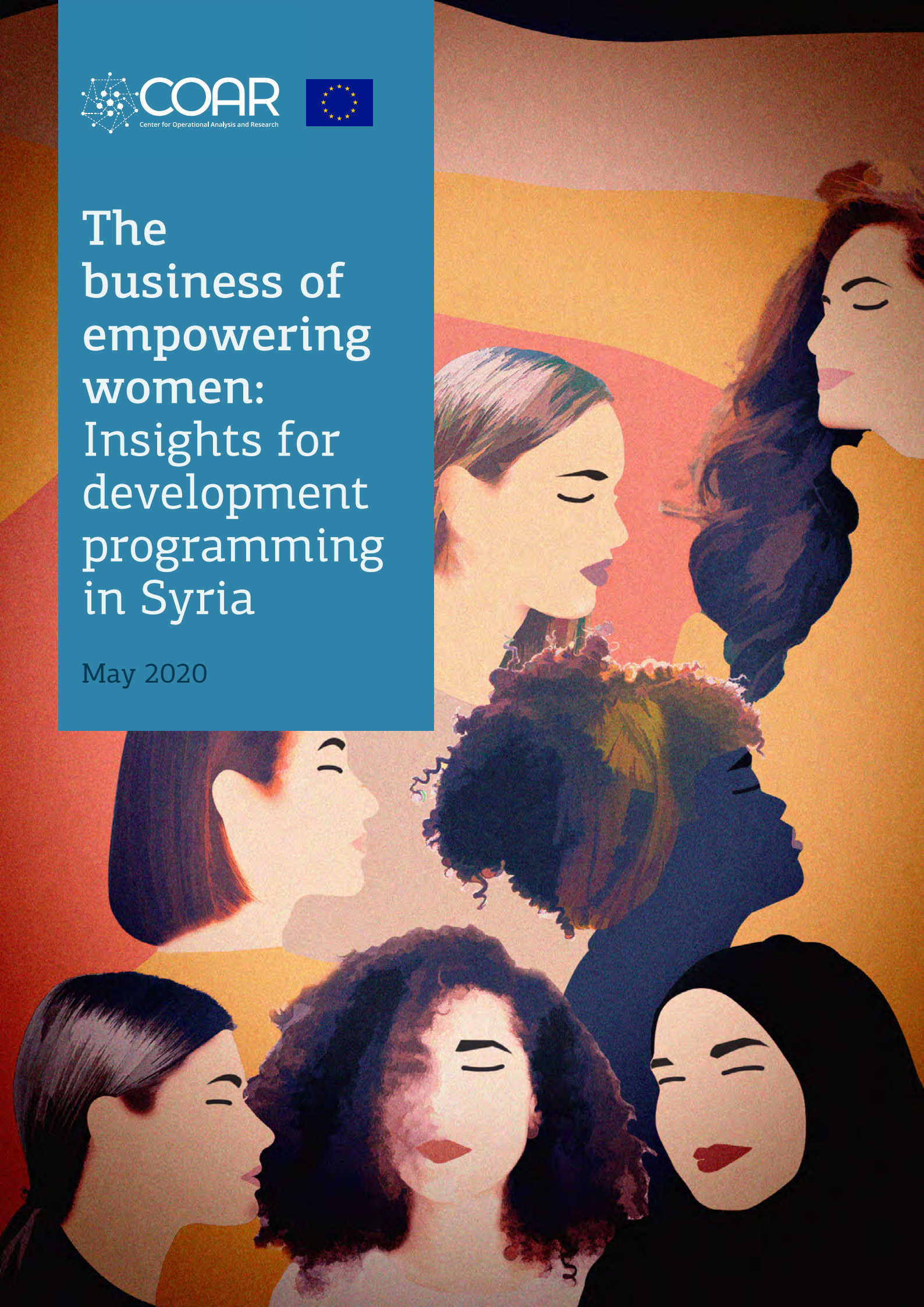


# The business of empowering women: Insights for development programming in Syria

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## Executive Summary

Changes in household composition due to battlefield deaths, displacement, and military recruitment have meant that many households in Syria have experienced a gendered restructuring, and as a result, have lost significant sources of income. This has led — and at times forced — more Syrian women to pursue income-generating activities<sup>1</sup> to cope with the radical changes taking place in the economic, social, and political spheres.

To date, international development agencies have largely viewed Syria's changing gender dynamics as a vehicle for women's empowerment, as they support programming intended to strengthen the role of women in Syrian society. Many of these initiatives are wedded to the prevailing narrative that women's economic engagement leads to empowerment. As such, it is often taken at face value that boosting women's entrepreneurship or labor force participation is a precondition for social and political emancipation. To a large extent, women's empowerment initiatives undertaken by development actors have thus approached women as beneficiaries of programmatic interventions designed to equip them to engage in income-generating activities, as a stepping stone toward greater participation in the household, the community, and, ultimately, the public and political domains. As this paper seeks to show, the assumptions that undergird such programming must be reconsidered.

This paper highlights several overarching challenges to the empowerment paradigm. Most importantly, this research shows that women's participation in economic activities does not equate to empowerment on a more holistic or ultimately meaningful basis. At best, an approach that correlates economic opportunity with women's empowerment is tenuous. At worst, it is blind to the myriad factors that shape women's choices, and it ignores the complex nature of empowerment itself. Moreover, this paper contends that

the prevailing conceptualizations and methods of quantifying empowerment are often ambiguous and divorced from context. As a result, they fail to address the many dimensions of women's empowerment that are equally critical, but exist beyond easily measured economic factors. Ultimately, these shortcomings arise not only because of flawed or partial conceptualizations of women's empowerment, but also because of institutional factors, including resistance that is entrenched at the organizational level.

