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THE SYRIAN WOMEN'S
POLITICAL MOVEMENT

Policy Paper

**FROM WAR ECONOMY TO AN ECONOMICALLY
-SAFE ENVIRONMENT: PROBLEMS AND
SOLUTIONS AS SEEN BY SYRIAN WOMEN**





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Executive summary

This policy paper aims to review the effects of war economy in Syria on elements that were defined locally as the basic foundations of an economically-safe environment from a women's perspective. It provides a list of recommendations that help achieve economic security on the personal, communal, and institutional levels. The paper is based on the results of 13 consultation sessions organized by the Syrian Women's Political Movement (SWPM) between February and April 2020. The sessions were attended by 130 women in 13 different regions inside Syria. The participants identified the most important factors that constitute, in their view, an economically-safe environment, and reviewed the challenges that face establishing them as follows:

○ Food and water security

Participants discussed the low purchasing power, the reduction in state-subsidized goods, and the high cost of living that led to an imbalance in nutritional choices causing extreme cases of malnutrition. Participants confirmed that this reality has resulted from the politicization of the foundational elements of food and water security, especially in terms of agricultural production. They further asserted that women had to bear the heaviest burden of food and water insecurity as many were forced to join organized networks of mendicity and prostitution, and many were forced into early marriages.

○ Services

Participants were unanimous on the poor conditions of services in light of the depletion of local resources, and their manipulation by de facto authorities who imposed taxes and unfair fees under pretexts of financing their personnel and projects. Participants also discussed aspects of the economics of violence including acts of kidnappings, smuggling, extortion, looting, as well as blackmailing families of detainees and those wanted for military service. Participants established that these acts were practiced by official and paramilitary security forces, in addition to gangs that often work in coordination with official forces or impersonate them.

○ Medical services

Participants noted that difficulty in accessing medical services was one of the most challenging issues that are directly linked to economic security and the ability to earn, especially amid the high costs of medication and medical services and the absence of any health insurance and subsidy. They also discussed the deliberate targeting of the health sector and its exploitation and utilisation as a tool of war, especially by the regime forces.

○ Educational services

Participants stressed that education was the key to economic security, especially for women, and linked education to the economic situation in a vicious circle. They highlighted the militarization of the educational sector facilities and the interference of de facto forces in their management, personnel and curricula, which made many people reluctant to pursue their basic and higher education. Participants demonstrated that the economic factor was the strongest in disrupting education, represented by the high cost of pursuing education, and the need of school-aged children to earn money, resulting in the prevalence of school drop-out and child labor in harsh conditions.

○ Housing, land, and property rights

Participants raised the issue of property rights in its political dimension while discussing economic security before and during the war. They tackled the problem of expropriation as well as the problems that resulted from systematic destruction, forced displacement, and the unjust urban legislations that were enacted and weaponised by the regime. Participants also discussed the prevention of repatriation, and the problems of losing official property and civil documents necessary to claim ownership rights. They stressed that women bear a greater burden in the problems of property rights, as they face them from a socially marginalized position.

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○ Job opportunities

Participants agreed that the dynamics of the job market have changed within the current situation especially from a gender-based perspective. They discussed the issues of unemployment, decrease in the actual value of income, corruption in all sectors, and the authoritarian interventions of military powers in the job market in all regions. They agreed that although the reality of war has empowered women, it did not create a structural change in the patriarchal society, as evidenced by the systematic injustice towards women in the job market and women's inability to make decision or participate in income spending.

○ Investment environment

Participants agreed that legal restrictions and deteriorating security led to additional costs for investors and was reflected in massive inflation suffered by consumers. Participants also talked about economic warlords who funded the regime and provided it with resources. They touched upon investment contracts obtained by the regime's military allies as a repayment for their military interventions. They explained the impact of the regional political economy, especially that of Lebanon, on the deterioration of the Syrian economy.

○ The economics of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

The political economics of NGOs was raised by participants as one of the basic foundations of the war economy. Participants asserted that the NGO sector helped sustain de facto authorities in general, and the regime in particular. They denounced the dependence of this sector on donor policies which impose projects that do not necessarily take into account the reality on the ground or the dynamics of conflict, and allow for manipulation and fraud. Participants also denounced the NGOs' focus on relief rather than development, resulting in greater individual and institutional dependency.

Participants shared the view that realising economic security requires the liberation of the above economic factors from politicization and militarization, and it needs individual and societal efforts to strengthen social responsibility. It also requires institutional change within a timeframe that starts immediately and lasts until economic recovery is achieved. Following are some recommendations presented by participants in this regard.

