



# RECOGNISING RESILIENCE

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN NORTHWEST SYRIA'S  
EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE AND BEYOND

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We dedicate this work to the memory of Ms. Raeifa Samie, member of Women’s Advisory Board & Constitutional Committee, and all those who lost their lives during the devastating 7.7 magnitude earthquake that struck southeast Türkiye, close to the border with Northwest Syria, in the early hours of 6 February 2023.

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**AMIDST THE CHALLENGES AND DEVASTATION CAUSED BY THE DISASTER, WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP, AND WOMEN’S ABILITY TO REBUILD AND ADAPT, HAS OPENED SPACE FOR WOMEN TO FORGE A PATH TOWARDS RECOVERY. WE DO NOT WANT TO LOSE THIS CHANCE.**

*Fatema*

We have ensured the accurate attribution of all the women quoted in this report, respecting their names and identities to effectively amplify their voices. Prior to their inclusion, we obtained explicit and full consent from each individual.

## ACRONYMS

**AFH:** Action For Humanity  
**EFCM:** Early and Forced Child Marriage  
**FGDs:** Focus Group Discussions  
**GDPR:** General Data Protection Regulation  
**GBV:** Gender Based Violence  
**GBVIMS:** Gender-Based Violence Information Management System

**IDPs:** Internally Displaced People  
**KIIs:** Key Informant Interviews  
**MHPSS:** Mental Health and Psychosocial Support  
**NGO:** Non-government Organisation  
**SGBV:** Sexual Gender-based violence  
**SRHR:** Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights

**UN:** United Nations  
**UNHCR:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
**WASH:** Water, Sanitation and Hygiene  
**WLOs:** Women's Leadership Organisations  
**WROs:** Women's Rights Organisations

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of women's leadership in Northwest Syria after the earthquake that occurred on February 6, 2023. Though the epicentre was located in Southwestern Turkiye, the earthquake caused widespread damage in both that region and Northern Syria.<sup>1</sup> It also explores the broader implications of their leadership for the ongoing Syrian peace processes and its broader implications for Syrian peace processes. It highlights the pivotal role played by women in the response effort and explores their potential to shape equitable, inclusive and sustainable approaches to post-earthquake reconstruction and postconflict recovery across Syria more broadly.

The methodology employed in this study encompassed community mapping, interviews with 12 women leaders from various areas in Northwest Syria, two focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 15 women, two feedback consultations, and a digital survey. These methods were utilised to collect data from a diverse range of participants, including Women's Leadership Organisations (WLOs), Women's Rights Organisations (WROs), Nongovernment Organisation (NGO) actors, community leaders, religious leaders and women from the general population.

The robust mixed-methods study revealed a shift in gender dynamics and the transformative potential of women's leadership in Northern Syria. Despite the ongoing conflict, which presented both barriers and new space for women's leadership to emerge, the earthquake prompted women to assume key roles in the response, therefore creating further space for increased visibility and recognition of women's capabilities, challenging traditional gender norms and limitations.

However, persistent barriers such as ongoing conflict, displacement, economic constraints, gender stereotypes, and lack of support hinder women's full participation and leadership development. Addressing these systemic challenges and promoting gender equality is vital to harnessing women's leadership potential in advancing peacebuilding, community resilience, and sustainable development.

The report provides recommendations for key stakeholders, including government institutions, international organisations, and civil society actors. These recommendations focus on enhancing women's participation, ensuring their safety, and expanding access to social protection mechanisms like education and economic opportunities, and fostering an enabling environment that recognises and supports women's leadership roles.

Recognising that the integration of women's leadership and empowerment is vital for Syria's recovery, the report underscores the importance of active inclusion of women in decision-making processes and reconstruction efforts. It emphasises that their involvement is not only essential for achieving gender equality but also serves as a catalyst for sustainable peace, social cohesion, and long-term resilience. By harnessing the skills, resilience, and innovation of women, the international community can translate the lessons learned from the earthquake response into lasting progress for women and communities in Syria as a whole.

**To achieve this, it is essential to confront gender inequality and discrimination. Three concrete steps must be taken as a priority:**

- **Ensure women at every level in society are included in decision-making processes.**
- **Support Syrian-led women's organisations, enabling them to effectively respond to the specific needs they face.**
- **Invest in programmes that promote gender equality and meet the specific needs of women and girls.**

In addition to financial investment, political will and resources must be devoted to ensuring women's direct representation in Syria's decision-making processes. Women's voices and perspectives are essential for creating a more inclusive and equitable society. By combining financial support, programming, and political commitment, significant progress can be made in promoting gender equality and advancing women's participation in peacebuilding efforts in Syria.

# KEY FINDINGS

## WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP DURING THE EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE

- **Enhanced Space for Women's Visibility and Leadership:**

Despite the ongoing conflict that limits women's participation, women were more active and visible during the earthquake as first responders and in ongoing relief efforts. The occurrence of the earthquake brought forth a shift in dynamics, enabling women to assume more active and visible leadership roles. Shaped by their location and proximity to impacted areas, women demonstrated their capabilities and played vital roles, including rescue operations, humanitarian assistance, and addressing the specific needs of marginalised communities.

- **Recognition and Acceptance of Women's Contributions:**

Prior to the earthquake, women's contributions often went unrecognised or were not accepted by the community. However, the visibility of women during the earthquake response - working alongside men, taking on critical responsibilities, or successfully mobilising resources - changed community perceptions. The community recognised and respected women's contributions, leading to increased acceptance of their activities.

- **Expanded Space for Leadership:**

The earthquake response presented a distinct scenario where certain women, who had previously not participated in community affairs, were able to participate in a range of leadership responsibilities extending beyond the domestic sphere. Women who were previously limited to household responsibilities actively participated in the broader response efforts.

● **Increased Coordination and Mobilisation:**

During the earthquake response, women took on a crucial role in resource coordination and mobilisation. They led the coordination of distribution processes and actively participated in fundraising initiatives. Effectively utilising their networks and connections, including in-person and through digital and traditional media, women amplified the impact of their endeavours. For instance, on social media platforms, women organised and coordinated emergency responses, collaborating and strategising to meet the pressing needs of affected communities. Women also actively engaged with traditional media outlets, leveraging these platforms to disseminate their message and effectively amplify their voices.

● **Networks and Solidarity:**

The earthquake response led to the creation of connections and networks among local and international women. Women formed connections with other women within their communities, fostering solidarity and resilience. They also formed connections with women internationally, transcending borders and expanding their support systems.

● **Addressing the Needs of Marginalised Groups:**

Women leaders actively worked to ensure that the unique needs of marginalised groups, including women, children, older people, and individuals with disabilities, were effectively addressed, due to their nuanced understanding of more intersectional issues and first-hand experiences with gender-based challenges. By initiating response mechanisms, promoting awareness, and extending support, many women leaders addressed the challenges faced by these at-risk groups.

● **Age and Intergenerational Dynamics:**

The response efforts highlighted the distinct challenges and contributions of different age groups of women. These intergenerational dynamics also played a role in the type of interventions women participated in during the earthquake response. The involvement of women from different age groups brought diverse perspectives, experiences, and skills to the response. Older women, who brought knowledge and ideas, offered valuable insights and guidance, while younger women brought ideas and technological proficiency. This intergenerational collaboration enriched women's interventions, fostering inclusive and effective emergency response strategies that catered to the unique needs and aspirations of different age cohorts.

● **Women's Leadership's long-term contribution:**

Women's leadership during the earthquake response offered valuable insights that could directly contribute to women's engagement in long-term peace processes. Their involvement includes inclusive decision-making, addresses gender-specific concerns, fosters trust-building, promotes representation and inclusivity, and leverages networks and alliances. By recognising and supporting the leadership of women, and addressing the barriers they face, the international community can effectively foster inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding efforts which also enhances the ability of women, and communities more broadly, to respond to future shocks and crises.





Women Leaders Working  
in the Rubble - Northwest Syria  
Earthquake Response  
© Syria Civil Defence

## BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP DURING THE EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE

- **The Erosion of Social Protection Measures:**  
The primary barriers preventing women from assuming leadership roles in Northwest Syria are closely linked to their material living conditions, with factors including: limited access to resources, economic constraints, and inadequate infrastructure creating these barriers. The erosion of social protection measures resulting from conflict, instability, and multiple displacements created significant obstacles that impede women's progress towards leadership.
- **Loss of women leaders:**  
12 years of conflict compounded by a devastating earthquake have led to the death of many women who were not only leaders in their communities, but an inspiration for other women. The loss of these women negatively impacted the leadership prospects of other women.
- **Women's Economic Injustice:**  
Economic constraints disproportionately undermine women's economic justice and severely hamper their prospects for assuming leadership roles. This includes limited control of resources, gendered division of labour, and the burden of unpaid caring responsibilities, which reinforce traditional gender roles and significantly limits women's capacity to engage effectively in leadership. Women's limited access to basic social services like education, vocational training, and healthcare acts as a significant barrier, further impeding women's personal growth and leadership development.
- **Gender-based Violence:**  
Though participants experienced an increase in GBV, the issue ranked lower as a barrier. The relatively lower ranking of GBV on the scale likely does not imply that it is not a significant barrier. Rather, it is indicative of the immense scale of needs and challenges in Northwest Syria. The presence of various barriers, including economic constraints, social and cultural factors, displacement, and living conditions, creates a complex landscape where addressing all needs becomes a challenge.
- **Societal factors and norms:**  
Despite some positive shifts in attitudes, societal norms/taboo and factors still pose significant challenges for women in assuming leadership roles, including restricted movement, and persistent gender inequality. Deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, prevalent cultural expectations, biases, discriminatory practices and a lack of support from families and communities further impede women's progress.
- **Age and disability:**  
Older women and women with disabilities were often marginalised in the earthquake response despite their distinct needs and additional challenges relating to their physical and mental capabilities as well as social barriers they face, such as, stigmatisation



# GENDERED ANALYSIS OF THE CONFLICT AND HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN SYRIA

The impact of the protracted conflict in Syria is gendered, exacerbating the challenges faced by women, girls, men, and boys. The conflict continues to result in mass displacement, with millions of Syrians continuing to be uprooted from their homes and communities, both internally and as refugees. This displacement places significant strain on resources and infrastructure,<sup>iii</sup> disproportionately affecting marginalised groups, including women and girls.<sup>iv</sup>

