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IN NORTH-EAST SYRIA

PAPER

4

Improving Gender-mainstreaming in Social Cohesion Programming:

North-east Syria



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Executive Summary

Building on insights gained from COAR’s work on social cohesion programming as part of the Studies for Stabilisation series, this report considers ways in which aid programmes in North-east Syria (NES) can improve gender-mainstreaming in policy and practice. Fundamentally, this requires an approach that ensures the particular concerns and experiences of women and men are an integral part of programming so that both groups benefit equally. Gender equality and gender sensitivity should be considered crosscutting dimensions of a cohesive society, and addressing gender fault lines must be regarded as essential to social harmony.

Broad themes relating to gender in NES are discussed, including, most notably, the prevalence of arbitrary gender stereotypes, implicit assumptions around gender roles in conflict settings, and the potentially misleading effects these mindsets can have on gender, social cohesion, and the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) programming. This version is adapted for publication, and does not include assessments of the client’s existing portfolio as per the original report. The original reviewed a number of client projects with regard to their sensitivity to context, to prevailing thought within gender studies, and to the practical application of projects across four metrics:

Concept	How well founded are project assumptions around gender?
Approach	Do the projects consider gender’s structural dimensions? Do they move beyond stereotypes? Does disaggregated data support project rationale?
Inclusiveness	Do the projects recognise the importance of inclusivity? How is this dealt with across gender divides?
Intersectionality	Is an intersectional lens applied in a way which recognises the unique experiences of all beneficiary populations?

Here, an intersectional approach means to consider the ways that social categories and systems of power such as ethnicity, age, class, and location, interact with gender to shape engagement with conflict and stabilisation programming. Its application to research is increasingly regarded as useful within aid programming, but is particularly indispensable in regions like NES where tribe, clan, and ethnicity play a pronounced role in socio-political organisation and intercommunal grievance. The original version of this report considered the above-listed dimensions in its portfolio review with these thoughts in mind, providing the client with a more structured framework with which to assess, monitor, and evaluate project proposals and project performance.

A note on terminology

‘*Gender dynamics*’ refers to the interaction between different gender categories,¹ informed by socio-cultural ideas about gender and the power relationships that define them. In order to understand existing gender dynamics, it is believed that gender must first be recognised and treated as structural. Gender norms are not just a matter of ideas and beliefs: they are embedded in formal and informal institutions and structures in both the private and public spheres. As such, analysing gender norms means examining the social, political, economic, religious, legal, and cultural institutions that uphold them. Such analysis can seldom be undertaken in short order and typically requires a long-standing commitment to qualitative research and learning.

‘*Gender mainstreaming*’ is a contested concept in both theory and practice. It aims to promote gender equality by improving the effectiveness of policies and making visible the gendered nature of assumptions, processes, and outcomes.² It also entails assessment of the implications for women and men of any planned action, and, as such, making women’s and men’s experiences and aspirations an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programmes.³ While gender-mainstreaming has been highlighted as a priority for stakeholders across all sectors of assistance, critical gender perspectives are typically absent from programme design and evaluation.⁴

1 USAID (2018) *Defining Gender for Gender-responsive Education Programs* | Education Links

2 Walby (2005) *Gender Mainstreaming: Productive tensions in theory and practice*.

3 UN (1997) *Gender mainstreaming*

4 White (2020) *Gender in Countering Violent Extremism Program Design, Implementation and Evaluation: Beyond Instrumentalism*

1. Gender in Wartime North-east Syria

A collection of global conflict analysis provides compelling empirical evidence that intra-state conflicts can destabilise gender dynamics and foster transformational changes to gender roles, at least in the short- to medium-term.⁵ Disruptions to gender roles are most often observed in these settings when the gendered division of labour is adjusted by conflict, which in turn opens space for women to enter male-dominated professions. This arguably contributes towards women's upward social and economic mobility, increases their political participation, and creates normative changes in public attitudes towards women in general. As witnessed throughout Syria, changes in household composition have occurred owing to male military recruitment, displacement, and battlefield deaths, causing many households to undergo a gendered reorganisation.