This paper is based on extensive desk research and numerous, wide-ranging interviews both with Syrian women engaged in economic activities and with international response professionals focusing on Syria. Although many of the conclusions of this research are drawn specifically from the Syrian context, they are by no means limited to Syria. On the contrary, these conclusions are relevant in any context in which gender-responsive or women's empowerment initiatives are needed — which is to say, universally. Of note, this research does not specifically assess the design or implementation of any particular donor-funded women's empowerment initiative in Syria. Rather, this research seeks to show the contextual realities of the broader operational environment in which donor-funded women's empowerment initiatives in Syria are undertaken. Above all, this research seeks to cast light on the inherent limitations of gender-responsive programming that either focuses exclusively on women as beneficiaries or which treats access to economic resources as the core activity of empowerment initiatives. Instead, this paper argues that a holistic, community-based approach is needed in order to grapple with the real complexity of social norms and traditional roles and responsibilities that continue to dictate women's relationship to work, their social surroundings, and their sense of self-worth and well-being more broadly.

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, we interchangeably use the terms economic activities and income generating activities to refer to both formal employment and informal labor.

## Key Takeaways

- The ongoing conflict has opened space to women in the Syrian economy. These changes are not guaranteed to last once the conflict ends.
  - Frequently, new economic opportunities open to women when conflict upends the existing social order. The challenge, however, comes when violent conflict ends. Men returning from frontlines often displace women from roles they occupied during periods of conflict. Without substantial social change, the sustainability of women's newfound economic prominence is therefore in jeopardy.
- Economic activity by women does not, in itself, lead to empowerment.
  - Women's engagement in economic activities can indeed be empowering, especially if a woman exercises control over her own income. However, we should not conflate money and power. Women's engagement in economic activities does not necessarily break gender binaries, achieve equality, or change stereotypes about women. Increased economic activity is thus one dimension of a broader women's empowerment initiative that must be multidimensional in order to achieve its real objectives.
- Gender-responsive programming can reinforce the very gender stereotypes it intends to upend.
  - Often, activities are confined to areas perceived as "appropriate" for women. For instance, vocational training activities that are limited to traditionally "feminine" economic activities reproduce gender binaries and stereotypes concerning gender division within labor skills, and also reinforces existing norms concerning the types of work that are "acceptable" for a woman.
- Women who engage in economic activities often shoulder a "double burden" of paid labor and traditional care work. Program activities seldom account for this reality.
  - Engagement in the labor forces is most often measured through macro-scale assessments of general economic conditions, which speak to the public domain but overlook the private domain. Unless care work is taken into account, the "double burden" will continue to undermine women's well-being.
- Donor-driven initiatives have largely failed to address structural impediments to women's empowerment.
  - Specifically, the creation of siloed programming and funding streams dedicated exclusively to gender-responsive programming has limited the reach of such initiatives and reduced overall impact in terms of the broader social, political, familial, and infrastructural challenges that women face. As a result, such programming often neglects community-level dynamics that intersect with women's oppression and inequalities.
- Gender initiatives must target men and social structures as a whole.
  - Women sometimes refrain from participating in program activities because their husband or family does not consent. Sometimes, this is due to the activities' perceived inappropriateness according to cultural norms. However, to blame "culture" or "tradition" for the inability of some women to engage in these activities is flawed and misses the point altogether. Rather, program design should ensure that responsibility for women's participation — and, more importantly, structural reforms — do not rest solely with the women themselves.

## Methodology

This research is based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with women engaged in economic activities in Syria as well as international development actors, implementing partners, gender experts, and gender analysts involved in the Syria response. The participants in this research are divided into two groups that consist, respectively, of seven women engaged in economic activity in Syria and seven women who are professionally engaged in the Syria response. Among participants who are engaged in economic activity in Syria are women between the ages of 20 and 39 who reside in various areas, to include rural Hama, Aleppo, and Idleb governorates, as well as the cities of Homs, Aleppo, and Tartous. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their demographics (age, marital status, educational attainment, place of origin and place of residence), and about their working experience and conditions, as well as the impact these factors have had on their personal, social, and economic standing. The overall objective of the data collection was to grant the participants the opportunity to tell their stories without shaping them by pre-determined themes.<sup>2</sup>

This paper is rooted in the understanding that women's experience of empowerment and engagement in economic activity are subjective, personal experiences that cannot necessarily be generalized. By closely incorporating these individuals' subjective experiences, it has been possible to

grapple with a deeper understanding of motivations and attitudes toward empowerment and economic engagement, as well as gender-specific challenges, vulnerabilities, solutions, and opportunities. More generally, collecting such experiences has allowed us to pay close attention to intersecting themes such as patriarchy, changing gender roles, traditions, norms, security, and political practices, as seen through the eyes of the participants themselves.

Finally, it is important to elaborate on the limitations of this research. First, due to the fact that the research is limited in scope, it has not been possible to tackle all aspects<sup>3</sup> relevant to the analysis and discussion of women's empowerment presented in this paper. This research is thus a modest attempt to advance a debate over current approaches to empowerment initiatives, and should by no means be considered exhaustive in addressing the broad field of study in which it sits. Second, as most of the participants in this research are young, unmarried, and educated, with a relatively good socio-economic background,<sup>4</sup> it can be argued that this research is most applicable to the experiences of a particular segment of Syrian women. However, what this research seeks to counter from a methodological standpoint is that the experiences of these women can be dismissed because they fail to fit the template of the commonly portrayed victimized woman.

