Violence and Power Relations:

Strategies for Protection from Violence against Women in Northwestern 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 Northwest 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.

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Introduction: Why focus on protecting women and girls in northwest Syria?

In northwest Syria, the United Nations estimates that 3.2 million people are grappling with food insecurity, with a staggering 80% of them being women and children. These vulnerable groups also make up 79% of the residents in both formal and informal IDP camps.[1] However, their ability to access basic services such as food, healthcare, and safe housing, which are essential for women's privacy, is severely hindered by a multitude of challenges. These challenges are further compounded by the prevalence of various forms of violence, some overt and others hidden. The violence they experience extends beyond direct harm caused by warfare, encompassing the limited access to services and immense psychological pressures resulting from the loss of breadwinners and the added responsibilities of caregiving and work outside the home. Moreover, all of these difficulties are entrenched in a social environment dominated by discriminatory norms and an increasing religious discourse that discriminates against women.[2]

The surge in incidents of violence against women and girls in this context can be attributed to the lack of or insufficient mechanisms for reporting abuse, as well as the absence of a social and cultural support system. These factors are exacerbated by the prevailing culture of impunity during this humanitarian crisis, wherein the basic social fabric has been destabilized, and communication channels and social safety nets have been severely disrupted due to mass displacement, including forced displacement. Consequently, the risk faced by women of falling victim to gender-based violence increases substantially. Notably, organizations advocating for the rights of Syrian women and UNICEF have reported a distressing escalation of gender-based violence in northwest Syria, which has now reached epidemic proportions across all regions of the country. This concerning trend is reinforced by a lack of trust in available protection and support mechanisms, as well as the profound psychological impact that impedes survivors from reporting cases of gender-based violence. Moreover, the issue is further exacerbated by the normalization and acceptance of gender-based violence, the prevalence of a culture of impunity, and the societal stigma that survivors are subjected to.[3]

Hence, it is crucial and imperative to prioritize the protection of women and girls, while simultaneously enhancing their capacities to foster resilience and facilitate their recovery. This becomes all the more essential in the midst of the war-torn and displaced conditions that prevail, exacerbating the myriad forms of violence that are deeply ingrained in Syrian society, including gender-based violence. However, the task of providing protection itself encounters significant challenges, primarily stemming from the dearth of financial and human resources. Working in an unstable region plagued by protracted conflict makes conditions within the protection sector exceedingly arduous. Moreover, the ongoing deterioration of the economic

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[1]UN News, "Northwest Syria: The lives and well-being of 4.1 million people are dependant on UN cross-border aid" (Arabic), 16 June 2022, link: https://news.un.org/ar/story/2022/06/1104922

[2]Kholoud Baraka and Usama Elashour, "Feminist perspective on reconstruction in Northern Syria" (Arabic), Impulse Paper, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Beirut, January 2022, link: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/18883.pdf

[3] Rapid Gender Analysis Policy Brief: Türkiye & Northwest Syria Earthquake Response, Policy Paper, CARE International, February 2023, link: https://www.care-international.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/RGA%20Brief%20Turkiye%20Syria%20Feb%202023.pdf

situation, coupled with the absence of concerted efforts towards local responses in this intricate context, further compounds the difficulties faced by women.

Developing comprehensive protection approaches that challenge discriminatory social patterns and reshape societal perspectives is crucial.[4] However, in northwest Syria, numerous factors hinder the investigation of this matter. The region is marked by ongoing direct warfare operations and a lack of stability, compounded by an escalation of discriminatory religious rhetoric. Furthermore, the control exerted by de facto forces interferes with civil society activities, while infrastructure remains destroyed. The loss of human resources has significantly impacted service provision and the absence of economic and social development plans. These factors have heightened the vulnerability of women, as societal structures undergo a profound shift and social protection privileges are eroded.

It is crucial to recognize that protection strategies often focus on specific forms of violence, neglecting the unique challenges faced by women regarding sexual violence and exploitation in humanitarian crises. To develop effective protection strategies, it is necessary to acknowledge the various forms of violence deeply rooted in the context. Women experience these forms of violence, which are intensified during times of conflict, as a result of pre-existing discriminatory social norms. Therefore, it becomes imperative to design and implement contextually appropriate responses that address the interconnectedness between violence resulting from the conflict and pre-existing forms of violence related to women's societal status and conditions. This entails addressing multiple facets of violence and deeply-rooted discrimination against women, including legal discrimination, societal and religious norms and values, and the distribution of gender roles within and outside the home.[5]

This policy paper aims to examine the existing landscape of protection strategies and violence prevention efforts concerning girls and women in northwest Syria. By conducting this study, our objective is to identify the current gaps in this context. Additionally, we aim to highlight the contextual opportunities and positive developments that have emerged over the past decade. Moreover, we seek to illuminate the coping and resilience mechanisms employed by women-led organizations in collaboration with partners. To provide a comprehensive understanding, we present the current on-the-ground situation as perceived by the participants in this research, prioritizing their perspectives on the most effective means of support.

Research methodology and scope:

The research methodology employed in this policy paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities surrounding protection and prevention strategies for violence against women and girls in northwest Syria.

