriminate against women – Culture of impunity – Absence of the rule of law – Armed force and de facto authorities that you use sexual violence (or targeting women) as a tool of war – Normalization of sexual harassment and violence in private and public institutions – Isolating women from public life, the political process, and decision-making in public and private institutions – Poor response and protection for survivors – Pressure on the independence of civil society organizations – Absence of national plans to address gender inequality and violence against women – Absence of economic and social development plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Persistence of individual and societal violence – Continued denigration of women and girls and diminishing their abilities – Social ostracization of survivors – Deeply rooted gender discrimination – Lack of economic opportunities due to instability – Societal normalization of violence against women – The stigma facing women when they experience violence

Relational level

- Increased tension within the family due to the experience of violence, poverty, forced displacement and internal displacement
- Loss of privacy, especially in IDP camps
- Increased social controls and restrictions on women
- Unequal access to decision-making and work, inside and outside the household
- Women bear the burden of providing and caregiver duty with limited access to job opportunities and exposure to violence in the workplace
- The inability of men to fulfill social expectations related to perceptions of masculinity
- Available job opportunities for women may not be accepted in light of widespread unemployment among men
- Inability to choose a partner in marriage (forced marriage)
- Marriage of minors as a negative coping mechanism
- Increased violence in society and its reproduction in the family and in relationships between individuals
- Lack of access to mental health services

Individual level

- Age and its intersections with different identities such as ethnic and religious identity (different forms of violence between one community another, and between one woman and another)
- Denial of access to educational, employment and skill development opportunities
- Lack of knowledge of rights and reporting mechanisms, when available
- Dispossession, poverty and dependence on humanitarian aid
- Forced displacement, internal displacement, and the lack of protection provided by communities of origin, and separation from family and supportive social structures
- Insecurity which restricts women's freedom of movement
- Women accept and justify violence that affects them
- Increase in the number of women as the sole breadwinners for their households

Forms of Violence Against Women in Northwest Syria

By analyzing the data resulting from networking sessions with participants, men and women, and the individual interviews, the forms violence discussed can be categorized into two basic patterns: the first is structural/institutional violence and the second is violence within the family/household. While these two forms of violence are affected and influence each other, they are presented in this way with the aim of simplification.

“You cannot isolate personal violence from social violence, family or local or political. This is a very complex group of factors, especially in a context of armed conflict in which everyone has a role. Unfortunately, [conflict] violence is felt even greater by the weakest in society, and it stratifies society. Some acquire unprecedented power due to having weapons and resources, and others lose frameworks, even fragile ones, that used to provide them a form of security.”

Expert Interview-1

First: Systemic and Structural Violence

The participants in this research underscored the significance of structural and societal factors in shaping the patterns of violence against women. This understanding helped us grasp the underlying elements that contribute to the creation of an environment where violence against women is not only tolerated but also normalized.

In our study, we define structural violence as a form of violence embedded within the social and economic fabric of a society. It is perpetuated over time through systems that maintain inequality among different social, ethnic, cultural, and gender groups. Unlike direct physical violence or violence resulting from military operations, structural violence is often invisible and concealed.⁵ This notion resonated with the participants, as much of our discussions revolved around the presence of structural violence in northwest Syria. Consequently, our examination of violence against women extended beyond individual acts of violence, encompassing the multifaceted political, economic, and social complexities that contribute to the overall landscape of violence against women.

1. Legal and Legislative Violence

Legal and legislative violence against women in Syrian society is rooted in the design of Syrian law, which resulted in a discriminatory personal status law derived and approved on religious interpretations that are fundamentally discriminatory against women. In addition,

⁵ We use here the definition as presented in this study: <https://shorturl.at/jotH7>

legal discrimination against Syrian women is not limited to the discriminatory personal status law, and extends to preventing Syrian women from granting their nationality to their children.⁶

The participants' responses shed light on the existence of discriminatory laws that, although not enforced in northwest Syria, have had a significant impact on the region. In various spheres of influence, customary law derived from discriminatory religious interpretations of personal status tends to prevail. This has shaped societal perceptions of women's rights in the region. Additionally, several contributing factors, including impunity, widespread corruption, and the adherence to prevailing customs and traditions, even if they contradict existing laws or religious texts, further compound the challenges faced by women. Consequently, women often find themselves unable to exercise their rights even within the framework of these discriminatory customary laws.

“Society is governed by a mixture of customs, traditions and religion, and the absence of deterrent laws.”
a participant in networking session

The detrimental influence of discriminatory customary laws is further exacerbated by their intersection with deeply ingrained social norms, traditions, and religious interpretations that perpetuate the perception of women as lacking full citizenship. In northwest Syria, the absence of state institutions and the alignment of religious authorities with de facto government entities have heightened women's legal vulnerability and reinforced the application of discriminatory customary laws. This is compounded by the absence of security forces, weak accountability mechanisms, a pervasive culture of impunity, and limited social protections for women.