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- 2 This has entailed having an inductive approach to our research, generating meaning from data collected in the field. Upon data collection, the data has been processed with the help of an extensive literature review comprising both policy papers, research conducted by humanitarian and development agencies, and academic literature. Upon data processing, approaching the data through an open coding technique entailed searching for recurrent themes in the data, and comprehensively allowing concurring and intersecting themes that repeatedly emerged, to constitute the categories analyzed and discussed in this paper.
  - 3 For instance, there are important inferences to be made in relation to domestic violence, gender-based violence, religion, displacement, etc. that are not dealt with in this research.
  - 4 It is important to note that the class position of the participants in this research was not measured. We relied on the participants' personal judgment of their socio-economic status compared to others in their community. In cases where participants refrained from explicitly describing their socio-economic standing, the latter was inferred from other data points provided by them.

## From abstract to concrete: Conceptualizing and measuring empowerment

In the period since gender equality and women's empowerment became pillars of the international development agenda, numerous academic and practical attempts have been made to conceptualize women's empowerment in ways that speak to mainstream policy discourse. To this end, implementing actors have overwhelmingly sought to quantify empowerment and demonstrate the impact of specific interventions on women's empowerment based on metrics that often have been divorced from their operational context. The preoccupation with quantitative approaches to the measurement of empowerment has thus led to a proliferation of research based on divergent, and sometimes contradictory, definitions and indicators of empowerment. However, a strong focus on the economic dimension of women's empowerment has been nearly universal — often at the expense of other critical factors. In effect, this emphasis frames economic independence as the most important aspect of women's empowerment and emancipation. However, this approach to empowerment often misses the multitude of ways in which power structures and power politics constrain women.

### Quantitative ease: The limits of metrics and measurements

The notion that empowerment can be clearly defined, let alone measured, is among the pervasive issues that this paper seeks to explore. The existing body of literature on women's empowerment shows both clear areas of overlap and significant divergence, thus indicating the limits of attempts to measure women's empowerment

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quantitatively.<sup>5</sup> Further, using a quantitative approach as the basis for assessing the meaning of women's choices may forcibly introduce values that are not held by the women themselves. In practical effect, this makes it more difficult to determine whether assessments actually measure the intended impact. This emphasizes the problematic nature of development policies in which women's empowerment objectives appear as catchphrases in the service of one-size-fits-all development approaches.

### Power, choice, and change

Given the myriad definitions of empowerment, it is important to clarify how the concept will be applied in this research. This paper draws heavily on Naila Kabeer's conceptualization of empowerment.<sup>6</sup> This particular framework has been selected as the basis to understand the insights and experiences of research participants because it integrates considerations related to power, structural constraints, community influence, and nuances in decision-making.

<sup>5</sup> Here it is important to underline that this paper does not seek to argue that quantitative methods are less valuable than qualitative methods, neither in general nor for the purpose of measuring empowerment — each method has both possibilities and limitations. Rather it is to point out that to adequately address and measure a concept such as empowerment across Syria requires a profoundly extensive study that most agencies lack the time, capacity and reach to conduct.

<sup>6</sup> Naila Kabeer (1999) *The Conditions and Consequences of Choice*.

Central to Kabeer's conceptualization of empowerment is the ability to make choices.<sup>7</sup> As such, *empowerment* is inseparable from *disempowerment*, and thus "refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability."<sup>8</sup> In other words, empowerment entails a process of *change*. However, the notion of choice must be qualified in a number of ways. First, choice necessarily implies the possibility of alternatives — i.e. the ability to have chosen otherwise.<sup>9</sup> According to Kabeer, choice has three features:

- **Resources:** present and future access to material, human, and social resources
- **Agency:** control over decision-making processes
- **Achievements:** outcomes for well-being

In the following sections of this paper, we use the data collected throughout this research to highlight some of the dimensions of women's empowerment that are often neglected and are rarely operationalized in gender-responsive initiatives. Holistically, this research challenges the narrative that economic activity is — or should be — the main vehicle for women's empowerment. While women's engagement in economic activities can

**... empowerment is not merely a transformation brought about by a transfer of money. Rather, empowerment is a complex, collective process that actively questions, destabilizes, and ultimately transforms the gender orders that lead to oppression and inequalities of all kinds.**

promote self-determination, grant agency in decision-making, and promote independence from patriarchal or familial structures, this alone does not necessarily translate into empowerment. As such, empowerment is not merely a transformation brought about by a transfer of money. Rather, empowerment is a complex, collective process that actively questions, destabilizes, and ultimately transforms the gender orders that lead to oppression and inequalities of all kinds.

<sup>7</sup> However, here it is important to note that not all choices are equally relevant to the definition of empowerment; some choices have greater significance than others in terms of their consequences for people's lives.

<sup>8</sup> Naila Kabeer (1999) *Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment*.

<sup>9</sup> This is why there is a logical association between poverty and disempowerment because an insufficiency of the means for meeting one's basic needs often rules out the ability to exercise meaningful choice.

## Gaining economic opportunity, awaiting structural change

The following sections assess the various thematic contents of the semi-structured interviews conducted for this research. In general, the female participants in this research indicated that their income-generating activities have had minimal impact on the gender norms they confront, thus suggesting that economic activity alone is not a sufficient condition for empowerment. For instance, one participant stated that she had been encouraged to seek employment by her family, whom she described as open-minded and supportive. However, she also stated that women's engagement in economic activities often has little influence on the way women are perceived by the society at-large.<sup>10</sup>

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“I do not think my employment has changed the way women are generally looked at in the public realm – this depends on each person's own opinion on women joining the workforce [...] It does not matter what a [woman] does, people will still view her the same.”

This view was seconded by a gender expert working with a UN agency. In her experience, women's empowerment initiatives are often overly optimistic when assessing the potential impact that women's engagement in economic activities may have on the wider community's perception of gender norms and practices. Rather, she stated that economic empowerment initiatives that are undertaken without first addressing underlying patriarchal power structures merely address the symptoms, rather than the root causes, of women's oppression.