The escalation of violence continues to result in widespread damage in residential areas, critical infrastructure, and essential services, compounding the difficulties facing the population.<sup>v</sup> Concurrently, the erosion of governance systems, community networks, and social cohesion has created a pronounced void, necessitating the implementation of innovative approaches to comprehensively address the multifaceted impacts of the conflict and establish a robust foundation for sustainable recovery and development.<sup>vi</sup> Furthermore, the pandemic introduced additional layers of complexity to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria, exacerbating pre-existing risks and adding new challenges, including increased health risks and reduced access to healthcare, as well as economic disruptions and food insecurity.<sup>vii</sup>

Women in Syria are disproportionately affected by the conflict, enduring sexual and genderbased violence as a means to enforce social order.<sup>viii</sup>

Gender inequality and discrimination contribute to a culture where violence against women is accepted. The conflict is exacerbating gender disparities and increasing the risks of violence for both women and men, although women and girls face greater risks.<sup>ix</sup> For instance, prior to the earthquake, it was estimated that approximately 75 percent of young girls residing in camp environments within Syria refrained from attending school due to their fear of experiencing sexual violence.<sup>x</sup> This not only hinders their ability to access public spaces, education, and future employment, but it also drives isolation and further increases risk of GBV.<sup>xi</sup> Moreover, the disruption of vital services, including healthcare, education, and water and sanitation facilities, exacerbates the difficulties women and girls encounter in accessing their rights and fulfilling their basic needs.<sup>xii</sup>

In February 2023, the catastrophic 7.7 magnitude earthquake that struck south-eastern Turkey near the Syrian border resulted in extensive damage, especially in Northwest Syria (home to more than 4.1 million civilians<sup>xiii</sup>). The ongoing conflict has already displaced millions of people and destroyed critical infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and other essential services.<sup>xiv</sup> Local actors were the first responders to the disaster due to the limited presence of international humanitarian organisations in the area, compounded by logistical challenges and access restrictions.<sup>xv</sup>



An infographic on a red background with four white icons and text boxes. Top left: Icon of a group of people, text: 'Thousands of people have lost their lives'. Top right: Icon of a building with a gear, text: 'Infrastructure has been severely damaged'. Bottom left: Icon of a house, text: 'More than 47,000 houses have been destroyed'. Bottom right: Icon of a family, text: 'More than 50,000 families have been displaced'.

UNHCR as of March 2023: <https://www.unhcr.org/neu/97487-the-earthquakes-in-turkiye-and-syria-a-crisis-within-the-crisis.html>

Women play active roles against the backdrop of ongoing conflict, including involvement in fighting, protesting, and documenting war crimes.<sup>xvi</sup> Additionally, women are contributing by mediating ceasefires, establishing local political councils, ensuring the provision of humanitarian assistance, and facilitating the release of detainees. The involvement of women in leadership roles is also opening up discussions about inclusive decision-making, gender-responsive policies, and sustainable development in the region.<sup>xvii</sup> In some instances, their invaluable contributions have garner recognition and respect from various parties involved in peace processes, and their insights play a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of Syrian peacebuilding efforts.<sup>xviii</sup>

However, even with these contributions, the underrepresentation of Syrian women in Syrian peace processes and formal decision-making spaces remains a significant concern for many women, hindering efforts to achieve a comprehensive and inclusive resolution to the conflict. The exclusion of women from these critical processes limits the potential for sustainable and gender-responsive peace in Syria. A recent report from CARE International shows that women are actively involved in leading and supporting their communities in times of crises, but their opportunities to do so may be decreasing due to factors such as social barriers and exclusion from formal decision-making processes.<sup>xix</sup>

Early Syrian peace talks did not include women, or only included a select few.<sup>xx</sup> For example, efforts to amplify Syrian women's voices in international peace processes, such as the UN-established Women's Advisory Board, have encountered challenges, including the difficulties incorporating grassroots actors, societal attitudes towards women in activism, and security threats that contribute to a lack of a unified feminist discourse on the international stage.<sup>xxi</sup> Another significant instance is the peace talks supported by Moscow, which took place in early 2018 in the Russian city of Sochi, without the inclusion of Syrian women in the representation.<sup>xxii</sup> Additionally, during the formation of the Syrian Constitutional Committee in 2019, which was tasked with drafting a new constitution for Syria, less than a third of the committee's delegates were women, and the women participants criticised the process for a lack of genuine inclusion and recognition of their

voices in decision-making roles.<sup>xxiii</sup> More recently (2023), a ministerial-level debate at the United Nations underscored the challenges faced by women in Syria, revealing that the progress in safeguarding women's rights and promoting their participation in decision-making processes remains insufficient. Despite the adoption of Resolution 1325 (2000)<sup>xxiv</sup> by the Security Council to address the intersection of gender and security, women in Syria continue to endure the consequences of armed conflicts, lacking representation in the peace process. The lack of progress to include women in the composition of peace tables and the failure to hold perpetrators accountable for crimes against women and girls has further contributed to the ongoing problem. Women in Syria also face elevated risks of sexual violence, displacement, and restricted access to healthcare and education. Their limited participation in labour markets and decision-making exacerbates their challenges and further impedes their ability to shape the outcomes that shape their lives.<sup>xxv</sup>

Similarly, within Syria, women are vastly underrepresented both in national government and local councils. This disparity stems from security concerns, conservative societal beliefs regarding women's involvement in public life, and patriarchal categorisations of women as unqualified for leadership positions.<sup>xxvi</sup> For example, women are disproportionately impacted by armed conflict, and thus are typically viewed as victims rather than actors with agency in peace processes and negotiations.<sup>xxvii</sup> Prior to the earthquake, local women's groups, both formal and informal, had established coordination mechanisms and networks to increase their influence and participation. However, their integration into humanitarian response mechanisms has been challenging due to the dominance of national and regional coordination led by public authorities or international agencies. While humanitarian actors rely on informal women's groups and volunteers for aid delivery, their meaningful involvement in decision-making stages of the response and recovery process is limited.<sup>xxviii</sup>

These examples highlight the urgent need to address the systematic exclusion of Syrian women from peace processes and to prioritise their meaningful participation, as their perspectives, experiences, and insights are crucial for achieving sustainable and gender-responsive peace in Syria.



### Factors that Enable Women's Leadership in Syria

- Effective policies and legal frameworks that promote gender equality and women's participation in decision-making processes, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325.<sup>xxix</sup>
- International frameworks that advocate for women's rights and gender equality, which influence local policies and actions, in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.<sup>xxx</sup>
- Resources that promote gender equality and women's meaningful participation in peace, security and humanitarian action.
- International stakeholders supporting long-term, gender equality-focused approaches informed by local gender equality stakeholders.

### Barriers to women's leadership in Syria

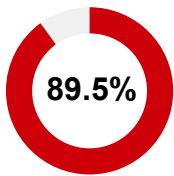
- The impact of armed conflict, increasing militarisation, and social and economic deterioration on women's participation, including mass-forced displacements and limiting safe spaces for engagement.
- Gender-based discrimination embedded in social attitudes, practices, legal norms, and institutions, which marginalises women.
- Insufficient prioritisation and allocation of resources to address women's demands and ensure their meaningful participation, often resulting in invalidated work on UN Security Council Resolution 1325.
- Existing modalities limiting women to advisory and consultative roles, reducing their influence on political, peace, and humanitarian agendas, and marginalising them within decision-making spaces.<sup>xxxi</sup>

## VISIBILITY AND LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN BROUGHT ABOUT SIGNIFICANT DISRUPTIONS TO THE PRE-EXISTING SOCIAL ORDER, CREATING SPACE FOR WOMEN TO TAKE ON NEW ROLES

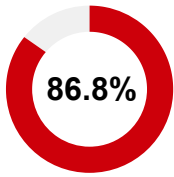
Against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict that enabled and constrained women's participation, women were more active and visible during the earthquake. According to the testimonies of Syrian women interviewed for this report, women played vital and impactful roles in the response to the earthquake, and the participation of women rendered the response 'quicker' and 'better'. It was also recognised that as the response progressed, there was both a noticeable increase in the number of women participating and demonstrating leadership skills, as well as visibility for these women and the ones who were active in their communities prior to the earthquake. Based on a survey conducted among 76 women in Northwest Syria, 89.5% of respondents indicated that women has become more actively engaged and empowered in supporting the community following the earthquake. Of those respondents, 86.8% said they personally felt more engaged and empowered in supporting the community during the earthquake response. While women's participation in the response cannot be quantified due to its complex diversity and large scale, the women's perception of and narrative around their own participation and that of other women is indicative in itself of a more empowering image of the capacity for women's leadership in Northwest Syria after the earthquake.

Based on their location and proximity to impacted areas, women demonstrated leadership in various critical areas, including the rescue of survivors from the rubble as well as the provision of crucial medical assistance, shelter and emergency resources. Women also played a significant role in mobilising support systems to provide psychosocial assistance and social protection and addressing the specific needs of women, girls, children, older people, people with disabilities and other marginalised communities. Women were also active in supporting their children, families and neighbours, ranging from emotional support to their own children to housing relatives when their homes were destroyed. Through their active and diverse involvement, women were able to foster social cohesion, nurturing unity in their own communities and between host communities and newly internally displaced people (IDPs).





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of respondents said they personally felt more engaged and empowered in supporting the community during the earthquake response.

## RECOGNITION AND ACCEPTANCE OF WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Several Syrian women interviewed for this paper emphasised the importance of recognising that prior to the earthquake, women were actively involved in various leadership capacities. However, the contributions made by women often remained unnoticed, unrecognised, or not accepted by the community. Ongoing conflict and health emergencies, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of cholera, had also created opportunities for women to step into leadership roles. The urgency of the earthquake response was a catalyst for women at every level of leadership to gain visibility, playing a significant role in positioning them at the forefront of the leadership arena. This resulted in heightening recognition and, in some instances and areas, heightening acceptance.

**“WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS AND INFLUENCE WILL BE INCREASINGLY VALUED AND INTEGRATED INTO DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES, EXTENDING BEYOND FORMAL POSITIONS TO ENCOMPASS THEIR ESSENTIAL ROLES WITHIN FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES.**

*Maisoon*

The level of public acceptance for women's participation varied across different communities and regions. Some interviewees pointed out that while some areas were more open and receptive to women's engagement, other areas still face challenges in fully accepting and embracing their contributions. For example, women in one of the IDP camps in Idlib governorate, believed that women's participation in the response received recognition from communities and women now have access to new opportunities, but that these opportunities are reserved for women outside of the camps. They reported that women living in the camp did not benefit from this changing landscape,

as the camp community seems to be resistant still to recognise women's leadership within an IDP camp setting. It was highlighted by all research participants that overall, there has been a noticeable increase in the acceptance and recognition of women's activities and involvement during the response.