While these discriminatory laws affect women across the board, their impact is particularly pronounced for women who have lost male providers due to death, arrest, or forced disappearance. These women face significant challenges in obtaining official documents that guarantee citizenship for their children and encounter obstacles in asserting and safeguarding their property rights, both for themselves and their children. The consequences of these discriminatory laws extend far beyond legal vulnerability, with profound implications for the autonomy, well-being, and rights of women in northwest Syria.

"My nationality is [my children's] right."
Expert Interview-3

In the Syrian legal framework, women are not granted the right to confer Syrian nationality on their children if they marry foreign nationals. While the provisions of Syrian law are no longer

⁶ discriminatory personal status law in Syria, Syrian Women association, In Arabic, <https://shorturl.at/aHJ49>

applicable in northwest Syria, as it is beyond the control of the Syrian government, certain groups of women are particularly affected by the intersections of this legal text with religious interpretations that grant lineage and nationality rights exclusively to fathers. Under this context, "lineage" refers to the notion that newborns belong to their fathers' families rather than their mothers'.

This issue presents a twofold problem. In the studied context of northwest Syria, families are able to obtain birth certificates that establish the lineage of their children, allowing them to acquire unofficial identification papers that facilitate their enrollment in schools and access to humanitarian aid. However, these papers lack official recognition beyond the borders of the region. As a result, these children and their families lack official proof of Syrian nationality, including those born during the years of conflict in areas outside the control of the Syrian government. However, if they manage to access regular documents from government-controlled areas, they can obtain official identity papers for their families, such as passports and other legally recognized documents that confirm their rights.

However, the situation is markedly different for women facing specific circumstances. This includes women who have married foreign fighters with unknown legal identities, those who have lost their identity papers during forced displacement, or women who have given birth to children as a result of rape in detention centers. These women encounter significant obstacles in establishing the lineage of their children, as it is prohibited by customary law as applied in northwest Syria. This discriminatory situation hampers their children's access to educational opportunities and humanitarian aid, while leaving these women in highly vulnerable positions, particularly in economic terms, thereby increasing their susceptibility to exploitation. Moreover, these women are unable to access official documents from government-controlled areas, as their children's parentage is unknown, and they are not considered Syrian nationals according to Syrian law. Consequently, their freedom of movement is severely restricted.

“We have many Syrian women who were married to non-Syrians, and the children are lost among more than 5,000 children here who do not have the Syrian nationality under the pretext that a woman cannot give her children the nationality.”

a participant in networking session

Moreover, within the framework of social norms, legal violence is protected through provisions and articles in Syrian law that mitigate the punishment for crimes committed under the guise of "honor," despite subsequent amendments. These honor-related crimes are particularly prevalent in northwest Syria, owing to the proliferation of weapons, societal complicity with de facto authorities, and the erosion of the rule of law and deterrent legal measures. Furthermore, community groups often rely on subnational affiliations, such as tribal or regional identities, to justify the killing of women in order to preserve their perceived honor.

"Society always blames the woman, so that she is prevented from anything she wishes. In the event of any transgression, she becomes rejected even by her family. Unfortunately, society says that nothing faults a man, while a woman cannot do anything, and the law always sides with men on matters of honor."

a participant in networking session

The participants further highlighted that in northwest Syria, where the rule of law is absent and accountability mechanisms are lacking, women face significant challenges in accessing their rights, even within the confines of discriminatory laws. Furthermore, when women assert their rights based on social customs and traditions, it can lead to crimes against them due to the widespread availability of weapons. The de facto authorities not only fail to implement accountability measures but also actively participate in and impose discriminatory practices against women. Moreover, the pervasive presence of financial corruption exacerbates women's struggles, further limiting their ability to secure the few rights available to them.

"Due to the war, there are no government authorities through which to access rights. I am unable to obtain my rights because of the absence of such authority."

a participant in networking session

2. Economic Violence:

Prior to the Syrian uprising, Syrian women endured a twofold burden resulting from policies of economic marginalization, systemic impoverishment, and a lack of efforts towards economic development. This disproportionately affected women, as their economic exclusion was perpetuated by a combination of discriminatory inheritance laws and customs and traditions that deprived them of inheritance rights. Furthermore, women faced barriers to entering the labor market as a result of societal norms and limited agency. For instance, the percentage of Syrian women participating in the labor market prior to the conflict did not exceed 13% of the total national labor force in 2010, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics in Syria.⁷

"With regard to inheritance, we have people that does not grant any inheritance to their daughters, so that it doesn't go to her husband."

a participant in networking session

⁷ Women in Syrian Economy: a feminist review of women economic empowerment projects, WILPF, 2022, <https://shorturl.at/kNP29>

Participants in our research emphasized that the economic vulnerability experienced by women in northwest Syria did not emerge abruptly as a result of the Syrian conflict. Rather, it stems from the interconnectedness of systematic impoverishment policies implemented before the conflict and discriminatory social practices that have persisted for decades. Illustrative examples were shared, highlighting cases where women were systematically denied their rightful inheritance, which should be protected even according to religious texts and customary law. These practices aimed to concentrate financial and economic power exclusively in the hands of male family members. Power dynamics within families were also discussed, exposing women to economic violence within their own households. Our findings indicate that many women lack the freedom to control and allocate their income, even when they have access to job opportunities. They may be completely deprived of financial autonomy or have their wages withheld, particularly when working within family businesses or farms, as their labor is often considered an extension of unpaid care work.