This view is supported by scholars who point to the fact that although women's engagement in economic activities can be empowering (especially if a woman exercises control over her own income<sup>11</sup>), research shows that women's engagement in economic activities does not necessarily break gender binaries, achieve equality, or change stereotypes about women.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the flawed premise that economic activity equates to empowerment has been central to gender-responsive initiatives carried out across the Global South.<sup>13</sup> For the purpose of this research, it is important to highlight some of the myriad reasons that women's engagement in economic activities fails to address existing gender binaries, achieve equality, or change stereotypes about women in the Syrian context.

<sup>10</sup> Important to these observations is the fact that the large majority of the participants of this research are young women from urban areas inside Syria of a relatively well socio-economic standing. Both in the literature and in our conversations with donor entities and individuals involved in gender responsive-programming in Syria, these women are considered more likely to reach a state of 'empowerment' as a result of vocational training or initiatives that promote income-generating activities in light of 'social capital' and their relatively 'progressive' surroundings. These views were often expressed in the interviews conducted for the purpose of this research.

<sup>11</sup> “Claims to be “empowering women” by engaging them in the market conflate power and money. The acquisition of money comes to be imbued with almost magical powers, as if once women had their own money, they could wave a wand and wish away the social norms, affective relationships and embedded institutions constraining them” (Cornwall, Andrea (2018): Beyond “Empowerment Lite”: *Women's Empowerment, Neoliberal Development and Global Justice*). See: <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/30104/1/empowerment%20lite.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Nour Abu Assab (2016) *Destabilising Gender Dynamics*.

<sup>13</sup> Universally, the link between women's engagement in economic activities and gender equality seems to hinge upon the idea that women's participation in formal (and measurable) employment promotes economic growth which in turn promotes gender equality. However, this link has been challenged by feminist economists who argue that if all aspects of women's labor (formal and informal) were considered and measured in GDP, it would become apparent that links between women's engagement in economic activities and gender equality are noncausal. See for example: Marylin Waring (1988) *If Women Counted*.



### Women's social recognition in rural Idlib: Challenging the urban-rural binary

Broadly speaking, urban areas are associated with greater openness, and are therefore generally perceived as less conservative than rural areas. It follows that urban areas are often regarded as being more receptive of, and permissive toward, women's empowerment, economic activity, and upward social mobility. However, this research finds that there are exceptions to this in practice: participants residing in rural areas have a significantly higher level of social recognition and status due to economic activities than do women living in urban areas.

The two participants living in rural Idlib and Aleppo indicated that upon their participation in social work, they felt well-connected, recognized, and respected by their communities. For example, one of these participants currently holds a position in a local council alongside an otherwise all-male membership. In contrast, women working in urban areas, though of a relatively higher economic status, cited feelings of social isolation, and indicated they feel no noticeable change in how the community views them, despite their economic activity. Of note, political context is likely a factor. Participants from Idlib have opted to frame their work as a contribution to "the revolution," and have necessarily factored this into the social recognition they highlighted.

The limitations of this research do not allow further exploration of the social capital of working women in cities as opposed to their counterparts in rural areas. However, the experiences mentioned above highlight the need to investigate this dynamic in greater detail, and to remain cognizant of this relationship when planning gender-responsive programming in Syria.

### No woman is an island: Rewriting power relations in empowerment

While there undoubtedly is space for individual agency in challenging gender norms and inequality, when it comes to empowerment, the actual effect of individual agency is often overstated. This is especially evident in programmatic approaches to women's empowerment in Syria. Almost exclusively, these approaches have addressed women's empowerment at the individual level, rather than at the level of the community. Consequently, power is dealt with as an attribute inherent to the individual beneficiary, rather than a property of the local context and prevailing structures, such as the family or community. What this approach fails to recognize (let alone operationalize) is that these outside structures often constrain women's ability to make strategic life choices. For example, while some of the participants in this research have pursued non-normative career paths, or have acted against prevalent gender norms in their respective communities,<sup>14</sup> these assertions of individual agency have sometimes come at great social and familial cost. Therefore, individual choices cannot be isolated from this context, nor can their consequences and outcomes.

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"I cannot have a stable romantic relationship. My work was the reason why I broke up with my fiancé."<sup>15</sup>

For instance, one participant attained higher education, engaged heavily in the NGO sector in Syria, and recently secured a desirable position with a well-known INGO, which provides a relatively good income. She considers her career to be a primary aspect of her life, and she defines her societal contribution through her work. When viewed solely as an example of a woman living the professional life of her choosing, this may appear to be a 'success story'. Yet a different aspect of the experience emerges when factoring in costs to the participant's personal life and her feelings of isolation from her family and the wider community. For instance, the participant stated that her engagement ended as a result of her fiancé's disapproval of her long working hours and her interaction with her male colleagues.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that gender norms and roles are dynamic and fluid; they do not operate in a rigid manner across time and space.

<sup>15</sup> Throughout this paper, direct quotations from research participants are used to illustrate the broader concepts being discussed. Participant identity has been anonymized, although relevant biographical details are used when contextualizing individual statements.

For the participant, the decision to terminate her engagement also had a negative impact on her parents' happiness, which in turn affected her relationship with them — something she considers to be a high price to pay for her autonomy. While the decision to remain employed and terminate an engagement can be interpreted as a signifier of empowerment, or an act of defiance toward patriarchy, the story of this participant illustrates how individual agency is not necessarily empowering in its own right. However, similar stories have often been touted as 'success stories' in the development sector, which has identified the severance of relationships of dependence as a sign of overall empowerment.<sup>16</sup>

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"It has become known that all women working in this sector [NGOs] remain single."