In many cases, the gendered reorganisation experienced by households has resulted in reduced incomes. This has in turn led – and at times forced – more Syrian women to pursue income-generating activities to cope with the radical changes taking place in the economic, social, and political spheres. Female-headed households have naturally risen in number as a result.⁶ Sustainable incomes are hard to find for many in NES yet some

women interviewed by COAR have managed to enter the labourforce after receiving vocational training from aid programmes. Others receive occasional cash support to make products for local markets. Each such initiative has been typically limited in scope however, and has not necessarily been concerned with increasing the long-term resilience of female-headed households.

Conflict-related societal change has naturally helped establish several prevailing gender narratives amongst practitioners responding to the Syrian conflict. These narratives hold that shifts in gender roles and household responsibilities have impacted pre-war gender dynamics significantly, and particularly in the private sphere. Such conclusions are reached almost invariably throughout Syria. However, like the conflict itself, gender dynamics are highly localised. It is therefore striking that, rather than recognise the unique ways in which gender norms are influenced by localised interactions, available gender dynamics research on Syria adopts a broadly homogenous view. On this point, a female NGO worker interviewed by COAR explained that while she considered the work of NGOs beneficial, they were “unrealistic when approaching some topics,” as limited awareness of different gender issues across contexts led to programming missteps and under-prioritisation.

Box 1: Moving beyond gender binaries and stereotypes: Women's radicalisation

The neglect of women in wartime has long been highlighted as a blind-spot by scholars of gender and security studies. When women are made visible, they are often stereotyped as victims, peacemakers, mothers, carers, and relatives of violent men.^{7, 8} This is arguably the case because the male role in political violence is assumed to require little to no explanation, and because essential qualities, such as being violent or peaceful, are often ascribed to male and female biology.⁹ This obscures the reality that women increasingly play multifaceted roles in political violence and terrorist organisations around the world, including in NES. Women were previously considered to take on primarily submissive and supportive roles as terrorist affiliates, but their involvement in the maintenance, perpetuation, and execution of terrorist ideologies is steadily earning wider recognition. In NES, for example, female IS affiliates were prominent on the front lines, variously serving as recruiters or officers in the IS women's police brigade.¹⁰

5 See, e.g.,: Webster, Chen, and Beardsley (2019) *Conflict, Peace, and the Evolution of Women's Empowerment* or Hughes and Tripp (2015) *Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010*

6 Before 2011, research suggests that 4 percent of households were headed by women – a number that has now risen to 22 percent.

7 Pearson (2018) *Why men fight and women don't*.

8 Aoláin and Huckerby (2018) *Gendering Counterterrorism: How to, and How Not To – Part I*

9 Kimmel (2018) *Violent extremists share one thing: Their gender*.

10 Middle East Institute (2020) *Life inside Syria's al-Hol camp*.

Part of the challenge when working with gender in Syria will be to move beyond the *traditional*¹¹. This label is often used indiscriminately across the country, often leading to the categorisation of women as a homogenous collective whose life experiences are fundamentally similar. Not only has this had the effect of universalising Syrian women's experience of conflict, displacement, and resilience, it has also replicated Orientalist portrayals of Middle Eastern women as sexually and religiously oppressed by patriarchal and violent Muslim men.¹² This type of analysis often passes for gender analysis because it considers women and men as actors and includes statistics about the positions of men and women in society.