"When a man owns land, a female worker receives a wage only if she is a stranger, but if it is his sister or wife, she does not receive a wage for the work, as all the revenue goes to the man alone."

a participant in networking session

During the years of conflict, the economic burdens faced by women in northwest Syria have significantly escalated, particularly for those who have become the sole breadwinners in their households. When examining the economic violence experienced by women in the region, we observe the convergence of established practices, systemic policies, and the economic crisis resulting from the conflict. These factors have exacerbated women's vulnerability, as a growing number of women and families have become entirely reliant on humanitarian assistance. In our discussions with participants, they shared testimonies that document the emergence of new patterns of violence against women and girls, driven by the exchange of access to humanitarian aid. This includes instances of sexual violence and exploitation, directly resulting from the practices and policies that perpetuate women's impoverishment, both pre-existing and as a consequence of the conflict.

"Society's loss of local economies and savings mechanisms has created dependence on relief alternatives. This reinforced a kind of new structure that imposed new violence. Women and girls are the most vulnerable to exploitation within these environments, not men. New avenues opened for sexual exploitation, harassment, gender-based violence, and sexual violence against women."

Expert Interview-1

Participants highlighted the impact of conflict conditions on women, including restricted mobility, limited job opportunities, and diminished access to resources, which further deepened their reliance on humanitarian aid, either partially or entirely. They also critiqued the financial and policy response mechanisms imposed by donors towards the humanitarian situation in Syria, which focused primarily on immediate relief efforts without adequate support for early recovery initiatives within local communities. These policies, according to participants, contributed to the continued impoverishment of women.

"Building a society dependent on relief, funding and financing mechanisms to respond to the situation of the armed conflict in Syria, and the policies that accompanied it, contributed to the establishment of new patterns of violence. Families depend on the relief basket and resist any projects for the economic recovery of the local community, which is associated with the region's security instability. Most of the projects focus on relief, not on generating income and empowering families, and thus the fragility of the economy and families has been exacerbated, destitution has increased, and women's poverty has become visible, because women become more destitute in this type of environment and it impacts them more."

Expert Interview-1

Access to humanitarian aid itself is conditional upon possessing recognized identification documents in the region. Our discussions revealed discrepancies in the documentation processes during the distribution of humanitarian aid, as they often fail to consider the challenges women face in accessing personal documentation to establish their children's parentage or obtain birth certificates, for instance. Women with stateless children encounter particular difficulties in accessing the necessary support for their children through humanitarian aid.

"On the level of organizations, the percentage of societies that support women is very low. Organizations' work is linked to the existence of identity papers and records, and this is why women do not have job and educational opportunities. Discrimination within the family if there are children who are not registered."

Expert Interview-3

Despite the numerous challenges women face in accessing employment opportunities, they also encounter significant obstacles in sustaining their work due to discriminatory work environments and societal resistance towards women's participation in the workforce. Women

shared their experiences with us, highlighting patterns of violence in the workplace and the heightened risk of violence from their partners who may not accept the reversal of traditional gender roles and women's engagement in the labor market. Additionally, we discovered that even when women secure job opportunities within civil society institutions, the patterns of their employment tend to reinforce expected gender roles and position women at the bottom of the functional hierarchy.

Furthermore, economic empowerment programs offered by civil society organizations often perpetuate stereotypical gender roles, viewing women's productive roles as mere extensions of their caregiving responsibilities. This further reinforces societal expectations and limits the transformative potential of women's economic empowerment initiatives.

3. Violence in Access to Health Services and Reproductive Rights:

Prior to the Syrian uprising, access to reproductive health services for women primarily relied on the private health sector. However, as the conflict unfolded, the Syrian regime systematically deprived populations residing in areas outside its control, including health services. In response, alternative structures emerged, relying on humanitarian funding to provide basic health services, including reproductive and sexual health care. The deteriorating economic, health, and security conditions, along with waves of forced displacement into northwest Syria, have severely impacted women's and girls' access to all health services, particularly sexual and reproductive health care.

Despite the presence of specialized centers and hospitals for reproductive and sexual health in northwest Syria, they remain insufficient to meet the needs of the population due to the high population density in the region. Additionally, access to these services is impeded by a combination of conflict-related barriers and limited physical and human resources. As a result, new forms and patterns of violence have emerged, directly affecting the quality, availability, and accessibility of health services and subsequently impacting the health of women and girls.

Under the current framework of humanitarian response, there is a predominant focus on providing primary and secondary health services for emergency and chronic conditions, with insufficient attention given to other crucial aspects of women's health. This creates a pattern of direct violence against women and can be attributed to a combination of factors, including a lack of awareness regarding the social determinants of health and their impact on women's access to health services, inadequate support from donors to strengthen the health system, and the loss of qualified medical personnel.