Such considerations can sometimes force women to choose between their status within their family or the community and decision-making autonomy in fundamental areas of their lives. In practice, this is antithetical to autonomy — the ostensible objective of many gender-responsive programmatic initiatives. Should a woman lose the acceptance of her family and community as a consequence of her strategic life choices, then such an act of 'defiance' (i.e., privileging employment over marriage or her parents' happiness) cannot be seen entirely as an expression of a step toward empowerment.

In methodological terms, this is a reminder of the importance of assessing the values embedded in agency and choice. The empowerment experienced as a result of individual choices is therefore deeply tied to the wider context, both internally within the household and externally within the community. In practice, on multiple levels, greater worth is ascribed to certain choices over others, thus rewarding those whose choices uphold these values.

Another participant expressed that her economic activities were met with both support and denunciation.

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"Some people encouraged me; some people did not. However, in society, it is usually frowned upon — especially given the fact that I moved to live alone without my family for work. It is regarded as not necessary."

This highlights that women's economic engagement has traditionally been — and continues to be — perceived as being of secondary importance, and is often accepted only when men cannot work. When asked why men in Idleb 'accept' their wives to work, a former manager of a women's center answered: *"They [men] have no other choice. How can they otherwise maintain the household [financially]?"* These attitudes are particularly important when considering social change and when assessing the sustainability of women's newfound economic prominence in Syria. In general, new roles and opportunities open to women when conflict upends the existing social order, and gender norms that previously hindered women's economic participation can become more lax. The challenge, however, comes after the cessation of violent conflict, during reconstruction and the transition from war to peace. Men returning from frontlines often displace women from roles they occupied during periods of conflict. Without substantial social change, the sustainability of women's newfound economic prominence is therefore in jeopardy.

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16 Critics of the magnitude to which empowerment programmes actually do transform development outcomes argue that neoliberal norms such as individualism have shaped empowerment initiatives.

Ultimately, the project of women's empowerment is dependent upon collective solidarity in the public arena in addition to individual assertiveness in the private sphere. Individuals and groups do make important choices and exercise agency in this regard, but they do so within the limits imposed by their social context. Women's organizations and social movements, in particular, have an important role to play in creating the conditions for change and in reducing the costs to the individual. At the same time, it is also clear that current individually centered approaches fall short in their attempts to dismantle structures of oppression. Participants with donor agencies indicated that women, more often than not, are targeted as individual beneficiaries rather than members of a collective community.

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“Projects and program responses target women with trainings in order to generate livelihoods, and they target them more as a beneficiaries — as a single line beneficiary — rather than looking at a more holistic context of how that woman functions in that society, in that community, and what are the barriers to empowerment from a much more cross-sectional perspective rather than just a livelihood perspective.”

This assertion is particularly important to one of the overarching inferences this paper brings forward: in order to promote women's empowerment, women's economic activities cannot be pursued in isolation from needed changes in other aspects of their lives, or to the broader social context. Moreover, it points to the top-down constraints that often complicate attempts to operationalize an understanding of local contexts, which can not be separated from the women – and men who live within them.

**... failing to bring together women and men in gender-responsive activities, where possible, reinforces the false notion that gender initiatives concern women exclusively, or that women's empowerment is a women's issue. In effect, this merely reinforces the patriarchal structures that such programming ultimately seeks to challenge.**

Several participants in this research expressed their concern with the disengagement or exclusion of men from programmatic responses related to women's empowerment in Syria, thus separating them from the processes of women's empowerment altogether. For instance, the head of programming at a prominent Syrian NGO working exclusively with women stated that men are not allowed in the centers where the organization conducts vocational training, leading many men to express discontent over their exclusion from these initiatives. Certainly, separating women from men in some initiatives is necessary due to protection issues, armed actor influence, or social and religious norms.<sup>17</sup> However, many gender-responsive initiatives continue to target women exclusively, even in areas where a communal approach to gender-responsive programming is feasible. This is not to say that programs that strictly target women should not be carried out. Rather, failing to bring together women and men in gender-responsive activities, where possible, reinforces the false notion that gender initiatives concern women exclusively, or that women's empowerment is a women's issue. In effect, this merely reinforces the patriarchal structures that such programming ultimately seeks to challenge.

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, one of the participants who runs a training center in rural Idlib indicated that training targeting men and women together is frowned upon by armed groups present in the area.

### Transportation infrastructure: An inroad to reducing vulnerability

Participants highlighted several daily challenges they face as they engage in economic activities, one of which is transportation. For example, one of the participants who was displaced from Saraqeb, in Idlib, to Al-Bab, in Aleppo, must commute to Mare', where the medical center in which she works is located. This participant stated that her job was at-risk because she was not capable of arriving at work on time due to the difficulties inherent to commuting.

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“To commute from Al-Bab to Mare', I have to take several stops during which I am usually subject to verbal harassment, especially at check-points. The roads in Idlib are in such a destitute state that by the time I arrive home, I am completely drained.”

The participant further indicated that, given the time she spends in transit, she is physically and mentally incapable of maintaining a social life. “*I became socially isolated*,” she said. She also expressed her frustration that donor agencies are oblivious to the hardships and risks that commuting entails for her and her female colleagues.

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“They [donors] do not know. They think we are close to the center, but this is not the case for all the women who work at the center they fund.”

This is not an isolated case. All other participants highlighted transportation as a key factor in their work and their sense of security. Notably, participants who shared similar concerns are residents in major urban centers of Syria, including Homs, Aleppo, and Tartous. This factor is particularly important given that transportation and road networks in these cities are more efficient and in better repair than infrastructure in Idlib governorate, which is historically underserved and has been subject to intense aerial bombardment. In fact, the participants indicated that active conflict conditions are only one of many factors that affect their mobility. As a result, the suspension of armed conflict has not mitigated the existing challenges they face in their daily commute.