**“SOME AREAS WERE VERY OPEN TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION, IN SOME OTHER AREAS THERE HASN'T BEEN ACCEPTANCE. BUT IN GENERAL, THERE'S DEFINITELY MORE ACCEPTANCE IN WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES.**

*Diana*

Increased visibility was mainly, but not exclusively, due to the high level of activity of women-led organisations and women responders. Participants spoke to a sharp increase in the number of women being active in more public spheres and activities outside the home. During the response, many women who were previously focusing on their caring responsibilities and housework in the home have joined voluntary groups on the ground to support relief efforts, thus shifting from their domestic roles to a more public type of leadership that takes place in more spaces (IDP camps, rubble sites, medical centres) or whether in the home but involving people outside of the family, such as survivors of the earthquake.

**“THERE ARE WOMEN WHO HAD NEVER WORKED BEFORE WHO STARTED PERSONAL INITIATIVES TO HELP WOMEN WHO NEEDED HELP.**

*Najwa*

**“MY NEIGHBOUR OPENED HER HOUSE FOR PEOPLE, SHE WAS DONATING BLANKETS, FOOD, AND OTHER ITEMS. SHE HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH ANY VOLUNTARY OR HUMANITARIAN WORK BEFORE.**

*Manahel*

**“THERE'S THIS WOMAN WHO LOST HER CHILDREN IN THE EARTHQUAKE SO SHE WANTED TO TURN HER LOSS INTO HELPING OTHERS. SHE CONTRIBUTED BY TAKING CARE OF AN INJURED CHILD.**

*Najwa*

The drivers behind the recognition and acceptance that resulted from women's overall increased visibility varied from one context to the other, and from one type of leadership to the other. In some instances, the recognition of women's participation

emerged based on the visibility of a perceived equality of labour between men and women, where women's ability to take the same responsibilities and carry out the same tasks as men was the rationale behind the recognition; this was the case for women in the Civil Defense (White helmets). One of the women board members for the Civil Defense (White Helmets) emphasised that women were active in emergency responses before the earthquake, but acknowledged that lack of acceptance from the community had been a barrier to recognition. The active presence of women during the earthquake, who were visible in adopting equal responsibilities as men and engaging in the response, was transformative in reshaping community perceptions. Considering the magnitude of the earthquake and the immense scale of need, the significant contributions of women further underscored their critical role in the rescue and recovery efforts.

**“WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN RESCUE MISSIONS IS NOT A USUAL SCENE FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES. OUR WOMEN VOLUNTEERS HAVE DONE THIS WORK BEFORE WHEN BUILDINGS WERE BOMBED, BUT BEFORE FEWER WOMEN WOULD BE SEEN. PEOPLE WOULDN'T BE ON THE GROUND TO WITNESS. BUT AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE, EVERYONE SAW AND THE NUMBER OF WOMEN WAS ALSO BIGGER. WOMEN PROVED TO THEMSELVES TO BE STRONG AND CAPABLE OF HAVING THE SAME RESPONSIBILITIES AS MEN. IF THEY RESCUED PEOPLE FROM UNDER RUBBLE, THEY CAN DO ANYTHING. THEY ARE NOW SEEN AS HEROES.**

*Dalal*

Women received recognition by taking on tasks that were not previously seen as appropriate for women such as the physical labour of distribution of assistance in camps. Multiple NGO leaders and volunteers this report spoke with explained that they were either met with positive surprise or resistance from (male) camp leaders trying to assign the distribution of aid to men. Following the earthquake response, having women distributing aid in IDP camps has now become a common phenomenon.

**“THERE WAS A POSITIVE CHANGE, OPENNESS AND MORE FAITH IN THE ROLE OF WOMEN. WOMEN PROVED THEMSELVES BY BEING ON THE GROUND TILL LATE HOURS AND WE PROVED THAT WE CAN WORK IN ANY CIRCUMSTANCE.**

*Fatema*

In other instances, the visible ability of women to mobilise resources was a driver behind the

recognition of their response efforts. Although local women-led NGOs and voluntary groups have been active in their humanitarian interventions prior to the earthquake, their participation in response efforts granted them more recognition by communities they got as individuals and groups who are able to mobilise resources, from fundraising and donations to providing much-needed assistance. This ability to provide resources in the eyes of the community, a theme explored later in this report, is what boosted the recognition of these local NGOs and initiatives.

**“A WOMAN LEADER IS ONE THAT CAN PROVIDE FINANCIAL SUPPORT [FOR HER ORGANISATION/INITIATIVE] ...AT FIRST PEOPLE DIDN'T LIKE THE IDEA OF US WOMEN WORKING IN THE RESPONSE, IT'S ONLY AFTER THEY SAW THAT WE WERE ABLE TO COMMIT TO THE PROMISES WE GAVE THEM ABOUT THE AID WE WILL PROVIDE THAT THEY LIKED THE IDEA.**

*Manahel*

**“I FACE PRESSURE FROM MEN WHEN DURING THE RESPONSE IN CAMPS, ONE OF THEM SCREAMED AT ME 'WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!' AND WAS GOING TO ATTACK ME. BY THE END HE WAS THANKING ME AND NOW MEN IN CAMPS INVITE ME TO SIT WITH THEM AND DRINK COFFEE.**

*Diana*

**“SOMETIMES WE WOULD GO TO SHELTERS RUN BY SOMEONE FROM THIS SECTION OF SOCIETY, AND HE WOULD BE AGAINST WOMEN WORKING. ONE TIME WE WERE AT A SHELTER DISTRIBUTING DIAPERS, SO ONE OF THE MEN MANAGING THE SHELTER OPPOSED US AND SAID THAT IT'S NOT SUITABLE FOR WOMEN TO BE DOING THE DISTRIBUTION SO HE WAS FACED BY THE FEMALE IDPS IN THE SHELTER WHO TOLD HIM 'WHAT DID YOU OFFER US? AT LEAST THEY'RE OFFERING US SOMETHING.' A MAN THAT WAS WITH HIM TOLD HIM 'THEY ARE RIGHT'.**

*Zamzam*

As mentioned earlier, many interviewees highlighted that the earthquake response created a notable shift by offering the section of women who were previously limited to leadership roles within the domestic sphere new avenues for active participation in the broader and more public response efforts. This newfound space for leadership enabled women to showcase their capabilities, expertise, and commitment in addressing the challenges brought about by the earthquake. Women who remained in the domestic sphere were able to respond in their own



ways, by opening up their homes to IDPs and donating much-needed items such as blankets and food products.

**“ANY CRISIS OR CATASTROPHE LEADS TO UNEXPECTED PHENOMENA. WHEN THE EARTHQUAKE HAPPENED THE FEW WOMEN WHO [WERE LIMITED TO THE] HOME BECAME ACTIVE IN THE RESPONSE - ALTHOUGH IN MY EXPERIENCE, THESE WOMEN ARE IN THE MINORITY. THEY LEFT THE HOUSE AND WENT TO SHELTERS TO COOK, OR SUPPORTED OTHER WOMEN IN ANY WAY THEY COULD.**

*Fatema*

**“NOT EVERYONE CAN RESPOND IN THE SAME WAY, AND EVERY WOMAN’S RESPONSE WAS DIFFERENT BASED ON THEIR PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES. FOR EXAMPLE, WOMEN WHO ‘STAY AT HOME’ HELPED BY WELCOMING IDPS INTO THEIR HOMES.**

*Zamzam*

Even for women who did not participate in public response efforts and preferred or were compelled to stay within the scope of domestic responsibilities, their contribution to response efforts should not be disregarded. Most of the interviewees explained how women emotionally and psychologically supported their children, and how they were a support system for the entire family. Another form of support was to direct their families on the measures to be taken in the case of another earthquake.

## **INCREASED COORDINATION, MOBILISATION AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**

### **COORDINATION**

Most participants of this study emphasised the significance of effective coordination in the response efforts, recognising that effective mobilisation and coordination were key factors in achieving successful outcomes during the response to the earthquake.

One participant interviewed, who serves as the head of the women’s committee, outlined the importance of a collective effort to assess the damage and respond where the needs were greatest.



Women and Men Working Together in the Rubble - Northwest Syria Earthquake Response © Syria Civil Defence

**“I HEAD THE COMMITTEE, SO I WAS ONE OF THE FIRST PEOPLE TO RESPOND. WE DID AN ASSESSMENT TO SEE WHERE OTHER NGOS AND ACTORS WERE RESPONDING, AND TO SEE WHERE THE DAMAGE WAS THE GREATEST IN ORDER TO WORK OUT OUR STRATEGY.**

*Maysoon*

Women not only coordinated with other women, but they also coordinated with main actors and organisations involved in the response, from local councils/authorities to humanitarian organisations, and there were instances where this was well received. For example, one participant said that she was able to provide an almost immediate response to the earthquake by leveraging a WhatsApp coordination group with representatives of different NGOs, most of which are men and women. She created the space to share information and delegate tasks to coordinate the most effective response possible. She explained that both men and women in the group were receptive to this form of leadership.

**“I IMMEDIATELY COMMUNICATED USING A COORDINATION WHATSAPP GROUP, ALTHOUGH I WAS NEVER REALLY ACTIVE ON IT, I WAS THE FIRST TO TEXT RIGHT AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE. I TOLD ALL ORGANISATIONS THAT WE NEED TO ACT FAST AND WE NEED TO COORDINATE TOGETHER, NEXT THING YOU KNOW WE WERE ALREADY DOING THAT THE NEXT DAY.**

*Diana*

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## RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

One interviewee also described a scenario in a newly formed IDP camp where five women emerged as leaders in the distribution of resources. Recognising the urgent needs of their communities, women took charge of organising and coordinating the distribution process, and acted as focal points for the distribution of resources by other groups providing assistance. They played key roles in ensuring a needs-based approach to the distribution of essential supplies.

**“IN ONE OF THE NEWLY FORMED IDP CAMPS, FIVE WOMEN TOOK RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES. WHEN WE WENT THERE TO SUPPORT AND DELIVER ASSISTANCE, WE WERE DIRECTED BY THESE WOMEN.**

*Zamzam*

Women were also able to effectively mobilise resources, including financial resources. Syrian women described actively engaged in fundraising initiatives, including garnering international support. One interviewee leveraged the heightened media attention to appeal for financial resources to support women led initiatives. Their presence on these outlets not only served as a means to disseminate their message but also allowed them to reach a broader audience, offering a unique and often underrepresented viewpoint and placing them at the forefront of public discourse.