To achieve this, we adopted an intersectional contextual approach, leveraging qualitative data obtained through the following methods:

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[4] UNFPA, The Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Programming, 2019, link: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/19-200_Minimun_Standards_Report_ENGLISH-Nov.FINAL_.pdf
[5] Aisling Swaine, Understanding and Addressing Conflict-Related Violence Against Women, Briefing Paper, PSRP, 2018, link: https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2018_BP_Swaine_Understanding-and-Addressing-Conflict-Related-Violence-Against-Women.pdf

1. Networking Sessions: We conducted two networking sessions in Salqin, located in the Idlib countryside of northwest Syria. These sessions brought together representatives from partner women-led organizations actively working on the ground. The first session centered around defining gender-based violence and conducting a contextual analysis of its causes and impacts. It involved the participation of 14 individuals, comprising 11 women and 3 men. The second session focused on exploring protection strategies, fostering networking opportunities, and promoting collaboration between organizations. This session involved the participation of 14 individuals, including 12 women and 2 men.

2. Individual Semi-Structured Interviews: We conducted five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Syrian expert women who are actively engaged in contextual programs that study and respond to patterns of violence against women in northwest Syria. These interviews provided valuable insights into the subject matter.

In a related study, we presented a comprehensive analysis of the causes and manifestations of violence experienced by women and girls in northwest Syria. Using a social environment model, we examined the location and types of violence to better comprehend the gaps in the conception and implementation of protection programs.

Findings: Protection Programs: Gaps and Opportunities

"All of us here work against violence. But I guarantee that I, and most of us, are victims of violence, whether from the community, in the household, from family, and from our social environment. This I am sure of, that we are all abused even though we work against violence."
A participant in a networking session

The networking sessions and individual interviews included participants who are actively involved in the protection sector and/or organizations dedicated to safeguarding and empowering women in northwest Syria. Through the analysis of their insights, it became evident that these individuals, particularly the women, feel overwhelmed by the relentless cycles of violence inflicted upon women in the region. Their contributions shed light on the deficiencies within the existing protection and response mechanisms available to them and women in general in northwest Syria. Many shared their personal experiences navigating the dire circumstances faced by women, exposing the entrenched structural patterns of violence that perpetuate the acceptance of violence against women and contribute to the stigmatization of survivors.

Furthermore, the current protection activities in place prove inadequate in addressing and dismantling these systemic patterns of violence, often prioritizing certain forms of violence while neglecting others. The presence of a culture of impunity, reliance on discriminatory customary laws, and the rise of hostile religious discourse further exacerbate the challenges faced by women, particularly in their public engagement, especially within the protection sector. The combination of these factors has led to an escalation of violent rhetoric against

women's/feminist activism, amplified by the actions of de facto authorities that engage in violence against women and seek to restrict their freedom of movement and hinder the work of civil society at large.

The discussions also illuminated the personal and professional challenges faced by participants within their respective roles in designing and implementing activities and programs to address women's needs and raise community awareness regarding the importance of protecting women during times of conflict. Despite the compounded and interwoven challenges, the women participating in the research expressed a strong determination to continue providing services and meeting the needs of women in northwest Syria. They aspire to carve out spaces for themselves to negotiate power imbalances based on their own experiences and perspectives, seeking professional growth and the development of activities and support systems that do not cause further harm.

While we did not offer a direct comparison between the opinions of men and women, it was apparent that the women participating in the networking sessions were better equipped to provide a nuanced gender analysis of violence patterns against women. They also offered critical perspectives on the shortcomings of protection and prevention programs and activities in northwest Syria due to their firsthand experiences of daily violence.

A. Challenges and Gaps in Protection and Prevention Activities

The participants emphasized the critical importance of ensuring that protection activities are conducted with utmost sensitivity, taking care not to inflict additional harm on women and safeguarding both women and humanitarian workers from psychological distress. They stressed the need for equitable access to humanitarian assistance for women, while emphasizing the necessity of protecting them from any form of sexual, psychological, or physical exploitation. In light of the challenges faced, the participants strongly advocated for the creation of safe spaces that compensate for the gaps in existing protection and prevention strategies. Amidst these complexities, the women involved in the research expressed their unwavering demand for continuous efforts to raise awareness among women about the various forms of violence they encounter, as well as the exploration of innovative solutions to provide support and solidarity.

Nonetheless, the participants offered contextual criticism of the current prevention mechanisms and response activities available to women in northwest Syria. They highlighted numerous gaps and challenges within the realm of protection and prevention, which can be summarized as follows:

Despite ongoing efforts to raise awareness within the community, particularly among women, regarding gender-based violence, there remains a lack of equitable access to information concerning the underlying causes and motivations behind violence against women. This lack of knowledge exacerbates women's vulnerability, leading to a lack of awareness of their rights and how to access them. Even if women do possess knowledge about the types of violence they may encounter, they often face limited or insufficient access to support and protection mechanisms, further perpetuating the impact of these patterns of violence. For instance, while women may be aware that they are victims of violence, fear of social stigma often deters them from reporting such incidents and seeking support. Additionally, a disconnect exists between

the priorities identified by women and the types of activities provided by civil society organizations and women-led institutions, highlighting a need for alignment and responsiveness to the specific needs identified by women themselves.

> "Whenever we're doing awareness-raising, they tell us 'You don't bring us anything, so we won't hear you. When we see other people, they give us a (food) basket."
>
> A participant in a networking session

All these challenges may be due to the current exacerbating need to receive response and protection activities in the community in northwestern Syria, the absence of comprehensive cross-sectoral prevention plans, the lack of long-term flexible funding plans, in addition to the lack of inclusion of the opinions of local communities and women in particular about the priority of service provision.