However, the functionality of transportation systems does not necessarily correlate to ease of movement, particularly for women. In turn, this casts doubt on the sensitivity of macro-scale security assessments and sectoral and urban analyses to detect critical impacts on women's mobility and security. Indeed, infrastructure gaps and the resultant difficulties in commuting and transportation are seldom taken into account in humanitarian and development programming, including women's empowerment initiatives. Among the reasons for this oversight are the conventions of the humanitarian and developmental response itself. The vulnerability criteria widely used among response actors locate the vulnerability in the beneficiaries themselves – in this case, the women – but fail to take into account the broader structural conditions and environmental factors that are often more important considerations.<sup>18</sup> Such an understanding overlooks support systems, such as the social and physical networks on which individuals are fundamentally reliant.<sup>19</sup>

Participants in this research are unambiguous that women's commutes and overall mobility are impacted by the conditions of the infrastructure in their areas of residence. To better understand women's experiences and mobility-specific risks, assessments of urban functionality and the status of vital sectors and services should be coupled with the study of the human geography of each locality to better understand individuals' interaction with these structures.<sup>20</sup>

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18 See for example: Hanna Bauman (2019) *Thinking through vulnerability: How conceptual approaches shape infrastructural responses*

<https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40367/Thinking-Through-Vulnerability-How-Conceptual-Approaches-Shape-Infrastructural-Responses>. This research highlights how the definition of vulnerability among humanitarian actors have shaped their response to Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

19 Judith Butler, *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance* in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. J. Butler, Z. Gambetti & L. Sabsay (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016).

20 See for example: Jennifer Fluri (2011). *Bodies, bombs and barricades: Geographies of conflict and civilian (in)security*. This research assesses a feminist political geographic approach to highlight the particularity of civilians' experiences in conflict sites in Afghanistan, arguing the need to add such knowledge to the macro-scale geographic inquiries and security studies.

### Gender ≠ women

Participants who are involved in gender-responsive programming in Syria stated that women sometimes refrain from attending vocational training because their husband or family does not consent to their participation. Sometimes, this is due to the activities' perceived inappropriateness according to cultural norms. At other times, it is due to a lack of knowledge concerning the activities themselves. However, to blame "culture" or "tradition" for the inability of some women to engage in these activities is flawed and misses the point altogether. Rather, program design should ensure that responsibility for women's participation does not rest solely with the women themselves.

According to one of the participants who works at a UN-funded program, these dynamics are also visible within her working environment, where men are generally disconnected from gender-responsive initiatives offered within the workspace.

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"When we first started they gave us a Gender-Based Violence training, but no men attended the meeting. We asked for more training, but we got no positive response. I think this training should be given for men and women, not only women — that misses the point."

Discussions with participants in gender-responsive programming and women engaged in economic activities make clear that men seldom participate in activities concerning women's empowerment and gender equality. Whether this is caused by top-down structural impediments, challenges to implementation, a lack of inclusion, or bottom-up unwillingness on the part of men is difficult to assess. This research indicates that

some combination of all these factors is likely at play. (For more on this discussion, please see *Gender Sensitive Policies: Ink On Paper?*) What is most important to recognize is that patriarchal attitudes exist throughout the population, meaning that all members of a community have a role to play in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. This is especially true in Syria, where men wield disproportionate power and influence within local communities. It is therefore crucial to engage men in order to promote change.<sup>21</sup>

A further consideration that is critical to normative change is that many women's empowerment projects implemented by international and local NGOs in Syria post-2011 have been confined to areas perceived as "appropriate" for women. These programs have often been deployed as quick fixes to economic deprivation, and have focused on vocational training confined to normatively "feminine" economic activities. For instance, many vocational training initiatives, including those involving some participants in this research, emphasize skills that do little to expand the sphere of "accepted" activities, among which are hairdressing, tailoring, embroidery, and administrative functions, such as secretarial work. There is also a tendency to support work that women can perform inside or close to the home. These tendencies have significant consequences. Not only do they reproduce gender binaries and stereotypes concerning gender division within labor skills, they also reinforce existing norms concerning the types of work that are "acceptable" for women. Additionally, these approaches remove political meaning from the empowerment process and instead focus on narrow, technical aspects of empowerment that can be 'taught'. According to data from other contexts, these tendencies direct women toward professions with less earning potential than professions traditionally occupied by men.<sup>22</sup> This subject deserves further attention in the Syrian context as well.

21 While not widespread in Syria, it is important to underline that this research has identified several agencies that do take these considerations into account, and that work with men based on this exact rationale. See for example: <https://www.womenforwomen.org.uk/sites/default/files/Files/WfWI%20MEP%20leave%20behind%20V4.pdf>

22 Naila Kabeer (2012) *Women's economic empowerment and inclusive growth: Labour markets and enterprise development*.

### Gender-sensitive policies: Ink on paper?

Participants working in donor entities, INGOs, local NGOs, and other organizations in Syria indicate that the gender dynamics at play within implementing organizations and donor entities have hindered efforts to evolve a novel approach to gender-related issues in the Syria response. These women described sexist attitudes and gendered power dynamics within their organizations, and for the most part, they were doubtful of the efficacy of gender-sensitive policies.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, they indicated that gender equality policies seldom alter the existing power dynamics in their workplaces and networks. One of these participants, working at a UN-funded program in Syria, indicated that women are expected to take on caregiving responsibilities, or have their tasks taken over by male colleagues.

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“The manager always asks my female colleague to make him coffee.”