"Women's access is related to the availability of services, proximity to services, waiting hours... Violence is present in every form, and the method of building the humanitarian and health response that imposes response only to emergency cases without the presence of any services related to

advanced reproductive health and early detection of breast cancer. This is a hidden form of violence caused by the conflict and lack of human and material resources. Access to health services varies depending on how near or far it is from places of residence, and is affected by the security situation and the inability of women to move freely due to the marginalization of rural areas. It also relates to the economic situation.”

Expert Interview-2

In addition to the violence experienced by women regarding access to health facilities and the limited availability of health services in northwest Syria, there exists a pervasive taboo surrounding reproductive and sexual health education, as well as women's knowledge of their health and reproductive rights. This taboo is imposed by religious, societal, and familial pressures. Consequently, women lack access and the freedom to make decisions about their own reproductive choices, including family planning and contraceptive use. Religious discourse prohibiting the use of contraceptives further reinforces this lack of control over their own bodies, denying women access to reproductive services that are otherwise available.

Furthermore, when examining the factors that hinder women's access to health services, various barriers were identified. These barriers persist even when services are available. They include the distance between medical centers and residential areas, transportation difficulties, and societal perceptions that prioritize a mother's responsibility to provide for her family's basic needs over her own health. Power dynamics and relationships within the health sector itself also contribute to the obstacles faced by women. For instance, in northwest Syria, the majority of nurses working in clinics and hospitals providing various health services, excluding reproductive health, are men. The absence of female nurses creates discomfort for women and hampers their access to these types of health services.

Reproductive violence manifests in various forms, including the denial of women's access to contraceptive methods and the restriction of their autonomy in making decisions related to pregnancy and childbirth. Disturbingly, we learned of cases where women experienced violence during childbirth in hospital delivery rooms, which can take both visible and invisible forms. Instances of psychological and physical abuse were shared with us, highlighting the urgent need for programs addressing psychological violence in medical facilities and raising awareness among pregnant women and healthcare workers. It is concerning that such violence has become normalized and not adequately addressed within the healthcare system.

Moreover, patterns of violence within the medical system can be observed through the psychological and physical burdens placed on healthcare workers who are often overwhelmed by the sheer number of patients exceeding the capacity of the medical infrastructure. Additionally, these workers operate in areas controlled by de facto authorities that prioritize access to services through the use of force. Furthermore, healthcare facilities themselves are at risk of direct military attacks. Women working in the medical sector are particularly vulnerable

to violence due to the lack of supportive policies for women or their inadequate enforcement. It is crucial to study these factors comprehensively and develop interventions to mitigate their impact, ensuring that the healthcare system does not become a source of violence.

“In the delivery rooms, women are subjected to violence because the nurses and midwives have power over them. The women are unaware of the extent to which they are being subjected to violence during childbirth. This may be verbal or physical, or disregard for the importance of a companion and necessity that Women be strong during childbirth. (Even) de facto authorities affect health, and try to impose their own access to health services at the expense of others. There is always the possibility of violence against medical workers, as some nurses were beaten by armed men. This affects not only nurses, but patients and their idea of the quality of health services provided, as violence is present in a place that is supposed to be peaceful.”

Expert Interview-2

4. The Absence of Cross-Sector Contextual Plans to Mainstream Gender and Protect Women from Violence:

The participants consistently highlighted patterns of violence against women within civil society and relief institutions as a significant concern. These institutions emerged in response to the conflict and were influenced by the discriminatory customs and practices prevalent in society. Consequently, the power dynamics that exist within society are reflected within the organizational structures of these institutions. Limited mobility, direct violence from the conflict, and the lack of comprehensive gender mainstreaming across humanitarian sectors have resulted in a delay in adopting and implementing gender-sensitive policies that support and protect women in the workplace across all sectors operating in northwest Syria.

The participants shared various areas of deficiency experienced by women, including the absence of gender-sensitive policies that facilitate access to educational resources and enable women to enhance their skills and advance professionally. These deficiencies encompass strategies to develop women's competencies, measures to facilitate movement in the precarious security conditions of northwest Syria, and the lack of accountability mechanisms ensuring equal pay for equal work. Additionally, there is a lack of policies and practices addressing the unique challenges faced by women in their reproductive roles, such as maternity leave, provision of daycare facilities, and flexible working hours for nursing mothers. The absence of such policies is not limited to the workplace, as marginalization extends to individuals with disabilities and other marginalized identities.

Furthermore, the employment patterns of women within these institutions reinforce societal expectations, often assigning them to middle and lower positions within the job hierarchy and limiting their roles to service providers rather than leaders in decision-making positions.

"Power relations exist within civil society as they do in all areas of life, and there is marginalization of women and anyone different. There are many forms, some of which are clear and visible, as sometimes employment policies hire fewer women, or women not assigned tasks such as accounting and logistics. There are also hidden and invisible relationships that society reflects, for example that women are not allowed to cry. There's also no consideration for the fact that women must take care of their children, as they have to work in the home along with their jobs, which affects their promotion prospects."