However, such analysis rarely engages the contextual features which might explain, for example, how class or urban–rural divides or other social categorisations determine lived experiences and/or gender role disruptions. It is therefore important to recognise that some of the prevailing gender narratives that form the basis of gender-responsive programming in Syria¹³ have been shaped by simplistic – at times – ahistorical, understandings of *traditional* Syrian households and power dynamics.¹⁴ As several interviewees emphasised,

the prevailing narrative of Syrian women's shift from housewives to breadwinners fails to recognise that women may well have been heads of households before the conflict and/or prior to their displacement.¹⁵

One way for aid actors in NES to adopt a more contextually sensitive approach to gender would be to recognise the often-disharmonious relationship between Kurdish and Arab populations; a feature which is all too often overlooked by aid actors in social cohesion programming in the region. Arab-majority areas are commonly underserved by social cohesion programmes, Arab women are therefore underrepresented, and the domination of predominantly Kurdish, Self-Administration-linked NGOs in programme delivery reduces a sense of Arab female ownership. This can naturally ignore (and at worst, exacerbate) social disconnects across different women. Indeed, while Arab women interviewees expressed a certain level of discontent regarding the domination of Kurds over the region's aid sector, Kurdish women justified these sentiments differently. Their view was that these organisations “are introducing new ideas to the society,” and that it was Arab women who were reluctant to accept change.

Box 2: Arab-Kurdish Relations in North-east Syria

NES is populated by an Arab majority and a mosaic of religious and ethnic minorities including Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen, Chechens, Yazidis and Kurds. Most Kurds reside in the far northeastern reaches of Al-Hasakeh governorate, and are concentrated in particular around the cities of Qamishli and Al-Malikiyeh. Unlike most other minorities in the region, Kurds experienced decades of systematic discrimination and marginalisation by the Syrian government until Kurdish-dominated authority structures began to impose themselves in 2012. Sensitivities arising from the contemporary Kurdish-Arab relationship can be largely traced to the discriminatory policies of the Syrian government prior to the current conflict. Social tensions were exacerbated as Kurdish populations were marginalised by the state, which has in turn fostered long-standing grievances between those positively and negatively affected by state policy. Tension between Kurds and Arabs was very much latent under the control of the Syrian government but has been unleashed and reshaped by the political and military domination of the predominantly Kurdish-orchestrated Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (hereafter, Self-Administration) and its allied Syrian Defence Forces (SDF).¹⁶

11 Lokot (2018) [Syrian refugees: Thinking beyond stereotypes](#).

12 Dağtaş (2018) [Inhabiting difference across religion and gender](#).

13 These initiatives have often been paired with the notion that women's economic engagement leads to women's ultimate empowerment. Previous research conducted by COAR shows that women's participation in economic activities does not equate to empowerment on a more holistic or ultimately meaningful basis. To read the full report, please see: COAR (2020) [The Business of Empowering Women](#).

14 Lokot (2018) [Syrian refugees: Thinking beyond stereotypes](#).

15 Historically, for many Syrian households, seasonal work in Gulf states was important to economic stability.

16 For a detailed account of NES military and political contexts see the sister study as part of this series: “[Entry Points for Social Cohesion Programming in North-eastern Syria](#)”.



Woman travels to work in Hasakeh.
Credit: Delil Souleyman/AFP

“ The harms experienced by men, boys, and male adolescents on the threshold of adulthood have largely been neglected in humanitarian and human rights discussions relating to NES.

Lastly, there is a tendency within gender analysis to emphasise the experiences and harms experienced by women and girls. This is often for wholly justifiable reasons linked to the fact that women typically experience heightened vulnerability in conflict settings, yet it risks ignoring the perspectives of men and boys who experience wartime differently. The harms experienced by men, boys, and male adolescents on the threshold of adulthood have largely been neglected in humanitarian and human rights discussions relating to NES¹⁷. When it comes to questions of social cohesion and PVE, however, men are subject to a unique collection of harms and vulnerabilities arising from assumptions about their gender, parentage, origins, and religious beliefs that demand careful consideration. The distinct harms being experienced by boys in NES should naturally sit within the framework of gender-responsive programming. This is true particularly as their gender is used as a defining trait to subject them to family separation, detention without process, and all the vulnerabilities that follow.¹⁸