Another participant who has substantial experience with NGOs and INGOs in Syria indicated that men in key administrative positions tend to indirectly reward women with overtly “feminine” characteristics and attitudes at the expense of other male staff members or even female staff who do not share these attributes.

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“Men are men, regardless of policies. The more feminine a woman is, the more she can get by with things at work.”

Notably, all participants working in organizations indicated that the fact that organizations in Syria are predominantly staffed by women had not altered the power dynamics prevalent in their working place, particularly the preeminence of men over women. Similar concerns toward the “decorative character” of gender-sensitive policies were shared by women working in organizations that promote or implement women’s empowerment projects in Syria. A manager of gender equality and women’s rights in a Syrian NGO spoke of maternity leave as a good example of agencies’ inadequate implementation of gender-sensitive policies:

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“Every organization gives maternity leave differently. They respond by saying that the budget only covers activities i.e. labor. In most cases, this is not disclosed to the donors, but rather covered internally.”

According to program managers and women working with donor agencies interviewed for this research, everyday workplace challenges have also inhibited their ability to catalyze change in gender-responsive programming in the Syria response. These participants indicated that they met resistance or outright opposition in their respective organizations when promoting women’s rights and advocating for a higher profile for gender, alongside other organizational priorities. A member of a donor organization described internal gender profiling in her organizations as a “galvanizing exercise” to which “there is a lot of internal resistance.” Likewise, a female board member and coordinator in a Syrian NGO based in Turkey stated that even after the implementation of a quota that necessitates gender balance in each organization within the various clusters, men in key administrative positions continue to choose female representatives who are less likely to speak about gender-related matters or programming.

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<sup>23</sup> These include, but are not restricted to, maternity leave, equal pay, harassment and gender-based violence in the working space, quotas or percentages for female staff within an organization, etc.

## ‘The double burden’: Economic activity on top of, not in place of, reproductive labor

Despite Syrian women’s growing participation in economic activities, few changes have taken place in the patriarchal social system of the community at large. Women who are engaged in economic activities are thus also expected to adhere to traditional gender roles, including by executing domestic responsibilities and care work. As a result, women shoulder a “double burden” of paid and unpaid work. Yet unpaid labor is seldom taken into account when assessing the impact of economic engagement on women’s lives. In fact, engagement in the labor force is most often measured through macro-scale assessments of general economic conditions, which speak to the public domain but overlook the private domain. Unless care work is taken into account, the “double burden” will continue to undermine women’s well-being.

In effect, the combination of paid and unpaid work perpetuates gender and economic inequality, and can be profoundly disempowering.<sup>24</sup> For example, one participant who lives in Al-Bab and supports her elderly parents pointed out the excessive burdens that the combination of paid and unpaid work places upon her and other women.

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“Is it possible for a mother to go out of her house every day? Then she has to come back home to work and cook. Western societies are not aware of that. Our societies cannot take on this type of work. They have to lessen the working hours for women; this is not work, this is just tiring to the soul.”

**...Women who are engaged in economic activities are thus also expected to adhere to traditional gender roles, including by executing domestic responsibilities and care work. As a result, women shoulder a “double burden” of paid and unpaid work.**

Two of the female participants who have care responsibilities within their households expressed the toll that long working hours have on their everyday life, yet neither suggested that men should take on such responsibilities instead. Rather, they pointed out that more livelihood opportunities are needed for men.

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“We want job opportunities for men. All the vacancies are for women.”

It follows that the participants’ dissatisfaction with their current working conditions and the “double burden” they shoulder as a result of these conditions should not necessarily be interpreted as a desire to retreat from normative gender roles and traditional responsibilities. Rather, it points to a discussion that goes beyond the values embedded in empowerment itself, to the values that are ascribed to certain kinds of labor over others.

### The waged woman: Measuring GDP, neglecting care work

In the push toward statistical gender equality in the labor market, women have increasingly been compelled to engage in paid work (i.e. work that is formally accounted for in GDP terms) by leaving behind unpaid work, such as reproductive labor, care work, or voluntary work, in which women are disproportionately represented. This has two effects. First, it ignores the wishes of some women to remain engaged in reproductive labor. Second, it diminishes the social value of reproductive labor, which cannot easily be measured by conventional econometrics. In effect, reproductive labor or voluntary work are left overlooked by these measurements altogether.<sup>25</sup> In this light, it can be challenging to appreciate or understand the

choices of the women who wish to engage solely in these types of labor, rather than paid work, leading to programmatic activities that sometimes seek to give women “fuller, more independent lives and paid work” at the expense of their actual wishes.<sup>26</sup> Advocates for women’s empowerment often have called for an equal distribution of household responsibilities as a precondition to women’s genuine empowerment through economic opportunities, yet this too risks privileging imposed sets of values over women’s actual choices. Thus, a fuller understanding of women’s actual choices requires understanding the entrenched social norms<sup>27</sup> that often dissuade men from taking on responsibility as caregivers.<sup>28</sup>

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- <sup>25</sup> The dominant neoliberal economic model actively drives values that disempower women, especially those living in poverty and those from certain ethnic and religious groups. In a world where mainstream economic institutions have fixated on growth, feminist economist and women’s rights movements have made the case that, while gender equality under certain conditions can support economic growth, economic growth does not necessarily go alongside gender equality. For more on these discussions, see for example: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/gender/assets/documents/research/choice-constraints-and-the-gender-dynamics-of-lab/Gender-Equality-and-Economic-Growth.pdf> and <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620928/bp-time-to-care-inequality-200120-en.pdf>
- <sup>26</sup> or more on these discussions, see for example: <https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/wages-for-housework-and-social-reproduction-a-microsyllabus/>
- <sup>27</sup> UN Women cites social beliefs as a key reason why, despite increases in women’s participation in paid work and the declining relevance of the male breadwinner role worldwide, men’s participation in unpaid care work has not increased in any substantial way (See: [https://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW\\_progressreport.pdf](https://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW_progressreport.pdf)). This in turn points to the argument presented earlier on in this paper; that a rise in women’s economic opportunities or a gendered restructuring of paid labour responsibilities, does not necessarily foster the structural change needed to accommodate changing gender dynamics and promote gender equality.
- <sup>28</sup> Training centers of women do offer child care services for women participating in such training, but these efforts are by no means mainstream. Rather, the care responsibilities of women engaged in economic activities, specifically mothers, are usually taken up by other females in the same household or alternatively by female kinship.