1. Lack of access to information

Our analysis of the participants' insights revealed significant gaps in women's access to information concerning all forms of gender-based violence, particularly those that are hidden or invisible. Awareness-raising campaigns often concentrate on visible and explicit types of violence, such as domestic violence or violence imposed by conflict, such as sexual exploitation, early marriage, and limited access to humanitarian aid. While these campaigns play a crucial role in raising awareness among women and society at large, there appears to be a limited focus on addressing the underlying root causes of this violence. The emphasis seems to be more on addressing the symptoms and manifestations resulting from structural discrimination. This prioritization may stem from the fact that the forms of violence being addressed are more recognizable and prevalent, thus perceived as immediate priorities due to their direct and explicit effects.

> "In a project done in the north to raise awareness of women's legal rights, the information was shocking to women, who lacked any knowledge of their rights, even legally. In my opinion, such a project was vital and profoundly necessary."
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> Expert Interview-5

Incorporating a knowledge component into the networking sessions and drawing upon the participants' contextual experiences allowed for the development of a gender analysis within various work areas in northwest Syria. Notably, the women participants exhibited a heightened sensitivity towards the patterns of violence experienced by women. This sensitivity must be taken into account when designing prevention and response activities. However, according to their viewpoints, albeit not expressed in the same language used here, the actual implementation of these programs often collided with a lack of widespread adoption and application of localized plans to address the root causes of gender inequality. While the

participants possessed knowledge and sensitivity, their insights clashed with gaps in the planning of protection activities, stemming from a lack of deep understanding among workers in community organizations regarding the gender impact during program and activity design. According to the participants, the absence of incorporating the voices of local women during the planning stages could result in additional patterns of violence that further exacerbate women's vulnerability.

2. Poor access to support and protection mechanisms

The lack of access to support and protection mechanisms in northwest Syria is closely linked to the inadequate availability of services. This could be attributed to a significant gap between the services provided to women and the level of their needs. The insufficient access may result from either the limited availability of services or a lack of sensitivity towards the unique circumstances of women and girls during the design of these services and activities. In many cases, these services fail to address the complex structural barriers that hinder women and girls from accessing them. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive cross-sectoral coordination and intersectional protection strategies contributes to the imbalance in service provision at both individual and societal levels.

External factors also play a role in hindering access to activities and programs. De facto forces attempt to restrict the movement of women working in the protection sector, which affects the quality of programs provided by women's organizations. These external pressures have an impact on the effectiveness of certain protection mechanisms, including awareness-raising activities. Women and men working in the protection sector often experience psychological pressure and a sense of threat.

During the discussions, participants shared numerous examples highlighting the harm caused to women during the implementation of protection activities and programs, such as awareness-raising initiatives, economic empowerment projects, and livelihood programs. Criticism was raised regarding the design and implementation of economic support/empowerment projects in camps, as they primarily focus on individual recipients without considering important conditions that should be met. These programs often fail to challenge traditional gender roles, potentially increasing burdens on women and exposing them to further violence within their families or society. A crucial protection strategy should center on supporting women and adolescent girls' access to economic resources while promoting their autonomy and reducing the risks of violence they face. This approach also contributes to the well-being of families and individuals, and challenges prevailing societal norms that confine women to domestic roles and restrict their participation in public life.[6]

During the discussions, participants shared critiques regarding the implementation of economic empowerment strategies in northwest Syria. Some participants pointed out that these strategies inadvertently reinforced stereotypical gender roles, further entrenching societal norms that limit women's agency. Others highlighted the feasibility challenges associated with these programs, emphasizing the need for parallel training initiatives to ensure the success and sustainability of the projects. Additionally, examples were provided to illustrate how certain economic empowerment projects inadvertently promoted patterns of economic violence

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[6] UNFPA, The Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies Programming, 2019, link: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/19-200_Minimun_Standards_Report_ENGLISH-Nov.FINAL_.pdf

against women. Participants pointed out that women faced difficulties in controlling the income generated from these projects, leading to power imbalances and increased vulnerability to economic abuse and exploitation.

> "When supporting small projects by women, we find them working and raising livestock in the heart of the camps, but in the end the revenue is given to the man. If she does not give it to him, she will be ostracized from her social environment, and she has no power to refuse."
> A participant in a networking session

Our research revealed a significant connection between the limited access to medical services and the inadequate access to protection services in northwest Syria. The medical sector plays a crucial role in directing survivors of physical and sexual violence to available protection services. Hence, the lack of access to protection services may stem from challenges in accessing medical services or the lack of effective coordination and referral mechanisms between institutions in the protection and medical sectors.

Furthermore, when it comes to violence against women within institutional structures in northwest Syria, there is a noticeable lack of knowledge and trust in complaint mechanisms. This may be attributed to the unclear nature of these mechanisms, concerns about potential marginalization and stigma associated with filing a complaint, or insufficient training provided to male and female workers regarding these mechanisms and the patterns of violence and harm related to power dynamics within the workplace. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that includes clear and accessible complaint procedures, awareness-raising efforts, and training programs to empower workers and ensure their understanding of rights and responsibilities within the institutional context.

> "If you have been subjected to violence, you cannot report it, nor can you complain or confront it. It will be easy for you to be excluded, especially since the high positions and decision-makers are mostly males. The case is left to individual discretion, because there are no forces and laws to deter [violence]."
> Expert Interview-1

In addition, our research revealed a significant intersection between the inadequate attention given to response activities and the pervasive fear of societal stigma experienced by women survivors. This fear extends to various categories of survivors, including those who have experienced domestic violence, arrests, rape, or have children born as a result of rape or marriage to foreign fighters. The fear of societal stigma acts as a formidable barrier that obstructs women's access to essential protection activities. Overcoming these barriers requires comprehensive efforts to address societal attitudes, raise awareness about the rights and needs of survivors, and establish robust mechanisms that prioritize confidentiality and non-discrimination.