Expert Interview-4

The prevailing culture of impunity and the absence of the rule of law in northwestern Syria have also permeated the perception and implementation of policies aimed at preventing workplace harassment in humanitarian and civil society institutions. Despite the existence of these policies, their effective application to protect women in the workplace is lacking, fostering an environment hostile to women and perpetuating a culture of normalizing harassment and violence against them.

Upon examining the reasons behind the inadequate enforcement of policies addressing harassment and exploitation in workplaces, several factors emerged. These include a lack of awareness about the existence and content of these policies, unclear complaint mechanisms, a lack of confidence in their implementation, and the fear of societal stigma associated with reporting instances of harassment. These factors collectively create significant barriers to addressing workplace violence, especially in light of social norms that tend to shift blame onto the victim rather than holding the perpetrator accountable.

"In organizations, there are policies to prevent harassment and exploitation. They initiate these policies because they bring money from donors. It is a kind of checklist that is not really reflected in practice, because women and men see their roles in a stereotypical and patriarchal way, because all of our society is like this. So, it is very easy for these dynamics to recur within the organizations, and it is difficult to fight them."

Expert Interview-4

We also discovered that the absence of women in leadership positions and the lack of policies and support for developing managerial skills have created a significant gap that directly impacts

service recipients. The participants identified several obstacles that hinder women's access to leadership roles within these institutions. Some of these barriers are rooted in societal and familial constraints, as well as restrictions imposed by de facto forces that limit women's mobility and their ability to fulfill the requirements of leadership positions, which may involve travel across borders or different areas of influence in northwest Syria. Additionally, there is a lack of awareness and efforts within these institutions to promote the importance of gender-sensitive policies and practices in the workplace.

“Rarely are projects sensitive to special needs. They also do not take into account access to stay-at-home women. There is preferential treatment, and it is not the women who win. In the councils and organizations, there are no women in planning units, and they are not always sensitive to women’s needs.”

Expert Interview-5

Furthermore, we found a concerning trend whereby de facto authorities exert continuous pressure on the autonomy of civil society and alternative institutions, including those focused on health, education, and other humanitarian responses. Women-led organizations seem to be more affected by these pressures than other organizations operating in the same context.

5. Violence Resulting from Persisting Manifestations of Hyper-masculinity:

It is important to acknowledge that the effects of the armed conflict in Syria are not limited to women alone, and it is crucial to consider the impact of economic, social, and security transformations on Syrian men as well. The absence of economic opportunities has led to high rates of unemployment among men, pushing some to engage in military activities as a means of income generation. Coupled with societal and personal pressures, including expectations surrounding gender roles within and outside the home, we observe the presence of visible and invisible patterns of violence that affect men in northwest Syria.

While this research does not focus extensively on the study of violence against men, we have examined its impact on the exacerbation and escalation of violence against women in northwest Syria. Through discussions with participants, we have come to understand the concept of "hyper-masculinity" as the societal expectations placed on men, such as providing for the household, defending honor, and protecting women. When men are unable to fulfill these expectations, they often face societal stigmatization, and this violence directed towards men can contribute to an increase in frequency or the emergence of new patterns of violence against women. This can be observed in incidents of so-called "honor killings" and through societal violence driven by men's grievances regarding their perceived entitlement to greater access to job opportunities compared to women. Moreover, there is an increase in domestic violence

when husbands are unable to secure employment, as their inability to meet the standards of masculinity can lead to frustration and aggression.

“There are grievances in men, but behind the discourse there is something real but it is not caused by women, but rather by the lack of job opportunities. We are suffering from a collapsing economy and repressive authorities. Sources of income are monopolized by armed forces and warlords. There is no industry or trade, and there is large displacements and four million displaced persons, most of them without work and have lost their jobs. All of this blame gets assigned to women who find a job opportunity.”

Expert-Interview-1

6. Targeting Women to Stigmatize Communities:

During the Syrian conflict, women have been systematically targeted through practices such as arrests, kidnappings, and intimidation. This issue was extensively discussed during the networking sessions, particularly focusing on the reasons behind the regime's arrests of women. It became clear that these arrests were not primarily motivated by women's political or civil activism but were intended to humiliate their communities, as societal norms often associate the honor of individuals and communities exclusively with women. Consequently, the stigma and consequences of arrest and detention disproportionately affect women. It is important to note that the targeting of women as a weapon of war extends beyond the actions of the Syrian regime, and the role of armed factions in abducting women for exchange deals with the regime was also highlighted.

The discussions also shed light on the violence and societal stigmatization faced by female detainees upon their release. Tragically, some women were rejected by their families or even subjected to violence, including honor killings.

“When a woman is released from detention, she is stigmatized, and there are incidents of parents killing their daughters. There are also cases in which the female detainee is divorced after her release, as they say she now carries a stigma. Meanwhile, when a young man is released from prison, he is celebrated as a hero.”

a participant in networking session

The harm caused by targeting women as a weapon of war extends beyond the period of detention. It leads to ongoing societal stigma, isolation, and subsequent ostracism from their families or society. Furthermore, children born as a result of these situations face significant challenges in accessing official documents that prove their parentage or enable them to obtain Syrian nationality. This directly impacts their access to humanitarian aid and educational opportunities.