## Lost in translation, grids, and box-checking: The way forward?

Data collected through interviews with women working in NGOs, INGOs, and donor entities has helped to identify several institutional impediments that hinder response actors' ability to comprehend the implications of their interventions at a local level, and which complicate the process of incorporating contextual research and analysis at the operational level. The challenges they identified include:

- A lack of contextual knowledge of gender dynamics in Syria;
- The insufficiency of the current program design, including a lack of the flexibility needed to confront the realities facing women in Syria;
- Insufficient funding allocations for gender-responsive programs;
- The lack of methodologically sound and effective assessments of gender-responsive programs;
- Internal resistance to increasing women's roles, and reluctance to undertake gender-responsive programs.<sup>29</sup>

Among these, the lack of contextual knowledge was identified as being among the most important factors to have reduced gender equality and women's empowerment to a "box-checking exercise," as noted by several participants in this research. The participants most likely to raise this concern were those affiliated with INGOs and donor entities. Participants affiliated with Syrian NGOs also expressed frustration regarding the perceived lack of awareness of the Syrian context on the part of INGOs and donors, in addition to their concern over strict timeframes, procedures, and requirements of program design. Accordingly, they stated

that such criteria, although necessary, have not permitted the needed degree of flexibility to meet intended project outcomes. Addressing the NGO-donor partnership, a participant in a women-led Syrian NGO stated:

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"Donors not only do not understand the context, but they do not understand that we understand the context better than they do."

Others highlighted the challenge presented by siloed funding streams and the inadequacies of monitoring and evaluation for gender-responsive programs. Specifically, the allocation of a funding stream dedicated exclusively to gender-responsive programming limits the reach of such initiatives and reduces overall impact in terms of the broader social, political, familial, and infrastructural challenges that women face. As a result, these programs are often reduced to women-targeting programs that may better the immediate material conditions of their beneficiaries, but fall short of instigating a change in a community's gender dynamics. Conversely, in the cases where gender is incorporated in other funding streams, it is often reduced to a box-checking exercise to quantify the number of women beneficiaries. As one participant from a donor entity indicated, a sector-specific division of funding streams is one reason why holistic approaches remain largely unoperational:

<sup>29</sup> Other concerns that participants highlighted and that are common to all programs in Syria include: continuously fluctuating context, the community's rejection, local stakeholders resistance etc. The latter was considered to be of higher risk in specific areas for gender-responsive programs more than other programs.

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“Part of the reason why I think actors have failed to do that is because we work in a humanitarian-development response system that uses projects as our metric, and fund disbursement as our metric, and indicators as our metric, and often these kind of systems and these kind of approaches are not conducive to multi-sector analysis, holistic thinking and community-based responses, because the industry is not really designed or does not function in that way.”

According to the same participant, even in cases where attempts at cross-sectoral approaches were pursued, the assessment and monitoring of these interventions has proven challenging, given the prevalent methods of monitoring and evaluation. In an attempt to circumvent the limitation of the methods, managers of women-targeting programs indicated that they maintain direct and continuous contact with the women beneficiaries of their program, in parallel with the regular assessments and evaluation of programs. Notably, these methods were mostly highlighted by Syrian women who enjoy more ready access to and a greater degree of connectedness with the communities in which they implement programs, when compared to international organizations or donor entities. Additionally, such measures are often the ad-hoc, individual efforts by women dedicated to highlighting gender-related matters within their organizations or their specific program, and thus are not incorporated systematically at any level of program design or implementation.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted some of the crucial challenges to the way in which development agencies approach women's empowerment objectives in Syria. Perhaps one of the most important inferences that this paper seeks to bring forth is that the complex processes of women's actual empowerment have often been reduced to simplistic development objectives as a result of the preoccupation with quantifying empowerment, often through the number of women beneficiaries reached, labor force participation rates, or simplistic econometrics. Moreover, it has been argued that the concept of empowerment offers a range of different, sometimes contrasting, meanings that have been used inconsistently across gender-responsive projects and programming, and which often divorce indicators of empowerment from their operational context.

Understanding the context in which individual and collective behavior are shaped is a prerequisite for understanding the agency, choices, and needs of the women (and men) themselves. Women's autonomy is deeply embedded socially, and should, therefore, be addressed through a holistic approach that does not separate indi-

viduals from the immediate context or mistakenly measure impact on individual dimensions of empowerment in isolation to other, interrelated dimensions. This also emphasizes the need to contextualize issues of empowerment and analyze them within the structures in which they operate.

However, the process of conducting sound contextual analysis and research to incorporate these considerations at an operational level is seemingly one of the most significant structural challenges which international agencies continue to face. The dominant explanations concerning the issues that agencies face when attempting to integrate contextual research and analysis into all levels of an intervention have often centered around the short-term nature of conflicts, and the lack of adequate financial or human resources and capacity. However, even when the necessary research and analysis exists, its integration continues to be impeded in several ways, the most significant of which may in fact be on the level of institutions themselves.

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