3. Inadequate psychological support programs and lack of community integration programs

The urgent need for social mental health services and specialized psychological support services has emerged as a crucial requirement for individuals in society, particularly women, to receive the necessary psychological protection and address the adverse psychological effects stemming from violence against women and direct conflict-related violence. Our interviews highlighted the positive reception of such support by women. In fact, the participants emphasized their specific need for this type of response and underscored the significant lack of access to reliable mental health services. The limited availability of services, often confined to psychosocial support, was deemed insufficient in addressing the deep-rooted psychological trauma compounded by years of conflict and patterns of violence.

> "The issues of activists are very important. We have been under immense pressure during these 10 years of war. We have seen extraordinary things. There are no programs that address us workers in the humanitarian field. There must be space for us to treat ourselves from this violence that we endured."
> A participant in a networking session

Moreover, we identified changes in the societal structure of northwest Syria resulting from forced displacement, which sometimes led to conflicts within host communities. These conflicts arose due to competition over resources, especially humanitarian aid, as well as cultural clashes arising from differences in social norms or social class between the host and displaced communities. Displaced women, in particular, faced significant challenges as they lost their original social networks and became vulnerable to isolation and exclusion within the host communities. Unfortunately, there is a lack of long-term strategic support for community integration and the provision of comprehensive protection and psychosocial support. However, it is important to note that local community strategies adopted by initiatives and women-led organizations have been implemented to enhance the social integration of displaced women. We shared stories of the participants' activities, which utilized existing protection initiatives, such as safe spaces, to organize discussions between women from the host and displaced communities. The aim of these discussions was to promote social interaction and foster alternative community-based protection for displaced women in host communities.

4. Different priorities

Upon analyzing the collected data, we discovered that access to income sources and basic human needs emerged as a primary concern for the entire community, including women, when discussing prevention and protection activities. This highlights a lack of consideration for the priorities of marginalized communities and the continued reliance on fixed needs without adapting to their evolving circumstances.

During discussions with participants, we observed three levels of discrepancies in prioritizing the quality of protection activities provided to women. The first level pertains to the priorities

of donors, who often impose programs borrowed from contexts outside of Syria without consulting the local community, particularly women. This results in a majority of funding in northwest Syria being allocated to emergency relief operations, with little focus on sustainable economic and social development projects. Furthermore, funding directed towards women's and feminist organizations still falls short of embracing flexible, long-term feminist funding approaches.

The second level involves Syrian women's organizations and civil society groups, which face significant challenges in accessing long-term and flexible funding to address women's specific needs. Inadequate funding often leads to program repetition and limits activities to awareness-raising and the provision of safe spaces. These organizations strive to adapt to the changing reality in northwest Syria, while grappling with restrictions on feminist activities, women's rights defenders, and local political forces attempting to exploit civil society activities for economic and political gains. Such interference impacts the quality of the activities or forces them to conform to the imposed restrictions.

The third level concerns the priorities identified by women and girls themselves, which intersect with the normalization of structural and conflict-related violence. For instance, we received accounts of girls and women declining to participate in awareness-raising activities about early marriage, particularly in camps, unless these sessions were accompanied by humanitarian aid. This response can be attributed to the dire humanitarian conditions, where immediate access to basic needs takes precedence over protection activities that may yield delayed results. Additionally, the prevalence of certain forms of violence against women and girls, such as high rates of early marriage, has contributed to the societal normalization of such violence. It also reflects the lack of confidence among girls and women in the effectiveness of civil society activities in the absence of better opportunities for change.

> "When we talk about economic structures that support women, how much funding can we get? And when we are relieved from funding policies, we clash against the policies of local authorities that want to make material and moral gains from our activities."
> Expert Interview-1

During our analysis, we identified a flaw in the general approach of providing grants for small projects or income-generating livelihood programs aimed at women's economic development. These grants were often not accompanied by programs designed to enhance women's individual economic skills, ensure the long-term viability of these projects, or promote feasibility. Additionally, there was a lack of understanding regarding the significance of integrating awareness of economic violence, power dynamics, and the distribution of care burdens within the home into economic empowerment programs. It is crucial to design these projects in a way that addresses power imbalances within households, without causing further economic, psychological, or physical harm to women.

Furthermore, while political empowerment programs that offer the development of political skills for women in northwest Syria are of great importance, they have predominantly focused on political engagement at higher levels, neglecting the need for parallel programs that

specifically target local political empowerment and involvement in local governing bodies. It is essential to support women's presence in these structures and advocate for the formation of local democratic systems that reflect the interests, needs, and priorities of women. Such initiatives would enable women to resist oppressive systems that impact their lives and provide opportunities for meaningful engagement in public affairs beyond higher-level politics.

> "Activism related to women is increasingly directed towards women's political empowerment, because it is easier and required by donor policies. However, it adopts a superficial approach that does not take into account root causes, nor analyze what the form of engagement, obstacles and levels are. It does not address localities, but rather national politics, without offering women true access to opportunities. It leaves us to wonder how effective these efforts truly are."
> Expert Interview-5

5. Programs about survivors, not with survivors

The participants strongly emphasized the need for a shift towards a victim/survivor-centered approach in the planning of protection activities and programs. They highlighted the importance of designing these programs in a way that ensures victims/survivors have ownership over their own voices and prioritizes their needs in the short, medium, and long term.