**“I PARTICIPATED IN SEVERAL INTERVIEWS WITH INTERNATIONAL MEDIA CALLING FOR URGENT FUNDING FOR OUR RESPONSE EFFORTS. WOMEN ARE NOT ALWAYS INVITED TO CONTRIBUTE IN PUBLIC DISCUSSION, SO I KNEW I NEEDED TO DO IT. WE ALSO CREATED A TIKTOK PAGE TO SHOW PEOPLE THE EXTENT OF THE DESTRUCTION AND CALL FOR THEIR SUPPORT.**

*Diana*

In addition to financial contributions, women opened their homes, even those who were traditionally limited to domestic roles, providing shelter and assistance to those affected by the earthquake. Recognising the importance of collective action, women pooled their resources, leveraging their networks and community connections to maximise the impact of their efforts. They gathered essential items such as blankets from their own homes and distributed them, demonstrating their resourcefulness and dedication to supporting their communities.

**“SOLIDARITY AMONG WOMEN WAS SO STRONG, WE BECAME VERY ORGANISED, POOLED OUR RESOURCES AND COORDINATED, WOMEN WHO HAVE SOCIAL NETWORKS AND MONEY WERE VERY ACTIVE TO PROVIDE FUNDING.**

*Maysoon*

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## NETWORKS AND SOLIDARITY

The active involvement of women in the earthquake response had a ripple effect, leading to an increase in the mobilisation of other women as the response efforts progressed. Women who initially may have been hesitant or less engaged became inspired and motivated by witnessing the visibility, impactful contributions, and community acceptance of other women. This created a positive momentum, encouraging more and more women to participate actively in the earthquake response.



**“WE DID AWARENESS-RAISING SESSIONS FOR WOMEN AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTARY WORK. ... AS A RESULT, FOR EXAMPLE IN MY ORGANISATION WE WERE 5 WOMEN, NOW AFTER WE CONDUCTED AWARENESS SESSIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTARY WORK, WE GREW TO AROUND 12 WOMEN VOLUNTEERS. SOME OTHER WOMEN WE DID THE AWARENESS SESSION TO ARE NOW DOING SIMILAR SESSIONS THEMSELVES TO OTHER WOMEN, OR ARE GATHERING DONATIONS TO HELP PEOPLE AFFECTED. THE WOMAN IS THE ONE WHO GIVES AN AWARENESS SESSION TO ANOTHER WOMAN.**

*Manahel*

**“I ALWAYS GET COMMENTS FROM WOMEN IN MY TEAM ON HOW I’M ALWAYS SMILING AND HOW IT ENERGISES THEM. ONE WOMAN TOLD ME ‘WHEN I SEE YOUR SMILE, I FEEL THE WORLD IS BEAUTIFUL’.**

*Najwa*

Through their collective efforts, women also created new networks. The response created space for many active women to connect now that they became more visible.

**“BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE THERE WAS NO KNOWLEDGE OF WOMEN LEADERS, THEY WERE ONLY KNOWN AT A LOCAL LEVEL, NOW THERE IS KNOWLEDGE THAT WOMEN ARE ACTIVE AND HAVE SKILLS... WE DISCOVERED ACTIVE WOMEN THAT WE NEVER KNEW EXISTED, FOR EXAMPLE WE ALWAYS KNEW THERE’S A CIVIL DEFENCE CENTRE BUT WE NEVER KNEW IT INCLUDED WOMEN UNTIL WE SAW THEM IN THE RESPONSE, THEY WOULD USUALLY**

**ONLY BE GIVING FIRST AID IN THE CENTRE, OR WOMEN THAT LIVE FAR AND WE DIDN’T KNOW OF THEM. NOW ACTIVE WOMEN KNOW EACH OTHER MORE BECAUSE OF THE CATASTROPHE.**

*Fatema*

Their efforts not only contributed to the physical and emotional well-being of women but also fostered a sense of solidarity and resilience within the community as a whole.

**“THE CIRCUMSTANCES WE LIVED AND ARE LIVING IN CREATED ENTHUSIASM AMONG WOMEN TO PARTICIPATE [IN THE RESPONSE]. THERE WAS SOLIDARITY AMONG WOMEN, FOR SURE, WOMEN WE DIDN’T PREVIOUSLY KNOW WANTED TO CONTRIBUTE.**

*Maysoon*

As well as creating networks and solidarity with other local women actors, the earthquake created the space for women to form connections with women internationally, including in Lebanon and Turkey. Their efforts not only contributed to the physical and emotional wellbeing of women but also fostered a sense of solidarity and resilience within the community as a whole, as well as transcending borders.

**“I AM STILL IN CONTACT WITH OTHER WOMEN THAT I MET DURING THE RESPONSE. THEY HAVE BECOME FRIENDS AND HAVE PERSONAL CONNECTIONS AND WE WILL CONTINUE TO STAY IN TOUCH. WE CHECK IN ON EACH OTHER**

*Fatema*



Diana Hussein Al Ali Mobilising Resources In The Media - Northwest Syria Earthquake Response © Diana Hussein Al Ali



Women leaders Coordinating Humanitarian Assistance- Northwest Syria Earthquake Response © Action For Humanity

## ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF MARGINALISED GROUPS

In many instances throughout the earthquake response, women's leadership played a crucial role in effectively ensuring that the distinct needs of marginalised groups, often overlooked by traditional humanitarian support systems, were effectively met, due to a more nuanced understanding of intersectional issues and first-hand experiences with genderbased challenges.

For example, women recognised the unique needs and challenges faced by women and took active steps to provide assistance, guidance, and emotional support. Women's groups and networks were formed to specifically address the needs of women, offering a safe space for sharing experiences and seeking help. They organised awareness sessions, workshops, and counselling services to address issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive health, and psychosocial well-being.

**“DOCTORS AND NURSES WENT TO THE CAMPS TO SUPPORT THOSE MOST AT RISK. I ALSO ENCOUNTERED A MIDWIFE WHO MOBILISED OTHER FEMALE MIDWIVES AND NURSES AND WENT TO CAMPS TO OFFER SERVICES TO WOMEN. A LOT OF WOMEN USED THEIR SKILLS TO HELP PEOPLE AFFECTED.**

*Maysoon*

Several interviewees specifically emphasised the importance of addressing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of women, recognising

the need for essential sanitary products and ensuring access to proper hygiene and reproductive healthcare support. Women's leadership and initiatives were essential in addressing these specific concerns and ensuring that the needs of these populations were met with appropriate sensitivity.

**“WHEN IT COMES TO WOMEN'S NEEDS THERE'S A NEED FOR DISCRETION. WOMEN ARE NEEDED TO RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF OTHER WOMEN. WOMEN OPEN UP AND SPEAK FREELY ABOUT THEIR EMOTIONS WITH OTHER WOMEN.**

*Maysoon*

Additionally, women played a vital role in offering psychosocial activities to fellow women, creating safe spaces for sharing experiences and support mechanisms. Almost all interviewees commented on the increased gender-based violence (GBV) risks faced by women in the community, citing conflict dynamics, economic stresses, dense living situations of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the breakdown of protective systems as key drivers of GBV after the earthquake. Moreover, in the broader scope, GBV and the constant fear thereof can impede girls' access to education, restrict their autonomy in decisions regarding marriage, and hinder their overall ability to realise their full potential.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The underreporting of GBV and the lack of effective reporting channels are influenced by deeply ingrained societal taboos and cultural norms, which further deter GBV survivors from seeking help and accessing the essential support they need.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The interviewees emphasised their proactive role in initiating response mechanisms, promoting awareness, and extending support to individuals affected by GBV.

**“GBV HAS INCREASED AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE. AFTER THEIR HOMES WERE DESTROYED, WOMEN NOW LIVE-IN UNSUITABLE CONDITIONS IN CLOSER PROXIMITY TO OTHER IDPS. PEOPLE ARE FACING GREATER HARDSHIP AND MORE PRESSURE, AND WE ARE SEEING NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS. IN MY EXPERIENCE, EMOTIONAL VIOLENCE IS THE MOST PREVALENT TYPE OF GBV, AS WELL AS EXPLOITATION, AND SEXUAL GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (SGBV), INCLUDING OF MINORS. THE PROBLEM IS VICTIMS DON'T SPEAK OUT. THERE'S A LOT OF TABOO AROUND IT.**

*Doaa*

## AGE AND INTERGENERATIONAL DYNAMICS

During a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with eight Syrian women leading different local organisations and initiatives, a discussion was had about the impact age had on women's ability to participate during the earthquake response. It was flagged that, during the earthquake response, different age groups typically participated in different types of intervention, reflecting their distinct challenges and contributions.

The FGD attendees reflected on how younger women had been subject to twelve years of conflict, which had disproportionately negatively impacted their access to education and livelihood opportunities, increased their risk of early and forced child marriage (EFCM), and restricted their options for healthcare and sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

In contrast, it was noted that, whilst it may differ from family to family, older women often considered themselves responsible for the well-being of their entire families. Their concerns revolved around providing for their families, and ensuring access to essential services.

The interviewees noted that, prior to the earthquake, older women had been subject to exclusion from the workforce despite possessing valuable skills. One interviewee specifically mentioned situations where younger women were assuming positions traditionally held by older women, who had previously passed down their knowledge and expertise and trained younger women.



**“OLDER WOMEN ENCOUNTER STIGMA IN THE WORKFORCE, AS THERE IS A PREFERENCE AMONG EMPLOYERS TO HIRE YOUNGER WOMEN. THIS RESULTS IN THE MARGINALISATION OF OLDER WOMEN FROM ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES WHICH LIMITS THEIR ACCESS TO SOCIAL LIFE. FOR EXAMPLE, A PROJECT AIMING AT EMPOWERING WOMEN ECONOMICALLY BY MAKING SWEETS EXCLUDED OLDER WOMEN WHO ARE THE ONES WHO TAUGHT THE YOUNGER GIRLS HOW TO MAKE SWEETS IN THE FIRST PLACE.**

*Diana*

younger women volunteers, offering encouragement and guidance. These generational differences highlighted the diverse range of challenges and priorities within the affected communities.