7. Media and Cyber Violence:

During our discussions, we delved into the patterns of violence prevalent in society, with a specific focus on the discourse propagated by various media institutions that emerged following the Syrian uprising. Notably, we explored the additional dimensions of violence faced by female media professionals and women's rights advocates, which can be categorized into two main levels.

At the first level, we examined the violence originating from the media institutions themselves. These institutions play a significant role in perpetuating gender roles and reinforcing religious and social narratives that hinder the inclusion of women in decision-making positions in public and political spheres. Such narratives contribute to the marginalization of women and serve to undermine their agency. The second level of violence is linked to the presence of de facto forces on the ground. These forces exert pressure to restrict the work of women-led institutions, women's rights defenders, and journalists. Their interventions aim to curtail the independence of civil society and impede the progress of gender equality initiatives.

“The situation of women journalists in northwest Syria is very bad, as they try to shed light on women's issues. In one program working with female journalists about journalistic writing from a gender perspective, they taught young women how to play with language to protect themselves before they protect their sources and the women and girls they interview. The issue is tiresome and stressful. Women's rights defenders are in a very bad condition.”

Expert Interview-3

We identified a range of factors that contribute to the reinforcement of the media discourse and cyberbullying campaigns targeting women. These factors collectively marginalize women and impede their involvement in public institutions and public life. Extremist religious discourse, societal expectations regarding gender roles, and the normalization of cyber and media attacks on women in public affairs all play a role in perpetuating this violence. Additionally, the lack of social development efforts that are contextually sensitive and align with local values hinders the progress towards achieving substantive and incremental change.

“Women activists on the ground in Syria are threatened with cyber violence. These campaigns attack women's work and funding agendas, and it is very violent for them and causes women to be reluctant to participate in public activity. We see violent campaigns, threats and blackmail, and assaults on social centers and activities, and religious sermons that change the public mood. If there was dormant resistance against the women’s movement, this gave it space to be open and blatant and base his legitimacy in religion.”

Expert Interview-5

Second: Patterns of Violence Resulting from the Interaction Between Individuals Within the Family Space

Here, we do not focus on violence within the family in isolation, but must address the patterns and causes of structural violence, and the overlap of these forms violence and their mutual interactions.

1. Domestic Violence:

Domestic violence is a multifaceted issue that arises from a combination of deeply entrenched social norms, religious discourse, and the absence of protective laws within the Syrian legal framework. In fact, some existing laws even perpetuate such violence by requiring women to seek their husbands' consent for job opportunities, freedom of movement, and exploiting legal loopholes that favor the abuser in cases of family crimes. Due to the stigma associated with disclosure and reporting, as well as the lack of protective mechanisms and fear of societal judgment, there is a dearth of comprehensive reports on the extent of domestic violence in northwest Syria. Additionally, societal acceptance of domestic violence is reinforced by religious discourse that justifies physical violence against women under the guise of male guardianship.

Several factors contribute to the escalation of domestic violence against women, particularly the heightened tension within families resulting from experiences of violence, poverty, and forced displacement. Women often find themselves isolated from their original social and familial environments that could offer some form of protection. Economic violence further exacerbates their vulnerability, trapping them in cycles of repeated abuse, while inadequate protection mechanisms and fragmented referral systems between sectors contribute to the perpetuation of violence. For instance, although the medical sector serves as the primary point of entry for providing medical support to victims, it lacks comprehensive services to address life-threatening physical violence and falls short in providing psychological treatment, legal assistance, and financial support.

The participants emphasized the profound impact of displacement on the surge in violence against women within their households. The loss of community protection, resulting from being uprooted from their original social environments, further exposes women to increased risks and challenges in seeking safety when they are subject to violence within their homes.

“When women are subjected to violence, and as a result of displacement and their distance from their [extended] families, they remain silent because there is no one to fight for them. Sometimes, women fear for their brothers and family because of their potential exposure to harm, which forces them to remain silent because of the high rate of crimes.”

a participant in networking session

The loss of privacy, particularly in IDP camps, has emerged as a significant contributing factor to increased tension within family spaces, making women more vulnerable to violence from their partners. Participants highlighted controlling behaviors stemming from societal expectations of hyper-masculinity as a catalyst for escalating violence against women. This includes men resisting equality in decision-making, refusing to share household responsibilities, and being unable to meet societal expectations due to economic circumstances. These factors further expose women to a heightened risk of domestic violence.

Furthermore, the rise in early marriage rates, the normalization of human rights violations, the absence of rule of law, and the prevailing culture of impunity, coupled with the presence of various de facto governing authorities in northwest Syria, create an environment where abusers can evade accountability by seeking refuge in areas under different control should their abuse be reported. This lack of accountability perpetuates cycles of violence and prevents justice for survivors.