However, during our discussions, it became evident that there is a general lack of attention given to consulting survivors/victims about their priorities and a failure to adopt an approach that empowers and enables survivors/victims to take a leadership role in the programs designed for them. Furthermore, there is a lack of accountability mechanisms to ensure that the programs deliver the intended results. This absence of a victim/survivor-centered approach was particularly evident in examples provided, such as the camps designated for widows, which ended up causing additional harm to both the mothers and their children.

It is crucial to recognize the importance of involving survivors/victims in decision-making processes and empowering them to shape the programs and services that directly impact their lives. By doing so, we can ensure that the needs and priorities of survivors/victims are truly met, and that the programs and services provided are sensitive, effective, and do not inadvertently cause further harm.

> "What do the survivors want? How do they see the recovery process that follows? Documentation is taking place… We document what they share, and then leave the survivor alone. Or sometimes we impose programs on them that are not very suited to their needs."
> A participant in a networking session

6. Lack of coordination mechanisms between organizations and, consequently, lack of integration of protection programs

The participants emphasized the importance of integrating protection programs and fostering coordination among organizations involved in providing protection services. They underscored the need for a comprehensive approach to planning and implementing protection projects, which involves addressing all forms of violence against women and adhering strictly to do-no-harm principles, particularly when dealing with vulnerable women. Various examples were shared to highlight the necessity of adopting this comprehensive approach.

One such example is the inclusion of psychological support programs as a fundamental component of all economic and political empowerment initiatives. Additionally, it was recognized that working with communities in a gradual and non-traumatic manner is crucial to reversing existing power dynamics without causing harm to women. However, these insights were met with an awareness of the challenges posed by the operational context in northwestern Syria.

The operational context often leads to fragmented protection and prevention activities, lacking coordination between civil society organizations and community initiatives. As a result, there are gaps in achieving substantial and sustainable change that can effectively convince society, both as a structure and as individuals, of the imperative to transform negative patterns and bring about meaningful contextual shifts. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is vital for overcoming barriers and implementing comprehensive protection programs that yield tangible and organic changes within the community.

> "I look forward to achieving our goals, even if they are a bit long-term. The goal is to accumulate skills, support the community and know its challenges, and understand their psychological and social conditions. All of these things are related, and we cannot overlook any of them."
> A participant in a networking session

By examining the reasons behind the limited progress in addressing violence against girls in northern Syria, particularly early marriage, despite the efforts made by women's organizations and women-led initiatives in providing protection activities, we can gain insights into the consequences of a lack of comprehensive protection approach and insufficient coordination across sectors. Understanding these factors is crucial for reversing the patterns of violence and ensuring the well-being of women and girls.

In our ongoing research on violence against girls in northwest Syria, we have examined the underlying causes that have contributed to the alarming increase in early and forced marriage, as well as the prevalence of violent practices such as forced puberty. These forms of violence can be attributed to various factors stemming from the conflict and its aftermath.

We have identified that the security situation, poverty, limited job opportunities, and lack of access to education play significant roles in perpetuating these forms of violence in northwest

Syria. Additionally, the absence of proper oversight on the access and use of hormonal drugs in forced puberty and the lack of accountability mechanisms within health directorates have contributed to the spread of a culture of impunity.

Addressing these forms of violence against girls requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses multiple layers of intervention and coordination across sectors. It is crucial to prioritize prevention interventions and establish strong cross-sectoral collaboration to effectively combat and mitigate the impact of these harmful practices.

B. Opportunities to Build Upon

While our discussions primarily revolved around the various forms of violence and the existing gaps in protection and prevention strategies, it was evident that the participants placed great emphasis on the importance of addressing these gaps and finding local solutions to enhance the services provided to women and girls. We observed that the participants, drawing from their deep understanding of the local context, often proposed creative ideas and solutions when confronted with challenges or issues. These valuable insights and innovative approaches can serve as foundations for improving the quality and effectiveness of future activities.

1. Flexibility and resilience of female workers and activists

Upon analyzing the data, it became evident that the participants displayed a strong determination to persist in providing services to women within their communities. Whether through individual endeavors or their involvement with various institutions, they exhibited remarkable resilience despite the direct violence targeted towards protection sector activists. This resilience and flexibility deserve greater support, particularly considering the challenging working conditions in northwest Syria. Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge and appreciate their profound knowledge and understanding of the local contexts, as well as their adaptive strategies that ensure their own protection while effectively responding to the needs of their community, with a specific focus on women.

> "If we were to talk about any issue, whether about religion or anything else, they would say, 'How are you coming to talk about religion?' as if we were completely outside the faith. In the end, we women activists are under tremendous pressure, and sometimes I think to stop being active, but then I think 'If I stop and others do, who would continue the work?'"
> A participant in a networking session

2. Safe spaces

During the sessions, we observed a strong emphasis on the significance of safe spaces as a crucial strategy for the protection and empowerment of women and girls. These spaces serve as a means for women to support one another and facilitate social integration. It was evident that safe spaces receive considerable attention among protection mechanisms, particularly in

contexts characterized by a culture of impunity, limited access to other services, and sources of support.