**“OLDER WOMEN WERE COMFORTING FIGURES FOR US YOUNGER WOMEN WHO WERE VOLUNTEERING. OLDER WOMEN OPENED THEIR HOUSES, COOKED MEALS, THEY GAVE US LESSONS THAT THEY LEARNED FROM THEIR LIFE EXPERIENCES, AND THEY TOLD US THAT THEY WERE PROUD.**

*Diana*

This stigma surrounding older women’s participation in the workforce resulted in their exclusion that preceded the earthquake continued to be reflected during the response efforts. Despite these challenges, the resilience and knowledge of older women provided a unique and crucial part of the response, albeit a different response from other age groups. They opened their homes, cooked meals, and shared valuable life lessons with

The earthquake created a transformative environment where women were presented with new opportunities to assume leadership roles, despite the fact that barriers still exist. The crisis disrupted the established social order, simultaneously challenging and reinforcing traditional gender norms. This dynamic interplay allowed for an expanded space where women could step forward and occupy leadership positions.

## **BARRIERS TO WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP**

Despite their active participation and unique contributions to the earthquake response, women in Northwest Syria still face significant barriers to assuming leadership roles.

### **THE EROSION OF SOCIAL PROTECTION MEASURES, EXACERBATED BY CONFLICT, INSTABILITY AND DISPLACEMENT CREATES SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS FOR WOMEN TO ASSUME LEADERSHIP ROLES.**

<b>BARRIERS FACED BY WOMEN IN NORTHWEST SYRIA IN PARTICIPATING IN WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP</b>	<b>RANKING OF BARRIERS FACED IN ACCESSING WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP: AVERAGE SCORES</b>
Gender-based violence	2.86
Health Issues	3.55
Economic Constraints	3.55
Conflict Related Issues	4.62
Mobility Restrictions	4.68
Social Norms	5.28
Lack of Education/ Skills	5.66
Caring Responsibilities	5.78



In the context of our study, we asked women in Northwest Syria to rank the barriers they face in accessing women's leadership. This process involved collecting individual rankings from participants, where they assigned priority to different barriers that they perceive to hinder women's leadership. These individual rankings were then averaged to derive an overall average of the perceived barriers to women's leadership based on the collective input of the surveyed women. This approach allowed us to understand and analyse the common challenges identified by women in Northwest Syria regarding their leadership aspirations and the factors that impede their progress.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

According to the findings of a ranking survey conducted among 74 women in Northwest Syria, caring responsibilities, lack of education and skills development, social norms and mobility issues emerged as the top-ranked barriers to women becoming more active in leadership roles in Northwest Syria. The survey involved a diverse cross-section of participants, and their responses indicated that caring responsibilities presented the most significant obstacle.

During the key informant interviews, various additional barriers were also identified that hindered women's leadership during the earthquake response. While these results highlight multiple challenges, it is evident that the primary barriers are closely linked to material living conditions. In Northwest Syria, the lives of women have been deeply impacted by the dual challenges of displacement and insecurity, and this was a key theme throughout the KIIs, FGDs and the survey. These barriers also speak to a broader absence of social protection measures.

Interviewees describe how the displacement experience disrupted their lives in multiple ways, causing a loss of livelihoods, assets, and social networks that were once their support systems. For displaced women, suitable shelter becomes a key issue, as well as access to basic necessities such as clean water, sanitation facilities, and healthcare. The lack of proper infrastructure exacerbates their difficulties, pushing them into further risk and compromising their material living conditions. Several women described

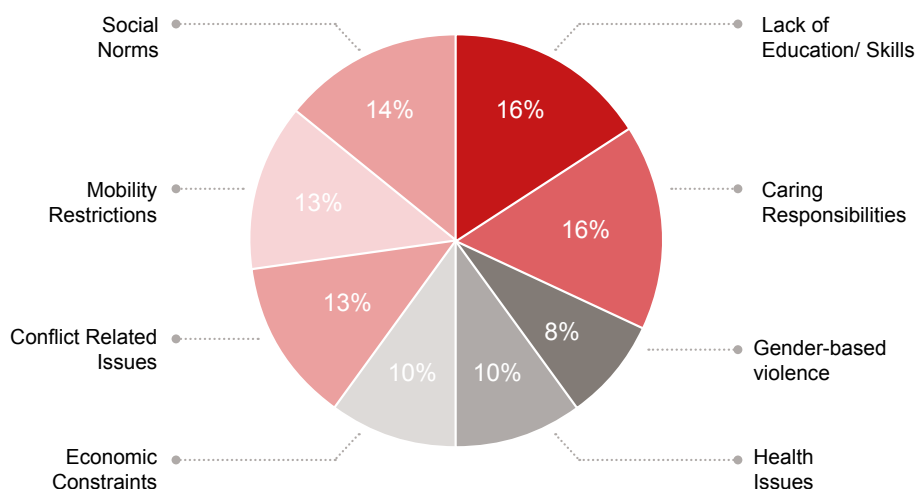
suddenly losing what they referred to as "their dignified life in their homes" and found themselves living in an IDP camp in harsh conditions following the earthquake.

**“THE FORCED DISPLACEMENT EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN IN NORTHWEST SYRIA HAS RESULTED IN THEIR CURRENT LIVING CONDITIONS, WHERE THEY FIND THEMSELVES RESIDING IN OVERCROWDED CAMPS WITHOUT ANY SEMBLANCE OF PRIVACY. THE LACK OF ADEQUATE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SUPPORT FURTHER HINDERS THEIR ABILITY TO RECOVER FROM THE DEVASTATING IMPACTS OF THE WAR AND EARTHQUAKE, PARTICULARLY FOR THOSE WHO HAVE LOST THEIR HUSBANDS.**

*Dalal*

Action for Humanity, supported by ActionAid, is leading an intervention focused on rehabilitating Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities within a collective shelter. This intervention is crucial for addressing the specific needs of women during times of displacement, as it tackles significant challenges related to women's privacy, hygiene, and overall well-being. By prioritising the rehabilitation of WASH facilities, the intervention ensures that women have access to safe and private sanitation facilities while promoting improved hygiene practices. This approach aims to create dignified and empowering living conditions for women, ultimately enhancing their safety, health, and overall quality of life.

## RANKING OF BARRIERS FACED IN ACCESSING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP: AVERAGE SCORES



Despite being recognised as having experienced an increase in prevalence, the impact of GBV on women's ability to engage in leadership roles during the earthquake response ranked at the bottom of the scale. In fact, the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBVIMS) task force found that the percentage of single women GBV survivors in Northwest Syria increased by 86% compared to the previous quarter.<sup>xxxv</sup> Task force members attributed this change to the heightened exposure to GBV following the earthquake. However, among the various barriers identified by women leaders, GBV was perceived as having a relatively lesser impact on their capacity to participate in leadership activities during the response, with an 8% average.

The relatively lower ranking of GBV on the scale likely does not imply that it is not a significant barrier. Rather, it is indicative of the immense scale of needs and challenges in Northwest Syria. The presence of various barriers, including economic constraints, social and cultural factors, displacement, and living conditions, creates a

complex landscape where addressing all needs becomes a challenge. While GBV is undoubtedly a barrier to women's leadership, the overall context and range of challenges in Northwest Syria highlight the urgent need for comprehensive interventions across multiple fronts.

**“WOMEN HAVE ASPIRATIONS AND INITIATIVES THAT REQUIRE ASSISTANCE. THEY POSSESS THE EXPERTISE AND CAPABILITIES, BUT FINANCIAL SUPPORT IS ESSENTIAL. OUR FOCUS IS ON PROMOTING PROJECTS TO REBUILD INFRASTRUCTURE AND CREATE A STRONGER NATION, RATHER THAN SOLELY ADDRESSING GBV. WHILE MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT (MHPSS) ARE IMPORTANT, ENSURING ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE, EDUCATION, AND BASIC NECESSITIES TAKES PRECEDENCE. WHEN A FAMILY LACKS FOOD OR SHELTER, ADDRESSING GBV OR PROVIDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT BECOMES SECONDARY. OUR AIM IS TO RECONSTRUCT NORTHWEST SYRIA AFTER THE DEVASTATION CAUSED BY THE CONFLICT AND THE EARTHQUAKE.**

*Fatema*

ActionAid and its local partners have prioritised addressing GBV) as part of the emergency response to the earthquake. Recognising the specific needs of survivors, efforts have been made to integrate GBV response mechanisms within the broader response framework. The aftermath of the earthquake has led to significant physical and emotional trauma, resulting in a rise in GBV incidents. To address this, safe spaces have been established where survivors can access comprehensive support services, including psychosocial support, GBV case management, counselling and legal aid. By understanding the connection between GBV and disaster response, ActionAid aims to meet the immediate needs of survivors while working towards long-term solutions to prevent GBV and promote gender equality in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction efforts.

## ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS SIGNIFICANTLY UNDERMINE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC JUSTICE, THEREBY POSING A SUBSTANTIAL BARRIER TO THEIR LEADERSHIP.

Economic constraints emerged as a prominent category, as interviewees emphasised the significant barriers posed by limited resources to effectively respond to the earthquake and to support themselves and their families. The ongoing conflict has led to widespread displacement and a weakened economy, disproportionately affecting women who already face gender-based economic inequalities.<sup>xxxvi</sup> This economic inequality further exacerbated the challenges faced by women in assuming leadership roles, such as widening gender gaps in the workforce, a concentration of women in the informal sector and increased burden of unpaid care work on women,<sup>xxxvii</sup> making it difficult for women to participate effectively in the response.

## LIMITED ACCESS TO RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THE RESPONSE

One of the primary challenges highlighted by women leaders was the limited access to crucial resources necessary for an efficient response to the earthquake. The protracted conflict in the region contributes to limited access to crucial resources,<sup>xxxviii</sup> hindering the ability to respond efficiently. External influences resulting from the conflict, political restrictions and limited international support also

significantly impeded women's ability to access essential humanitarian assistance, including medical supplies and infrastructure.<sup>xxxix</sup> This shortage of resources directly hampers women's ability to assume leadership roles during crises, further exacerbating the challenges they face in addressing the urgent needs of their communities.

**“I'M NOT EXAGGERATING, WE LACKED ALL RESOURCES, LIKE MEDICAL, HUMAN, INFRASTRUCTURAL RESOURCES. WE HAD A LACK BEFORE AND NOW IT'S COMPOUNDED.**

*Fatema*

Access to financial resources and funding was highlighted as a main barrier by several of the women leading initiatives and voluntary groups in Northwest Syria. Their lack of access to the funding channels that local and international NGOs have hampered their activities from before the earthquake, but especially during the response that followed it.