17 Aoláin (2021) Gendering the Boy Child in Counterterrorism: The Situation of Boys in Northeast Syria.

18 Aoláin (2021) Gendering the Boy Child in Counterterrorism: The Situation of Boys in Northeast Syria.

2. Gender Equality and Extremism

The varied roles that different gender categories play within peace, security, and conflict are often misconceived,¹⁹ and it is widely acknowledged that gender inequality can be both the cause and the consequence of different forms of violence, including political violence.²⁰ It is therefore vital that gender sensitivity is at the heart of social cohesion programming in NES in ways which support the prevention of violent extremism. In many respects, NES provides fertile ground for this kind of activity. The Self-Administration purports to hold a political philosophy which seeks to reduce gender inequality, primarily by means of “ensuring that women of all ethnic and religious backgrounds can participate in political, social, and economic life at every level, from their neighborhoods to regional politics”.²¹ This mirrors thinking within international fora such as the UN Security Council, which has encouraged member states to address conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism through women’s empowerment.²²

Certainly, there is overwhelming quantitative evidence linking women’s empowerment and gender equality with peace and stability, as well as strong correlations between gender inequalities and violent conflict. Yet more recent work suggests that while the causes of violent extremism may be broadly assumed, they have yet to be definitively proven.²³ Correlation does not imply causation,²⁴ and the conflation of empowerment agendas with security-focused objectives may be ineffective or even counterproductive. Consider, for example, awareness raising around child marriage or initiatives concerned with reducing gender-based violence. While these are valuable programmes in their own right, they may not necessarily contribute to counter-terrorism objectives if they are disconnected from the local drivers of de/radicalisation. For this reason, it is important to critically evaluate the anticipated outcomes of wom-

en’s empowerment and the links these programmes have to a donor’s broader strategic objectives.

This is all the more important given gender programming in NES has been largely viewed as a vehicle for women’s empowerment. A plethora of gender-responsive and gender-specific programming has therefore been produced which establishes women’s empowerment as its ultimate objective. However, attempts to conceptualise women’s empowerment in ways that speak to mainstream policy discourse has resulted in a proliferation of research based on divergent – and sometimes contradictory – definitions and indicators of empowerment. This is arguably due to an overwhelming preoccupation with quantifying empowerment and demonstrating the impact of specific interventions based on metrics that are often divorced from their operational context. One interviewee summed up this sentiment, referring to a common refrain expressed by crisis-affected populations subject to international assistance. As she explained, women-focused NGOs “sometimes do not observe the tradition and norms of local communities,” and therefore design and implement programmes that are detached from local realities.

There has been a strong focus on the economic dimension of women’s empowerment in Syria, often to the detriment of other critical factors. In effect, this emphasis has framed economic independence as the most important aspect of women’s empowerment and emancipation. However, a range of empirical studies, including one undertaken by COAR,²⁵ show that women’s participation in economic activities does not necessarily equate to empowerment on an ultimately meaningful basis. Existing initiatives have often focused exclusively on women as primary beneficiaries rather than through a holistic, community-based approach. This has led to the inclusion of some activities and the

19 Bryson (2018) [Debunking myths on gender and extremism](#).

20 Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo (2020) [How is political violence gendered?](#)

21 Syrian Democratic Council describes its broad approach to women’s empowerment [here](#).

22 [Resolutions](#) on this subject have been supplemented by entities like the [Global Counterterrorism Forum](#) in terms of how CVE considers discrete gender dimensions, on the gender dimensions of countering violent extremism.

23 Winterbotham (2018) [Do mothers know best? How gender assumptions harm PVE](#).

24 There are examples of CVE projects that have positively impacted women’s access to services, education etc., but not translated into improving women’s response to terrorism. Meanwhile, it is also true that violent extremism emerges in peaceful, stable and relatively ‘equal’ societies.