Safe spaces offer opportunities for psychosocial support to victims and survivors, employing a community-based approach that helps address the gaps resulting from the lack of access to mental health services. They also contribute to establishing community protection mechanisms and fostering the exchange of experiences to advance a community-based approach to local development. Notably, participants consistently emphasized the role of safe spaces in facilitating support networks and breaking the cycles of isolation. These spaces play an innovative role in developing context-sensitive approaches led by women themselves, aimed at creating economic opportunities and implementing participatory livelihood programs that foster collective material gains and integration within supportive groups. Within these spaces, experiences are shared, and learning sessions are conducted. For instance, participants highlighted two important models. The first model revolves around safe spaces that bring together displaced women and members of the host community, fostering the development of organic community mechanisms that work to mitigate conflicts arising from the diverse backgrounds of these women. These spaces also offer awareness-raising sessions on the various forms of violence experienced by women, thus enabling the development of community-led solutions. These groups evolve into vital entities that respond to the needs of other women and provide ongoing support.

The second model for safe spaces involves families of forcibly disappeared individuals, who have formed groups to strengthen solidarity and exchange psychosocial support. Over time, these groups have transformed into participatory economic projects that bolster the resilience of women and their families.

The discussions emphasized the instrumental role of safe spaces in empowering women, promoting community engagement, and fostering sustainable solutions to address the challenges faced by women and girls. It is evident that these spaces serve as catalysts for positive change and offer a platform for women to collectively advance their well-being and drive social transformation.

> "In the families of the forcibly disappeared, the women are always sad and have the burdens of the family and the burdens of society that we both know are stressful. In such spaces, they can talk and express their grief, and they listen to each other as a group able to help and support one another... After a year and a half, they turned into a workshop of contributors and opened a workshop that offers various services to the community, and they were actually honored as women leaders in their community."
>
> A participant in a networking session

In addition to the safe spaces established through organizational efforts, it was evident during the discussions that the focus extends beyond those spaces alone. We discovered the existence of parallel spaces created through individual initiatives by members of the community. It was remarkable to learn that certain women in host communities were adamant about including

displaced women and seeking genuine solutions to offer support and break the cycles of isolation experienced by those who have lost their original social environments. This indicates that the local community, comprising both host and displaced individuals, is actively developing new, authentic, grassroots protection mechanisms.

3. Linking rights to the need for comprehensive societal change

The inclusion of men's voices in the discussions proved to be crucial, as it shed light on the importance of providing gender analysis training to all those working in the protection sector. While our focus here was primarily on protecting women from gender-based violence, it is important to recognize that men in northwest Syria also face structural and conflict-related violence. This includes the societal stigma surrounding limited job opportunities and the resistance from the community and individuals to the reversal of gender roles that occurred during the years of conflict. It was explicitly discussed that working with men as individuals, as well as engaging religious and community initiatives, is necessary to facilitate a genuine shift in societal attitudes, behaviors, and prevailing social norms in northwest Syria. Both male and female participants expressed the need to work with and educate men, emphasizing that they too are victims of a system that perpetuates and reproduces violence.

We discovered that certain initiatives actively sought direct engagement with local religious leaders to mobilize the community and advocate for changing prevailing gender stereotypes in a manner that aligns with the local context. For instance, in advocating for women's right to full citizenship, one local initiative engaged in dialogue with religious leaders to issue a religious fatwa or discuss the right of women to confer nationality to their stateless children. Simultaneously, they worked to educate community members, donors, and international organizations about the importance of finding contextual and localized solutions at both the local and national levels. These shared experiences exemplify the development of a local understanding regarding the adoption and advancement of an "all-of-community" approach to protect women and girls and advocate for their rights.

> "We started talking with sheikhs, moderates and others. We came across opinions that it is a natural right. Another sheikh asserted that there is no solution but for mothers to be able to give their children lineage."
> Expert Interview-3

4. Women's contextual readings of power relations within civil society structures and finding spaces for negotiating power

The women participants strongly emphasized the importance of capitalizing on the progress made by feminist and women's organizations in recent years. They urged for the advancement of further rights and gender inclusion within implemented programs and the entities responsible for delivering these programs to society. Key to this is the inclusion of women's voices in the design of projects, ensuring that their needs are accurately represented. The objective is to bring about positive change that addresses the existing gender power imbalances in Syrian society and within civil society structures. The participants viewed the connection between relief

efforts and civil work as an opportunity, highlighting the positive impact of donors who enforce policies that prioritize gender sensitivity. This foundation serves as a valuable starting point to be built upon in the future.

> "The opportunity today is to relate to the donor's perspective, which imposes certain approaches that society necessarily needs. Today, women have a leverage. [Organizations] cannot say no to the inclusion of gender because it has become a demand by donors. Thus, a new type of power has emerged for women that must be seized."
>
> Expert Interview-5

Furthermore, the participants expressed the need for a dual approach to driving societal change: one that operates at both the grassroots level and within institutional structures such as civil society organizations, government bodies, and local councils. The participants conveyed that change could be achieved by mobilizing and exerting pressure from both the top-down and bottom-up perspectives. They highlighted the importance of leveraging donor policies that prioritize gender sensitivity in programs, while simultaneously advocating for a reevaluation and transformation of power dynamics within civil society institutions. This would involve challenging and reversing prevailing gender norms and patterns that perpetuate structural and institutional discrimination against women.

It is worth noting that there was no widespread negative perception of the role of civil society in northwest Syria. On the contrary, the participants viewed the achievements made through programs and job opportunities provided to women within civil society as positive. They recognized the role of civil society in facilitating inclusive practices and community engagement. Women involved in civil society spaces actively advocated for the normalization of women's presence and participation in public spheres and decision-making processes. They emphasized the direct impact of women's involvement in enhancing the quality of services for women and society as a whole, and in countering the effects of violence targeting women and girls. Concrete examples were shared, highlighting the significance of having women in leadership positions to genuinely serve the interests of society.