**“THE NETWORK OF ACTIVE WOMEN ORGANISATIONS DID NOT HAVE FINANCIAL RESOURCES... WOMEN HAVE PROJECTS AND AMBITIONS THAT NEED TO BE SUPPORTED. THEY HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS BUT THEY NEED FINANCIAL SUPPORT.**

*Fatema*

**“HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS HAD A BIG ROLE MAINLY BECAUSE THEY HAVE DONORS AND FUNDING AND RESOURCES WHILE WE DIDN'T.**

*Maysoon*

IDP Camp in Northwest Syria  
- Northwest Syria Earthquake Response  
© Diana Hussein Al Ali



## ACCESS TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION

Many women leaders also faced economic constraints to support themselves, their families and their communities as leaders during the response. This affected their abilities to dedicate their time to the response as leaders. Following the earthquake, living conditions in Northwest Syria have experienced a notable deterioration, marked by inflation and a rise in prices.<sup>xi</sup> In heavily affected sub-districts like Harim, Jandaris, and Sheikh Al-Hadid, reports indicate a limited or complete absence of essential food items.<sup>xii</sup> Approximately 40% of households surveyed in the northwest region have reported financial losses due to reduced income since the earthquake. Several women mentioned that the dire living conditions and lack of basic services serve as primary barriers, impeding their ability to cultivate and exercise leadership skills effectively.

**“A MAIN BARRIER IS LIVING CONDITIONS AND EVERYDAY NEEDS FROM ALL ASPECTS. HOW CAN WOMEN BECOME LEADERS IF THEY HAVE NO ACCESS TO A PROPER TOILET?”**

*Doaa*

Not only did women leaders in Northwest Syria encounter difficulties accessing financial resources to support themselves, one interviewee noted that some women have been driven to enter the workforce for the first time due to heightened economic concerns. However, the work available in these circumstances is

characterised by low wages, being unskilled, and above the capacity of the women performing the labour.

**“SOME WOMEN HAVE HAD TO START WORKING BECAUSE OF THE DIRE ECONOMIC SITUATION AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE. IT IS NOT EMPOWERING WORK AND IT IS TIRING FOR THEM. THEY ARE WORKING FOR WEALTHIER FAMILIES, CLEANING OR LOOKING AFTER THEIR CHILDREN, OR OUT COLLECTING WASTE. THIS OF COURSE LIMITS THEIR CAPACITY FOR LEADERSHIP.”**

*Khadouj*

The interviewee's perception that this shift disproportionately affects women's economic justice and opportunities, speaks to global trends. For example, in emergency settings women tend to work in sectors with less social protection and fewer safety nets, as they are predominantly concentrated in informal work sectors and labour markets that offer little to no safety nets or social protections.<sup>xiii</sup> This type of work often involves low wages, and a lack of decision-making power or influence. As a result, it perpetuates gendered economic inequalities by limiting women's access to higher-paying and more empowering roles. The growing presence of younger women in informal jobs also further exacerbated the exclusion of older women from the workforce.

Consequently, this systemic barrier hampers women's progress, perpetuates gender disparities, and reinforces the need for transformative measures to dismantle these economic constraints and enable women of all ages to fully exercise their leadership capabilities.



Women leaders Mobilising Other Women - Northwest Syria Earthquake Response © Diana Hussein Al Ali



## UNPAID CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

Additionally, participants of the survey cited caregiving responsibilities as the biggest barrier to women's leadership. Women carry an increased burden of care and domestic work during crises, which further compounds the structural barriers they face in participating in leadership roles. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls experienced an additional 2-3 hours per day of unpaid care work.<sup>xliii</sup> This was discussed further in the KIIs, with interviewees commenting on the impact child care had on their ability to respond to the earthquake.

**“WE JUST HAD TO MAKE IT WORK. SOMETIMES CHILDREN WOULD BE IN FORMAL CHILDCARE, OTHER TIMES IT WAS INFORMAL. OTHER TIMES WE WOULD TAKE THEM WITH US. EVEN IN THIS INTERVIEW [REFERENCING THE KII], MY CHILDREN ARE WITH ME.**

*Diana*

Though these gender-based economic inequalities tend to perpetuate during crises, deepening existing disparities and hindering women's empowerment and economic wellbeing,<sup>xliiv</sup> it was noted by one participant that there have been examples of men taking on childcare responsibilities during the earthquake, challenging traditional gender roles and offering glimpses of a more equitable distribution of unpaid care work.

**“DURING THE EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE, IT DEPENDED FROM DAY TO DAY WHO WOULD TAKE CARE OF THE CHILDREN. SOMETIMES THE WOMEN WOULD DO IT, SOMETIMES THE MEN WOULD TAKE THEM. WE HAD TO MAKE IT WORK.**

*FGD*

The repeated mention of unpaid care as a significant barrier by multiple interviewees, despite instances of men taking on childcare responsibilities during the earthquake, suggests that while there may have been some instance of shifts in gender roles, the magnitude of change was not substantial enough to be deemed transformative in terms of overcoming the deep-rooted challenges posed by unpaid care work.

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## BARRIERS TO ACCESSING OPPORTUNITIES THAT COULD FOSTER SKILL DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN LEADERS

Even before the earthquake struck, women in Northwest Syria faced significant barriers when it came to accessing opportunities that could foster their skill development. These barriers encompassed various aspects of their lives, limiting their potential for leadership growth. One prominent barrier was the lack of access to quality education. Women from the FGD conducted in one of the camps encountered difficulties in pursuing formal education due to limited resources, societal norms, and the remoteness of educational institutions.

**“WOMEN ALREADY FACED ISSUES ACCESSING EDUCATION BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE WHICH LIMITED OUR ABILITY TO BE LEADERS. FOR EXAMPLE, I WAS UNABLE TO GO TO UNIVERSITY BECAUSE IT WAS TOO FAR AWAY.**

*FGD*

Another barrier stemmed from the limited availability of vocational training programs and skill development initiatives. Women in Northwest Syria often lacked access to programs that could enhance their technical skills and enable them to engage in income-generation activities. The absence of such opportunities further hindered their capacity to acquire specialised expertise, hampering their progress towards leadership positions in various sectors.

**“MARGINALISATION, VIOLENCE, SOCIAL NORMS AND TRADITIONS, ALL THIS LEADS TO LACK OF EDUCATION, TRAINING, WORK, HEALTH SERVICES AND ESPECIALLY THOSE SPECIFIC TO WOMEN. ALL OF THIS AFFECTS WOMEN'S ABILITY TO LEAD AND BECOME LEADERS.**

*Dalal*

Within the broader context of limited access to opportunities, the lack of healthcare services and specialised programs specifically designed for women presents a significant barrier to their leadership development. In Northwest Syria, the scarcity of quality healthcare facilities hampers women's ability to prioritise their health and well-being, including reproductive healthcare. The absence of comprehensive reproductive health services in some areas, such as family planning and maternal care, restricts their autonomy in making informed decisions about their reproductive health and family planning, consequently affecting their career aspirations. Furthermore, the absence of targeted programs addressing women's concerns and providing support for their specific needs further diminishes their leadership potential.

Following the earthquake, ActionAid, in collaboration with Violet Organisation, is providing support to a hospital that offers maternity and neonatal services. This initiative plays a critical role in addressing the specific concerns of women during this challenging period. In the midst of the chaos and instability in Northwest Syria, women face distinct challenges concerning pregnancy, childbirth and the welfare of their new-borns. The hospital serves as a secure and protected environment where women can access essential prenatal, childbirth and postnatal care. By prioritising women's needs in this emergency-stricken context, the supported maternity and neonatal hospital becomes a vital lifeline, promoting the health and well-being of women.

interviewees explained how social norms and gender inequality can hamper leadership by generating lack of faith in women's capacities among other women, or in the wider community, as well as restriction on their movement.

**“INEQUALITY BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN IS THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP**

*Survey respondent*

**“WHAT SOCIETY IMPOSES ON A WOMAN IS A CONSTRAINT IF SHE DOESN'T FREE HERSELF FROM IT AND WORKS ON BUILDING HERSELF AND HER FUTURE**

*Survey respondent*

Despite Some Positive Changes in Attitudes in Regards to Women's Participation in the Response, Societal Factors and Norms Continue to be an Obstacle that Can Hamper Women's Leadership Capacities

A gender analysis of NWS conducted prior to the earthquake reported challenges generated from cultural dynamics that women face such as limited control of resources, gendered division of labour, limited representation and restriction on movement<sup>xlv</sup>.

**“A MAIN BARRIER TO WOMEN LEADERSHIP IS THE INEQUALITY AND MARGINALISATION FACED BY WOMEN FOR DECADES.**

*Dalal*

The context differs from one area to the other and from one community to the other, and one interviewee reported that she did not face any social restraints during or before the response and that her community welcomed her work. However, many women reported during the interviews or in the online survey that social norms and gender inequalities are still a barrier to their leadership after the earthquake.

**“THE SOLUTION IS TO BELIEVE IN THE CAPACITY OF WOMEN. THE SAME TOOLS GIVEN TO MEN SHOULD BE GIVEN TO WOMEN.**

*Doaa*

While the earthquake response opened up new arenas and opportunities for women to develop and practise different leadership capacities, the struggle with some social norms that limit these capacities are still barriers that are faced by women today. It is established that gender inequality not only exacerbates the impact of disasters but it is also exacerbated by disasters.<sup>xlvi</sup> Several women

These societal factors have led many women to internalise this inequality leading to a lack of self-esteem in their leadership capacities. Many women have internalised gender-based stereotypes associated with reproductive and productive work.<sup>xlvii</sup> Furthermore, women still face a lack of support from their family members and communities to be or to become a leader and participate in leadership activities, especially ones that go beyond the domestic sphere.

Another way social norms hinder leadership capacities of women is the still-ongoing restrictions on their movement and mobility. Available literature and reports emphasise the restrictions on movement that are being placed on women<sup>xlviii</sup>. For example, certain areas may be inaccessible or restricted for women, either due to limitations on access altogether or limitations during specific periods, or requiring the presence of male family members as companions for access.<sup>xlix</sup> Women who participated in the research highlighted constraints on their movement as a challenge faced during their participation in response efforts. Some women reported facing this challenge in different ways.