2. Violence Against Girls

The issue of early marriage emerged as a significant form of violence against girls, as highlighted by the participants. While early marriage is not a new phenomenon in Syrian society, its prevalence has significantly increased during the conflict, reflecting the alarming rates of early marriage in northwest Syria. Although accurate data on the extent of early marriage in the region is lacking, national statistics indicate a similar upward trend. For instance, according to report published by the independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic in June 2023, early marriage is widely spread in all of Syria, where 84% of children living in areas where child marriage is a major problem for girls between 15 and 17yras old.⁸

⁸ Gendered Impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on women and girls, 12-06-2023 accessed through OHCHR, <https://shorturl.at/ehoKL>

In northwest Syria, families resort to marrying off their daughters as a desperate response to the challenges posed by the conflict and the economic hardships faced by displaced families. Early marriage is seen as a means of providing protection for girls from sexual harassment and safeguarding family honor. This practice is deeply intertwined with economic circumstances, livelihood challenges, and the pervasive poverty experienced in IDP camps, where limited access to education exacerbates the consequences for girls in society.

"[They think] why should a girl be educated? If she has finished the sixth grade, it is possible for her to become a wife. Society views girls who leave the home, especially for the university, unfavorably because it requires her freedom of movement. They are allowed to travel in groups, but a girl is not allowed to move on her own, because it is socially unacceptable. Even when it is accepted, there is the issue of cost, and priority in the household budget is not to pay for girls' education, but that of boys."

Expert Interview-5

Forced puberty has emerged as a recent harmful practice in Syria, while female genital mutilation (FGM) was introduced by foreign jihadists during the conflict. These practices have had a devastating impact on Syrian girls in northwest Syria, causing physical and psychological harm and perpetuating violence and inequality. It is imperative to raise awareness about the severe consequences of these practices and take immediate action to eliminate them.

" There are families forcing girls to reach puberty early by giving them hormones in order to marry them off due to economic violence. As for abortion, it intersects with politics and rule in the name of religion, and authorities prohibit this kind of services, Not to mention strange practices that these authorities have imposed on Syrian society such as female genital mutilation, which is a phenomenon that does not exist in the Syrian society but have been imposed by foreign fighters and their families."

Expert Interview-1

Conclusion:

The forms of violence against women in northwest Syria, as explored in this research, are interconnected rather than separate, amplifying each other's impact and increasing women's vulnerability, particularly in the context of protracted conflict. Structural violence, deeply ingrained in Syrian society, is characterized by gender inequality in access to resources, education, skills development, and economic opportunities. This inequality exposes women to

higher risks of gender-based violence during periods of social, security, and economic fragility, as witnessed during the conflict in Syria. Understanding and addressing the root causes and patterns of structural violence embedded in laws, social norms, customs, and religious practices is crucial for comprehending the consequences of direct conflict violence, such as forced displacement and the erosion of social cohesion, on women who previously enjoyed some level of societal protection despite discriminatory legal frameworks.

It is equally important to examine how structural violence permeates within civil society structures, humanitarian institutions, and alternative governance systems. This includes understanding external factors that reinforce gender discrimination, such as funding policies that prioritize replicating projects ill-suited to the specific context of northwest Syria or neglecting the support for early recovery efforts and community development at the local level. Moreover, it is essential to comprehend the persisting conditions that perpetuate instability and insecurity, including the absence of a political solution, ongoing military operations, the presence of de facto governance authorities seeking control over civil work, and the ideological influence within operating sectors in northwest Syria. These factors have undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of visible and hidden patterns of violence that disproportionately impact women and marginalized groups.

Recommendations

This research highlights the pressing need to adopt a contextual understanding of the factors that perpetuate violence against women and to implement long-term strategies for achieving positive and effective changes in response to the needs of survivors. It is essential to address the root causes of violence while also providing comprehensive support and response mechanisms. In doing so, we can effectively tackle the patterns of violence against women in northwest Syria. The recommendations of this study are as follows:

1. Developing and adopting a general policy to prevent violence against women

- ◆ Conduct an internal assessment of power dynamics within workplaces and decision-making centers to identify and address patterns of discrimination against women. Use the findings to develop interventions that promote equality and challenge existing power imbalances.
- ◆ Implement gender-sensitive policies in all work environments to ensure equitable access to services and opportunities for women. Design and implement programs that address gender disparities and promote equal participation.
- ◆ Ensure effective implementation of safeguarding policies, gender parity policies, and policies addressing sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment. Establish clear complaint mechanisms and actively combat impunity for perpetrators.

- ◆ Develop contextual solutions to address the unique patterns of violence faced by women in the Syrian context. Ensure that women in vulnerable situations have access to comprehensive support systems, including humanitarian aid and economic assistance.
- ◆ Create policies and practices that remove barriers preventing women from accessing resources that support their development and career advancement within work environments.
- ◆ Transform work environments into gender-sensitive spaces by providing necessary resources and mechanisms for evaluating and monitoring the effectiveness of existing policies. Regularly reassess and improve these policies as needed.
- ◆ Promote awareness among staff members in organizations operating in northwest Syria, as well as in organizations' headquarters if they are based in Turkey, about the importance of implementing effective and consistent gender-responsive policies.
- ◆ Develop methodologies and tools for gender analysis that are context-specific and utilize standardized and contextualized gender terminology. Ensure these tools facilitate a clear understanding of the causes of gender inequality in Syrian society and provide guidance on how to address it effectively.