25 For more on this discussion see: COAR (2020) [The Business of Empowering Women](#).



Women's empowerment programmes in NES must demonstrate more specificity as to how they promote resilience for women presenting with particular circumstances.
Credit: NPA

exclusion of others and a common programmatic failure to address the more diverse 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 their overall effects on 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 experience of inequality and may ultimately fail to deliver on stabilisation objectives including counter extremism.

Specifically, the creation of siloed programming and funding streams dedicated exclusively to gender-responsive programming has limited the reach of such initiatives and reduced their overall effects on the broader social, political, familial, and infrastructural challenges that women face.

3. Understanding Gender as Structural

Of all Syrian regions, NES is recognised as the most open to the recognition of sexual, minority, and women's rights. Civilian structures have been built to foster women's rights and gender equality, and all governmental bodies, including collectives, communes, and committees, operate a co-chair mixed gender leadership system.²⁶ In the cultural domain, Self-Administration leadership figures have proclaimed that women have been welcomed into historically male-only social lounges for discussion of important tribal and political matters (al-Madafah).²⁷ In addition, the Self-Administration has provided space for the creation of mixed gender and women-only civil society organisations within its community level commune system. Operating within the framework and principles set out by the Self-Administration's political structure, these organisations are designed to respond to the specific needs of a given community and/or identity group. Theoretically, this helps ensure that women's local aspirations are not homogenised, and complements the work of cross-community women's initiatives including safe spaces, shelters, women's centers, and women-only villages.²⁸

Though such initiatives can be viewed as important steps towards more inclusive forms of gender equality, they have yet to institute sustained change in common public attitudes and are unevenly distributed. Indeed, with regard to the change in status of al-Madafah, there is little to suggest that tribal notables have accepted the inclusion of Arab women. Indeed, local sources report that Arab men have in fact opted to leave these chambers because of a refusal to share the floor with women. Conversely, acceptance is reportedly better for Kurdish women in Kurdish public spaces, but a raft of women-specific challenges endure throughout the region. For instance, women and girls face continued and multiple protection and reproductive health risks, and gender-based violence has reportedly increased, particularly in camp settings.²⁹

On paper, the Self-Administration's Charter of the Social Contract offers a rights-based model that promotes political participation and women's rights across ethnic and socio-political divides. It also provides nominal guarantees for the rights of sexual and gender minorities. In practice, however, many of its promises have gone unfulfilled. Women are rarely granted actual authority, and roles of influence remain superficial. For example, municipal councils in Ar-Raqqa established committees for women's issues in an effort to provide notable positions for women in the community. Overall, however, the roles this initiative has created are not regarded as particularly influential by wider society.³⁰

Similarly, mixed ethnicity women's organisations appear to reflect token representation rather than any substantive contribution to policy discussion and public attitudes. Arabs occupying local leadership positions in the SDF and Self-Administration are often said to possess little actual influence, and their decision-making is commonly overseen by more powerful Kurdish political consultants known as 'cadres'. As COAR has noted elsewhere, this can have practical consequences for social cohesion given it feeds a sense of marginalisation among Arab-majority communities and an associated refusal to fully engage with the Self-Administration's political project.³¹

This poses the question as to whether the elaboration of such policies is sufficient to facilitate strengthening of women's political status, or whether empowerment resulting from gender provisions further depends on successful implementation. Emerging research suggests that gender provisions are most likely to bring about real improvements in women's political status when women take active part in fulfilling and exercising existing and newly afforded rights.³²

26 Burch (2020) *Non-territorial autonomy and gender equality: The case of the Autonomous Administration of north and east Syria*.

27 Al-Monitor (2020) *North-east Syrian women to participate in meetings on tribal matters*.

28 Women-only villages are organized, built, and maintained by women, and have been established primarily to support women who have been subject to domestic and/or gender-based violence. Over time, they have increasingly become a space for collective education and a range of initiatives that emphasise women's rights.