**“THERE ARE LIMITATIONS ON MOVEMENT AND TRANSPORTATION AS WOMEN CAN ONLY MOVE AROUND WITHIN SPECIFIC TIMES DURING THE DAY. I WOULD GO TO SHELTERS THAT ARE IN MY AREA AFTER WORK SO THAT THEY ARE NOT FAR FROM MY HOME SO IT MEANS LESS TIME DRIVING THERE, AND GO TO FURTHER CAMPS DURING THE WEEKEND. WE HAD MEN DELIVERING THE AID WE PROVIDED TO FARAWAY CAMPS AS WELL.**

*Zamzam*

During an FGD, one participant shared her experience of having to take a taxi for a two-hour



journey to attend regular meetings with other women involved in leading initiatives. To ensure that her departure is acknowledged and accepted by the neighbours and community, her husband accompanies her to the car, emphasising that she is leaving with his knowledge and consent.

## **THE OVERLAPPING CRISES HAS HAD A PROFOUND IMPACT ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP, INCLUDING DUE TO THE LOSS PROMINENT WOMEN LEADERS**

Moreover, the conflict has resulted in a substantial loss of lives, including both the general population and women who played vital leadership roles within their communities. This presents a notable challenge because, as well as the loss of women leaders, the leadership prospects of other women leaders are also impacted. This challenge has been prevalent throughout the ongoing conflict and is further compounded by the earthquake, which claimed the lives of over 4,500 individuals in Northwest Syria.<sup>i</sup>

**“AFTER 24 HOURS I STARTED SEEING THAT NORTHWEST SYRIA LOST A BIG NUMBER OF WOMEN LEADERS THAT HAVE A VOICE AND ARE ACTIVE IN MEETINGS. IRONICALLY IT WAS AROUND THE SAME DAY AS WORLD WOMEN'S DAY, WE CANCELLED THE PLANNED EVENTS BUT EMBODIED WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A LEADER AND MOURNED THE WOMEN WE LOST.**

*Maysoon*

Another interviewee highlighted that the passing of their organisation's leader, who was widely recognised as one of the most prominent and engaged women leaders in the region, posed a significant challenge for her and her team during the response efforts following the earthquake.

**“IT WAS TRAUMATIC WHEN WE LOST CONTACT WITH RAIFE. WE HAD A MEETING WITH HER THE EVENING BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE. IT WAS AS IF SHE WAS GUIDING US ON WHAT HAPPENS AFTER SHE LEAVES US.**

*Fatema*

## **THE INCREASE IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE POSTED LIMITATIONS ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP**

The earthquake and subsequent displacement disrupted social structures, created an environment

where the risk of gender-based violence (GBV) increased significantly. Women leaders interviewed during this study stated that GBV took various forms, including emotional and physical violence, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), economic GBV, which hindered women's ability to assume leadership roles and contribute to the recovery efforts, and also indicated that GBV emerged as a significant barrier to women's leadership and participation in Northwest Syria.

**“GBV INCREASES IN REFUGEE CAMPS AS THE INFLUX OF PEOPLE LEADS TO OVERCROWDED AND INADEQUATE TENTED SETTLEMENTS, LIMITED ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES FOR WOMEN, AND THE PRESENCE OF TRAUMA AND PSYCHOSOCIAL STRESS. GBV IS A RESULT OF PRE-EXISTING GENDER INEQUALITY WHICH WAS PRESENT BEFORE AND EXACERBATED AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE. GBV OF COURSE PREVENTS WOMEN FROM USING THEIR CAPACITY TO GET ANYWHERE, BECOME A LEADER, TO CONTINUE WORKING.**

*Doaa*

It has been identified by interviewees that EFCM, which was already prevalent in Northwest Syria, has increased after the earthquake. This could be due to a number of factors. Firstly, the disruption caused by the crisis, such as displacement and instability, can create an environment where families feel compelled to resort to early marriage as a means of protection or survival for their daughters. The fear of sexual exploitation, abuse, and kidnapping is a driving factor behind forced early marriages, while the rise of social media has also been identified as a leading cause.<sup>ii</sup>

Additionally, the loss of livelihoods and economic hardship often experienced can lead families to view early marriage as a way to alleviate financial burdens.<sup>iii</sup> The limited access to education and constrained opportunities for girls in Northwest Syria exacerbate the situation. For instance, a needs assessment conducted by the Education Cluster revealed that 40% of the 300 reported schools or temporary learning spaces were damaged, requiring repairs or restoration to resume operations.<sup>iiii</sup> These circumstances can further contribute to the prevalence of early marriages as families perceive marriage as a means to secure their daughters' futures.<sup>iv</sup> It is important to recognise that these factors are interconnected and their impact can vary based on the specific context of the crisis and the prevailing cultural norms in the region.



Women leaders Supporting Marginalised Communities - Northwest Syria Earthquake Response © Action For Humanity

**“I CAN CONFIRM THAT GBV INCREASED, I DON'T HAVE NUMBERS BUT I CAN ASSURE YOU. THE DISRUPTION OF SCHOOLING FOR A PROLONGED PERIOD HAS CONTRIBUTED TO A RISE IN SCHOOL DROPOUTS, SUBSEQUENTLY LEADING TO AN UPSURGE IN EARLY MARRIAGES. THE CURRENT SITUATION OF DISPLACEMENT AND INSTABILITY EXACERBATES THE PREVALENCE OF EARLY MARRIAGE.**

*Maysoon*

Whilst it was recognised that the presence of GBV is a significant barrier to women's participation in leadership activities, several interviewees also noted a shift in community attitudes towards GBV response services. Previously, GBV prevention practitioners had to discreetly integrate GBV awareness sessions within more socially acceptable interventions such as capacity building or skills development classes. However, following the earthquake, there has been a noticeable increase in community acceptance of GBV services. Women who had previously hidden their participation in sessions and safe spaces now openly communicate with their husbands and brothers about attending GBV prevention activities.

**“TODAY, WOMEN WHO USED TO COME TO SESSIONS AND TO SAFE SPACE WOULD TELL THEIR HUSBANDS AND BROTHERS THAT THEY ARE GOING TO A SEWING CLASS, BUT NOW AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE, THERE IS MORE ACCEPTANCE. THE MEN EVEN DRIVE THE WOMEN TO OUR SPACES.**

*Maysoon*

## **OLDER WOMEN AND WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES FACE BARRIERS SPECIFIC TO THEIR AGE AND DISABILITIES THAT OBSTRUCTS THEIR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT IN THEIR COMMUNITIES**

In line with broader trends observed during emergencies, older women and women with disabilities were often marginalised in the context of the earthquake response, despite their distinct needs. They faced additional challenges, including difficulties evacuating buildings, loss of essential assistive devices, social stigmatisation, and constrained access to resources and support. Interviewees stated that efforts by formal assistance mechanisms to include these marginalised groups were inadequate, as even basic awareness sessions often failed to involve older women and those with disabilities. As well as providing direct support to these communities, women leaders ensured to make sure their needs were acknowledged in this research.

**“I WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT THE NEEDS OF OLDER PEOPLE AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ARE ACKNOWLEDGED IN THIS RESEARCH. THEY FACE ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES THAT ARE OVERLOOKED, AND IT AFFECTS THEIR POTENTIAL FOR LEADERSHIP.**

*Diana*

## **EXCLUSION FROM DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES AT ALL LEVELS POSES A SIGNIFICANT BARRIER TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP**

Access to decision-making structures at every level poses a significant barrier to women's leadership both in the aftermath of the earthquake and more broadly in Northwest Syria. Although some women reported an increased inclusion in decision-making, women continue to face challenges in securing meaningful participation in decision-making processes overall, whether it is in their homes, at the community level, within organisations, or in formal governance structures.

**“DURING THE EARTHQUAKE, THERE WAS A LACK OF INFORMATION FROM THE LOCAL COUNCILS AND AUTHORITIES, AND WE WERE NOT INCLUDED IN ANY DECISIONS THAT WERE MADE. THIS WAS A REAL BARRIER.**

*Survey respondent*

**“WE ARE STILL EVEN NOW WITHIN [MY ORGANISATION] ASKING FOR DEMANDS AND EQUALITY WITH OUR MALE COUNTERPARTS. WOMEN HAVE 2 SEATS ON THE BOARD, WE GET TO PARTICIPATE IN DECISION MAKING AND VOTING ON DECISIONS.**

*Dalal*

**“IN MY FAMILY, ME AND MY HUSBAND MAKE THE DECISIONS AND I GET A BIT MORE SAY. BUT IN GENERAL, IN NORTHWEST SYRIA, WOMEN FACE DIFFICULTIES BEING INCLUDED IN DECISION MAKING PROCESSES AT EVERY LEVEL, EVEN IN THE HOME. EVEN THOUGH WOMEN HAVE PROVED THEMSELVES WE STILL DON'T SEE THEM IN LOCAL COUNCILS, EVEN IN ORGANISATIONS YOU MOSTLY FIND THEM IN MIDDLE POSITIONS RATHER THAN TOP POSITIONS.**

*Rana*

Limited representation and inclusion of women in decision-making spaces not only perpetuates a power imbalance but also undermines the potential for sustainable peace and stability in North West Syria. Women's active involvement in the peace process is crucial for addressing the root causes of conflict, promoting social cohesion, and ensuring the needs and priorities of all members of society are considered. When women are included in peace negotiations, the resulting agreements are more inclusive, comprehensive, and durable. To overcome

these barriers, concerted efforts are needed to dismantle systemic biases and promote gender equality in decision-making processes. This includes creating spaces for women to actively participate, fostering an inclusive and respectful environment and ensuring their voices are heard and respected. It also requires providing women with the necessary support, resources and capacity-building opportunities to engage effectively in peace processes.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOSTERING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

#### A) ENSURE WOMEN AT EVERY LEVEL IN SOCIETY ARE INCLUDED IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES:

- Promote sustainable solutions and gender equality in the Syrian conflict by reaffirming the need for a sustainable solution based on UN Security Council resolution 2254 (2015).<sup>lvi</sup> Governments and mediators should treat women's inclusion as essential to peace agreements, investing political capital to bring women to the table as negotiators, not just advisors.
- Support a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned political process facilitated by the UN that ensures inclusive governance. Emphasise the importance of progress in the Constitutional Committee's work,<sup>lvii</sup> prioritising the inclusion of diverse women's voices and perspectives.<sup>lviii</sup>
- Set a minimum representation target of 30% for women in decision-making structures of international peace processes, aligning with the goal set by the UN.<sup>lix</sup>
- Advocate for the inclusion of diverse women's voices and perspectives in international peace negotiations and forums.
- Urge decision-makers, including parties to the conflict and political parties, to provide space for women's participation in peace negotiations.
- Collaborate with local NGOs, women's rights organisations and women's leadership organisations to facilitate engagement between de-facto authorities and the Government of Syria.
- Do not expect full unity. Women involved in peace processes should not be expected to speak with one voice and unify across party lines. International support should focus on providing platforms and resources for women to determine their own collective action and cross party lines when they see fit.
- Women's participation in peace processes should extend beyond achieving gender parity. They should have substantive input on all areas of the process, not just gender-specific issues.