> "I can build upon the research that I conducted. It is necessary to have women in leadership positions and to listen to their opinions, not only women's representation in numbers. The issue of violence that women are subjected to [...]is individual effort. The presence of women will make the issue easier because it can gather greater momentum to solve problems and overcome obstacles."
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> Expert Interview-2

5. The development of a contextual approach to work ethics in the protection sector

In order to safeguard themselves and navigate the complex sociopolitical landscape of northwest Syria, workers in the protection sector and women's rights defenders have developed strategies to employ non-problematic terminology that aligns with prevailing local norms and does not contradict the de facto authorities or societal expectations. These strategies aim to ensure their personal safety and the continuity of their activities without compromising the access to protection and support services for themselves and women in their communities.

For instance, participants shared insights into the development of contextual gender terminology and approaches for communicating women's rights in a way that resonates with the local context. This includes training activities for women journalists and women's rights defenders, where they learn to write in a gender-sensitive manner without using terminologies that may be perceived as problematic locally, such as "gender" and "gender justice." While this coping mechanism may place an additional burden on protection workers and women's rights advocates, it allows for a contextual understanding and sensitivity to potential risks, ensuring their protection without hindering access to necessary support and services for themselves and their communities.

Additionally, we observed the emergence of a contextual approach to work ethics within the protection sector, particularly concerning information gathering and case management. This approach has evolved through the accumulated contextual experience of workers in this sector over years of conflict. Participants emphasized the importance of understanding the intersections of structural violence when referring survivors/victims to the required services, prioritizing their safety, confidentiality, and minimizing the risk of social stigma. This involved considering additional factors that impact protection, such as the gender of workers involved in data collection and case management. Thorough scrutiny was applied when hiring male and female workers for these roles to ensure the appropriate handling of sensitive information.

6. Collective work, solidarity and coordination

In the development of this research project, the utilization of a participatory methodology and networking sessions among partnered women-led organizations served as a catalyst for collective thinking and the establishment of effective solidarity networks in northwest Syria. The participants recognized the value of these sessions as a platform for fostering future solidarity, resource-sharing, and the integration of long-term strategic planning to challenge prevailing discriminatory societal patterns and bring about substantial, sustainable change over time.

Moreover, the sessions provided a vital space for creating immediate safe havens of solidarity, which are crucial for confronting defamation campaigns and online attacks targeting women. They also facilitated the identification of alternative spaces within different zones of control in northwest Syria, enabling participants to navigate the complex landscape while circumventing direct conflicts with de facto authorities and working within the restrictions imposed by local communities and discriminatory religious discourse. These efforts contribute to the cultivation of resilience and the pursuit of transformative action within the existing contextual constraints.

"Solidarity networks across multiple contexts in northwest Syria allow us to confront online violence campaigns and circumvent the de facto authorities and their interference. It also allows for building safe spaces for activists to exchange experiences and resources. Networking can produce great results, as [activists] can support one another, share resources, and protect each other."

Expert Interview-5

Another important aspect highlighted during the discussions was the urgent need to establish democratic structures, such as trade unions, within the context of Syria. Participants emphasized that the formation of such organizations would serve as a crucial step in reevaluating and addressing the existing power imbalances within women's activist circles, both inside and outside of Syria.

"I proposed that we move towards trade union models with elections, so that women feel that they are representing themselves or making their voices heard. Structures must be established by local will and have flexible and local funding without the interference of an external party, with no objection to those who come from abroad. However, the leadership must be local and produce something local, with the ability to act, make decisions, and implement on the ground."

Expert interview-1

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this policy paper, we have conducted an assessment of the strategies employed for protection against gender-based violence in northwest Syria, providing an overview of the current challenges. Drawing from the data gathered during networking sessions and individual interviews, our focus was primarily on identifying the existing gaps between the provided activities and the actual needs on the ground. We also aimed to highlight the contextual strengths and opportunities that can serve as a foundation for future endeavors.

Based on our findings, the main outcomes of this study can be summarized as follows:

♦ Comprehensive Concept of Protection: There is a pressing need to shift towards a comprehensive understanding of protection that encompasses the entire community and addresses the underlying causes of violence faced by women and girls in northwest Syria. This approach necessitates collective action and a holistic response to the multifaceted challenges they encounter.

♦ Victim/Survivor-Centered Approach and Enhanced Coordination: It is imperative to prioritize a victim/survivor-centered approach, which empowers individuals and ensures their ownership of protection processes. This entails strengthening coordination

mechanisms among various sectors operating in northwest Syria, fostering collaboration, and avoiding duplications to deliver more effective and efficient services.

- ♦ Continued Support for Safe Spaces: The importance of safe spaces cannot be overstated as they serve as essential platforms for solidarity, community protection, and the exchange of experiences and knowledge. These spaces provide opportunities for psychosocial support, skill-building, and collective action, contributing to the overall well-being and empowerment of women and girls.
- ♦ Support for Women Workers in Public Affairs and Rights Defenders: A significant focus should be placed on supporting women workers engaged in public affairs and women's rights defenders in northwest Syria. This support entails providing them with the necessary resources, recognition, and capacity-building opportunities. Additionally, efforts should be made to facilitate coordination and foster solidarity among these individuals, enabling them to advocate more effectively for the rights of women and girls.