29 France 24 (2021) *Hundreds in northeast Syria protest 'honour killings'*.

30 Atlantic Council (2019) *Tokenism or empowerment? Syrian women and the SDF*.

31 For more on these dynamics, please see: *Northeast Syria Social Tensions and Stability Monitoring Pilot Project May 2021*.

32 True and Riveros-Morales (2019) *Towards inclusive peace: Analysing gender-sensitive peace agreement 2000–2016*.

4. Conclusions and Considerations

Gender dynamics in NES are as multifaceted as anywhere else in Syria. In order to grasp the reshaping of gender roles and norms in these locations, qualitative analysis should move beyond a generalised understanding of gender dynamics in the region as a whole, and acknowledge the localised nature of these dynamics. It is also important to recognise that gender inequality cannot be redressed through separate women's groups and gender-specific programmes. All levels of governmental institutions, local organisations, aid programmes and other stakeholders must transform their policies and policy-making processes to analyse their effects on both women and men, and to ensure equality in their responses and aspirations.

A one-size-fits-all programming approach rarely proves useful, and may prove impotent in regions with complex local dynamics such as NES. Designing and implementing effective programmes that adopt a compelling approach to gender therefore entails continued efforts to acknowledge the particularities of each location and the ways in which these elements can inform the most contextually appropriate response to the challenges of stabilisation. Like all aspects of international assistance in conflict-affected and transitional settings, PVE and social cohesion in NES must be built on sound gender analysis that transcends gender binaries and stereotypical interpretations. This entails critical engagement with behaviour, norms, attitudes, and the various systems of power which all too often shape representations of women as innately maternal, domestic and peaceful, and portray men as perpetrators of violence. The solutions to extremism and social disharmony almost certainly lie in more complex characterisations of people and their motivations, and limitations. As such, it falls to aid agencies to take a more deliberate approach to gender, which could proceed on the basis of the following considerations:

- Insist upon the incorporation of an intersectional approach to programme design which recognises unique challenges presented by different beneficiary groups in each target location. The application of context should go beyond basic community profiling and instead critically engage with the interaction of people, place, and project planning. Rather than homogenising the experiences of women and men as categories, research must recognise the ways in which other identity markers intersect to form the particular circumstances confronting the individual.
- Interrogate gender stereotypes and blanket gender assumptions. These are not only common to several of the projects assessed here, but permeate many of the gender-related aspects of programmes in other sectors and gender-related discourse in overseas assistance to conflict-affected contexts more broadly. Assumptions rarely provide an accurate template for the interpretation of gender issues however, and their continued use is only likely to provide the same answers to different problems for different people in different (and evolving) areas.
- Recognise the unique harms, vulnerabilities, and experiences of men and boys. PVE and social cohesion programming tend to emphasise the vulnerabilities of women, often for wholly justifiable reasons. However, this has resulted in an under-appreciation of the perspectives of men and boys, producing assumptions about their gender, origins, and behaviour that can undermine the quality of social cohesion and PVE programming.
- Critically evaluate the anticipated outcomes of women's empowerment programming. It is widely assumed, for instance, that economic empowerment necessarily results in a range of positive developmental outcomes for women. This may not be the case as often as assumed however, and particularly when these programmes fail to engage with the diversity of structural impediments to women's empowerment. Community-level dynamics that intersect with women's experiences of inequality must be acknowledged and incorporated into programme design.
- Invest in ongoing and detailed gender analysis, particularly in relation to the historical, political, and social context of the operating environment. Research and analysis of gender dynamics should transcend immediate priority concerns. It should seek to explain (rather than simply describe) gender dynamics and the vulnerabilities of women and men in conflict-affected environments. This encourages

a localised understanding of gender that is dynamic, longitudinal and explanatory, and will prove useful when designing, implementing, and adapting all types of programming in Syria.

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