## **B) SUPPORT SYRIAN-LED WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS:**

- Efforts should be made to advance the implementation of UN Resolution 1325, acknowledging the significance of women's inclusion in programs and facilitating their freedom of movement to effectively pursue women's empowerment initiatives.<sup>ix</sup>
- Guarantee women-led organisations access to flexible funding that is tailored to their needs on the ground rather than to donor requirements, allowing these organisations to continue their critical work.
- Efforts should be made to enhance communication channels within the Triple Nexus (humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors), recognising that local actors may not align their categorisation with that of donors or INGOs.
- Establish interactive platforms for Syrian civil society organisations working on women, peace, and security issues to enable coordination, shared learning and collaboration.
- Facilitate cross-regional learning by connecting Syrian organisations with successful women's networks in neighbouring countries or regions.
- Provide multi-year strategic assistance to foster the growth and development of new and existing regional feminist networks, strengthening their capacity and collective impact.
- Increase investments in targeted capacity building initiatives for women's organisations and women-led initiatives in Syria, focusing on building skills and expertise in peace processes, conflict resolution, research and leadership.

## **C) INVEST IN PROGRAMS THAT PROMOTE A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO GENDER EQUALITY:**

- Address the root causes of gender-based discrimination, eliminating systemic barriers to women's access to resources and leadership opportunities.
- Promote equal access to social protection services, including water, sanitation, hygiene facilities, and sexual and reproductive health and rights services.
- Ensure equal access to quality education, removing barriers such as early marriage, gender-based violence, and cultural biases.
- Establish comprehensive measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, improving access to justice and support services for survivors.
- Fund specialised training and education programs to enable women in Northwest Syria to access high-skilled work opportunities and traditionally male-dominated sectors.
- Collaborate with women's rights organisations to create an inclusive workforce and promote women's entrepreneurship.
- Establish caring economies that recognise, reduce, redistribute, represent, and fairly compensate unpaid care work.
- Implement universal social protection measures to include diverse groups of women workers, including those in the informal sector and internally displaced persons. Although these measures may not counteract all barriers and challenges faced by women in accessing women's leadership roles, they can contribute to creating an enabling environment that fosters increased opportunities for inclusive spaces.



Women and Men Working  
Together in the Rubble -  
Northwest Syria Earthquake  
Response © Syria Civil Defence

# CONCLUSION

The aftermath of the earthquake that impacted Northwest Syria further exacerbated the challenges faced by populations in the region after 12 years of conflict. But the changing landscape and shift in circumstances prompted women to assume key roles in the response, creating the space for them to become leaders in their homes and communities.

The conditions created by the earthquake brought forth a shift in dynamics which enabled women to assume more active and visible leadership roles. Influenced by their proximity to impacted areas, women actively participated in rescue operations, humanitarian assistance and addressing the specific needs of marginalised communities.

This increased visibility led to a greater acceptance of some women's contributions and expanded space for women's leadership that went beyond household responsibilities for some women.

Furthermore, women proved in the eyes of their communities their abilities to coordinate and mobilise resources during the response. Women established networks and connections with other women within their communities and internationally, fostering solidarity and resilience. These networks not only facilitated a more efficient distribution of assistance but also created a platform for knowledge sharing, capacity building and mutual empowerment. The findings also highlight the importance of leveraging women's leadership in long-term peace processes. Inclusive decision-making, addressing gender-specific concerns, trust-building, representation, inclusivity and the power of networks and alliances are crucial elements that can contribute to sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

However, in order for these shifts to have a transformative impact, it is crucial to actively nurture them by addressing the challenges and barriers that have the potential to restrict or undermine the progress of women's leadership. These barriers encompass economic, social, and security factors that serve as persistent obstacles and systemic challenges impeding women's full participation. The international community and international organisations must take decisive action to confront these barriers, seize the current momentum and ensure the long-term sustainability of the emerging space for women's leadership by taking tangible actions to ensure the inclusion of women in peace processes and decision making.



By overlooking the perspectives and experiences of women, decision-making processes can overlook key insights and solutions to complex challenges. As this study shows, women bring unique perspectives and priorities to the table, including a focus on the specific needs of marginalised communities, social justice and community well-being. Their inclusion promotes gender equality and challenges power structures that can perpetuate conflict and discrimination.

When women are included in decision-making, they play a transformative role in building sustainable peace. Their participation fosters a more holistic understanding of conflicts and their consequences, leading to the development of inclusive policies and initiatives that address the needs of all members of society. By recognising and harnessing the significant role of women's leadership, a more inclusive, just and resilient future can be paved in Northwest Syria.



Women and Men Working Together in the Rubble - Northwest Syria Earthquake Response © Syria Civil Defence

## METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This report is based on a comprehensive data collection process designed to explore the theme of women's leadership. The methodology relied on qualitative data collected through key informant interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and group consultations, as well as a digital survey.

### QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS COMMUNITY MAPPING

The selection of Women's Rights Organisations (WROs), Women's Leadership Organisations (WLOs) and women community responders was carried out based on various factors, including existing or past partnerships with Action For Humanity or ActionAid, established relationships through other platforms, snowball sampling, presence in the community as a religious or community leader, or as an actor who emerged after the earthquake. The minimum requirement for participation was that participants had been recognised to be actively responding to the earthquake emergency in any capacity,

The inclusion criteria did not prioritise formal employment with an established organisation. This approach aimed to capture the perspectives of women who may face barriers accessing formal employment or are active within the domestic sphere, ensuring a representation of diverse experiences.

### KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS, FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS, AND GROUP CONSULTATIONS

The methodology included KIIs, FGDs and group consultations. The KIIs were conducted virtually using Zoom. They involved national civil society organisations, such as the Syrian Civil Defence (The White Helmets), informal Women's Rights Organisations (WROs), religious and community leaders and individual actors. All interviews were conducted in Arabic. A total of 9 organisations, representing WLOs and WROs, participated in the KIIs, with participants in different towns throughout Idlib and Aleppo.

Two FGDs were conducted, one with leaders of WLOs and the other with women from the community who were not necessarily associated with a formal organisation but who were identified, via snowball sampling, as having demonstrated leadership during the earthquake response.

Following the completion of the KIIs and FGDs, two small group consultations were conducted with participants in order to share preliminary data and findings, as well as to gather their recommendations based on the findings. For women who were unable to attend a session, an opportunity was provided to submit written feedback on the key findings and recommendations.

## DIGITAL SURVEY

In addition to the KIIs and FGDs, a digital survey was distributed as part of the data collection process. The survey was designed to reach women who were unable to participate in the KIIs or FGDs due to various reasons such as time constraints or limited accessibility. The digital survey served as an alternative means to engage with a wider range of women, including those who may be less visible in public spaces but still play vital roles in their homes and communities. The digital survey received 100 responses, with the only criteria being that participants identify themselves as women living in Northwest Syria.

The survey was distributed by Action For Humanity's protection team, and via participants following snowball sampling. It was designed to be user-friendly, accessible and was available in Arabic.

## LIMITATIONS

The reliance on KIIs and FGDs arranged with participants following community mapping may introduce bias by potentially excluding women who played significant leadership roles but were not identified during the selection process. This limitation was addressed by snowball sampling with participants, and the introduction of a digital survey.

In itself, the use of a digital survey, while aiming for broader participation, may face limitations in terms of access and response bias. The research primarily focused on the earthquake response, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings. Some women may have been unable or unwilling to provide feedback, impacting the comprehensiveness of the data collected. These limitations highlight the need for future studies to address these issues and ensure a more inclusive representation of women's leadership experiences.

Further research is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of women's leadership in Northwest Syria, including the

perspectives of men through interviews, in order to capture a holistic view of the dynamics and challenges involved.

## SAFEGUARDING

The research team consisted of both male and female members, ensuring a balanced representation. To ensure the well-being and security of the participants, particularly considering the potential risks and communication challenges posed by patriarchal norms, a female presence was consistently maintained during the interviews. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point as well as the right to remain anonymous. The research team adhered to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)<sup>xi</sup> guidelines at all times, maintaining confidentiality and handling information with sensitivity. Consent was collected from all respondents who participated in research activities. Informed consent was recorded for all respondents through verbal agreement to participate. Interviews conducted via Zoom were recorded, and all participants were informed that the sessions would be recorded for research purposes. These recordings will be securely stored and will be destroyed after a period of three months (August 2023).

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- <sup>iii</sup><https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/hard-lessons-inquiry-children-disabilities-exposureprotection-risks-lebanon-and-northwest-syria>
- <sup>iii</sup><https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-west-syria-situation-report-13-february-2023>
- <sup>iv</sup><https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/hard-lessons-inquiry-children-disabilities-exposureprotection-risks-lebanon-and-northwest-syria>
- <sup>iv</sup><https://www.helpage.org/silo/files/older-people-in-disasters-and-humanitarian-crises-guidelines-forbest-practice.pdf>
- <sup>vi</sup><https://press.un.org/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>
- <sup>vii</sup>The UN recently called on the Syrian Constitutional Committee to resume its work following a 10-month hiatus.
- <sup>viii</sup><https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/un-urges-syrian-constitutional-committee-to-return-to-work-after-10-month-lapse/2854281>
- <sup>ix</sup><https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2023-03-13/secretary-generals-remarks-thewomens-civil-society-town-hall-delivered%C2%A0>
- <sup>x</sup><https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>
- <sup>xi</sup><https://gdpr-info.eu>

# ACTION FOR HUMANITY



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**DURING THE EARTHQUAKE, WOMEN PROVED TO THEMSELVES TO BE STRONG AND CAPABLE OF HAVING THE SAME RESPONSIBILITIES AS MEN. IF THEY RESCUED PEOPLE FROM UNDER RUBBLE, THEY CAN DO ANYTHING. THEY ARE NOW SEEN AS HEROES.**

*DALAL*

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