In more detail, we present here a set of recommendations for different stakeholders:

Recommendations for Donors

- ♦ Adopting Flexible and Gender-Sensitive Funding: Donors should shift towards providing flexible, long-term, responsive, and gender-sensitive funding as a fundamental component of all development and humanitarian aid programs. This approach ensures equitable access for women to all services and promotes gender equality throughout the funding process.
- ♦ Increased Funding for Community Development and Contextual Economic Programs: There should be an emphasis on increasing funding for community development programs and contextual economic development initiatives in partnership with women's organizations and institutions. This investment will facilitate gender-sensitive strategic planning to address and reverse various forms of violence against women in northwest Syria, particularly structural violence. Additionally, support should be extended to coordination, solidarity, and partnership initiatives among women's organizations, activists, and defenders of women's rights. Long-term investment in local women leaders and advocates should be prioritized, including their learning and technical development, social integration, and economic empowerment.
- ♦ Investment in Preventive Measures: Donors should increase investment in activities aimed at preventing patterns of violence against women and girls. It is crucial to adopt an inclusive contextual approach that involves all members of the community, in consultation with women's organizations, feminist groups, and women and girls-led organizations, to assess individual and community needs accurately. By addressing the root causes and promoting gender equality, these preventive measures can contribute to sustainable change and a safer environment for women and girls.
- ♦ Integration of Specialized Psychosocial Support: Donors should support and advocate for the inclusion of specialized and effective psychosocial support and treatment activities as an objective in all sectoral support projects focused on preventing and responding to violence against women and girls. Ensuring the availability and access to comprehensive psychosocial support services will be

crucial in addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by survivors and promoting their healing and well-being.

In addition, we recommend supporting evidence-based research, specifically:

- Collection of High-Quality Sex-Disaggregated Data: Donors should prioritize funding research initiatives that aim to collect high-quality, sex-disaggregated data. This data should specifically focus on women's access to various services, including medical services for reproductive health, protection services, and response mechanisms for violence. By improving data collection practices, a better understanding of gender dynamics and disparities can be obtained, leading to more effective interventions and policy recommendations.
- Development of Contextual Methodologies and Tools: Donors should support research projects that focus on developing contextual methodologies and tools for gender analysis. This includes the development of unified contextual gender terminology that does not clash with local communities. These tools and methodologies will enhance the accuracy and relevance of research findings, ensuring they are better aligned with the specific cultural and social contexts of northwest Syria.
- Research on Causes of Gender Inequality and Contextual Solutions: Donors should fund research studies that provide a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of gender inequality in northwest Syria. This research should also identify contextual best practices and strategies to address these inequalities effectively. By supporting research in this area, donors can contribute to evidence-based decision-making and the implementation of more targeted and impactful interventions.
- Capacity Development and Monitoring Mechanisms: Donors should allocate funding towards research projects that focus on developing human capacities across sectors and within organizations. This includes initiatives that enhance gender sensitivity and non-discrimination in the workplace and service provision. Additionally, donors should support the development of monitoring, evaluation, and accountability mechanisms that ensure the absence of discrimination and address barriers to accessing services.
- Evaluation and Improvement of Protection Methods: Donors should invest in research projects that evaluate and develop strategic plans for referral systems, response methods, and protection mechanisms provided to survivors within the healthcare system. This research should focus on identifying gaps, challenges, and opportunities for improvement to ensure comprehensive and effective support for survivors of gender-based violence.

Recommendations for women and feminist organizations, Syrian civil society organizations, relief agencies, and alternative governance structures

- Power Relations and Gender Equality: It is essential for all organizations to critically examine power relations within their structures and ensure that the impact of these power dynamics on women's access to protection and resources in the workplace is addressed. Efforts should be made to promote gender

equality and create an inclusive and empowering environment for all employees.

♦ Implementation of Zero-Tolerance Policy: Organizations should adopt and implement a zero-tolerance policy towards any violations of protection policies. Senior management should take proactive steps to ensure that policies are effectively translated into action on the ground, with clear mechanisms for reporting and addressing incidents of misconduct or gender-based violence.

♦ Cooperation and Coordination among Organizations: Strategic programs should be developed to promote cooperation and coordination between women-led/feminist organizations and other organizations working in the protection sector and various sectors. This collaboration is crucial to fostering a comprehensive and positive change process within society. Joint initiatives should be encouraged to enhance the impact and effectiveness of interventions.

♦ Strengthened Partnerships and Knowledge Sharing: Improved coordination between different sectors and partnerships between women's organizations, humanitarian agencies, and civil society organizations are essential. This collaboration can lead to the development of innovative local initiatives that address the needs of women and girls, improve interventions, and reduce barriers to access. Sharing assessments related to gaps and potential risks to women and girls is important to inform collective efforts.

♦ Strengthening Service Sectors and Referral Systems: Advocacy efforts should focus on supporting the strengthening of service sectors, particularly the educational and medical sectors. This includes the development of accountability mechanisms and the establishment of strong referral systems between the medical sector and organizations providing protection and prevention services. Collaborative approaches will help ensure comprehensive and coordinated support for women and girls.

♦ Support for Safe Spaces: Safe spaces should be recognized as a strategic goal for protecting women both within and outside work environments. Investing in safe spaces provides opportunities for community support, integration, skill development, and knowledge exchange. It is important to allocate resources and prioritize the sustainability of these spaces.

♦ Support for Solidarity and Coordination Initiatives: Beyond financial support, organizations should provide technical and organizational assistance to support solidarity and coordination initiatives. This includes supporting women's local democratic structures, empowering their leadership, and facilitating platforms for sharing expertise, experiences, and best practices.