2. Creating supportive environments

- ◆ Prioritize the establishment and continuous support of safe spaces for women in northwest Syria, recognizing their critical importance in the absence of adequate legal and support mechanisms. Ensure these spaces provide not only psychosocial and community support for survivors, but also serve as platforms for developing networks of solidarity, community protection, and economic empowerment, with a vision of driving social change.
- ◆ Invest in knowledge generation and research focused on the significance of safe spaces within the context of northwest Syria. Emphasize their transformative potential beyond offering support to survivors, highlighting their role in fostering solidarity, community protection, and economic development. Position them as essential infrastructures for promoting positive change.
- ◆ Support the integration of safe spaces within organizations, ensuring internal discussions are open and inclusive for all gender groups. Encourage active participation to shed light on the forms of violence experienced by women in the workplace and develop contextually appropriate response strategies.
- ◆ Foster the formation of women's alliances, federations, and networks across areas of influence and control in northwest Syria. Provide support to local leaders within these structures, enabling them to serve as safety nets and empower women activists by facilitating effective solidarity, protection, and the exchange of experiences.

3. Promoting community work to create social development with a local perspective

- ◆ Facilitate open and constructive dialogue with media institutions to emphasize their ethical responsibility in promoting awareness of various forms of violence against women. Encourage these institutions to shift their discourse to one that accurately reflects and addresses these patterns.
- ◆ Develop media campaigns, including social media initiatives, to raise awareness about violence against women in a manner that is contextually and culturally appropriate. Aim to challenge and reverse patterns of media and online violence by promoting messages of respect, equality, and non-violence.
- ◆ Provide support for local initiatives that promote the integration of survivors and displaced women into host communities. These initiatives should focus on empowering women and creating opportunities for their active participation, fostering social cohesion and mutual understanding.
- ◆ Foster sustained collaboration between local women's initiatives, women-led organizations, and religious and legal authorities in northwest Syria. Facilitate inclusive and ongoing discussions involving all members of society, including boys and men, to raise awareness about the causes and patterns of violence against women. Encourage participatory approaches to finding contextual solutions that ensure community protection.

4. Developing the personal skills of women and girls, including cognitive, managerial and economic skills

- ◆ Develop comprehensive awareness-raising programs that address the different patterns of violence against women, taking into account the local culture and context. These programs should focus on finding effective solutions to address the impact of violence and promote positive change.
- ◆ Provide support for women's leadership programs that take a holistic approach to developing the knowledge and skills necessary for leadership roles. These programs should also incorporate resilience-building strategies to empower women to overcome challenges.
- ◆ Ensure that long-term psychosocial support is integrated into all prevention and response programs for violence against women. This support should be sustainable and address the emotional and psychological well-being of survivors.
- ◆ Take a comprehensive approach to economic empowerment projects, ensuring that women have access to a range of skills and support to ensure the success and sustainability of these initiatives. This includes providing training, mentorship, and access to resources and opportunities.

- ◆ Invest in supporting the development of future leaders, particularly among young men and women. Foster their skills, knowledge, and leadership potential across various fields to create a more inclusive and diverse generation of leaders.

5. Redirect all humanitarian and development services

- ◆ Conduct a comprehensive review of humanitarian and service projects delivered by humanitarian organizations, local communities, local councils, and governmental entities to identify and address barriers that hinder women and marginalized groups from accessing these services.
- ◆ Ensure that urban planning processes take into account the specific needs and considerations related to women's access to development projects, promoting inclusivity and gender sensitivity.
- ◆ Advocate for increased funding that shifts the response in northwest Syria from solely emergency humanitarian assistance to a more sustainable approach that encompasses community development, early recovery, livelihoods, stabilization efforts, civil peace, and support for alternative governance structures.
- ◆ Make gender equality a primary goal across all projects, including service programs and access to humanitarian aid, ensuring that gender considerations are integrated into the design and implementation of activities.
- ◆ Collect and share high-quality, sex-disaggregated data on women's access to services, including reproductive health, protection services, and violence response, to inform evidence-based programming and decision-making.
- ◆ Provide comprehensive training for frontline workers in the medical sector and humanitarian organizations to raise awareness about structural violence and barriers to accessing services. Additionally, develop and implement parallel programs to support the mental health and well-being of workers.
- ◆ Support contextual activities that adopt a comprehensive, cross-sectoral approach to empower girls and women, shifting towards a victim/survivor-centered approach and ensuring their meaningful participation in all stages of activity and program design and implementation.
- ◆ Invest in long-term, sustainable plans and initiatives that guarantee access to education for all children and adolescents, alongside awareness-raising programs addressing early marriage.
- ◆ Support initiatives and partnerships that foster and enhance women's leadership, particularly in service sectors such as healthcare, education, humanitarian response, and local governance.
- ◆ Promote women's political participation at the local level, expanding opportunities beyond the national level to ensure their active involvement in decision-making processes.