1. General recommendation to achieve an economically-safe environment

- Achieving security and political stability
- Creating a just legal environment
- Establishing an effective institutional environment
- Supporting civil activism and the social environment
- Building a productive and just economic environment

2. Recommendations specific to the war economy in Syria

○ On the political level:

Prioritizing economic recovery in the political process and working with neighboring countries to develop frameworks that stimulate local economic recovery, in addition to building on economic agreements between de facto authorities to establish political agreements that could help stabilize security without compromising on accountability.

○ On international aid and the work of NGOs:

Emphasizing a participatory, inclusive, and rights-based reconstruction process, aimed at achieving economic recovery, while activating accountability for the work of the United Nations (UN) and international NGOs by donor countries; maintaining cross-border international aid; working directly with affected communities in regime-controlled areas and not through co-opted institutions; insuring effective mechanisms for operating in areas captured by extremist armed forces, instead of cutting fund for fear of its diversion; creating an independent mechanism that oversees the work of NGOs to monitor human rights violations and corruption; linking awareness raising with economic empowerment programs; ensuring conflict-sensitive operations; and setting up a long-term withdrawal plan of NGOs to help establishing self-sustained local institutions.

○ On the economic situation:

Addressing the problem of investment contracts awarded by the regime to its political and military allies to guarantee the rights of the Syrian people; holding economic warlords accountable and reclaiming embezzled funds to serve the public interest; encouraging policies that protect human capital and activate local production; supporting financial, monetary and investment policies that contribute to reducing inflation, encourage investment, and raise purchasing power; creating favorable conditions that promote Syrian capacities; and separating labor laws from political loyalties and addressing the resulting problems.

- **On services, health and education:**

Pressuring on the regime to immediately stop the systematic bombing of hospitals and schools, and to stop the interference of security forces in services and public institutions including health and education facilities; ensuring the right to safe and affordable access to all services and infrastructure networks, as well as access to official documents necessary to activate political, civil and legal participation; allowing NGOs to work on restoring infrastructure networks and services in reconciliation areas that are experiencing voluntary return; providing financial support to families with children of compulsory education age; supporting educational sector workers; increasing subsidy to the medical sector, improving its efficiency, and facilitating health insurance and mental health programs for all groups.

- **On food and water security:**

Reviewing policies and laws that aim at raising the efficiency of agricultural production; devising plans to address damage to natural resources caused by military operations and aggressive coping mechanisms; ensuring safe access for workers in the agricultural sector to their lands; ensuring the availability of services and infrastructure necessary to advance agricultural production.

- **On housing, land, and property rights:**

Creating a legal mechanism for documenting property rights for groups whose rights are being violated by laws enacted by the regime; providing legal and financial support to those affected by property rights violations to obtain the necessary documents to claim their rights; suspending unfair laws enacted by the regime after 2011 in relation to property rights; compensating those affected by such laws as part of transitional justice; linking the safe and voluntary return of forcibly displaced people with property rights; placing pressure on the regime to stop policies that prevent repatriation; providing necessary support to local communities who are rehabilitating homes and infrastructures in their neighbourhoods using individual and community resources.

Introduction

During the years of the war following the 2011 Revolution in Syria, the country entered a vicious cycle of war economy dominated by multiple de facto powers who manipulated resources within each region to serve their political and military interests. Residents of these regions were forced to comply with this reality and endure its dynamics, even when this translated in empowering the de facto powers, whether directly or indirectly. The dynamics of this vicious cycle of war economy, and its effects on local communities in Syria may differ from one region to another. What is common, however, is that the basic components of economic security are exploited to serve the interests of the dominant powers at the expense of

local communities, and that the official economy has shrunk fundamentally, giving way to a 'shadow economy' to dominate the scene, saving lives in sometimes, while producing economic warlords who imposed themselves alongside military warlords and de facto powers, and acted as intermediaries between them.

Several studies have analyzed the effects of war on the collapse of official economy in Syria, and deconstructed the components of the alternative war economy that replaced it. This policy paper attempts to review the effects of this new reality on local communities in Syria from a women's perspective by understanding the impact of this reality on what women identified as the essential pillars of an economically-safe environment. The paper provides a set of recommendations for dismantling war economy and reaching economic security on the individual, community, and institutional levels. The paper is based on 13 consultation sessions organized by SWPM between February and April 2020. The sessions were attended by 130 women in 13 different regions inside Syria. Each region has followed a unique trajectory and endured different authorities and powers.



"Despite my good income, I am far from being financially secure. When I make some surplus money, I worry about spending it as I might need it in the future, and I worry about not spending it as it might lose its value due to the ongoing inflation... And even when money is available, many basic services are not! There is no electricity, no gas, and no fuel for heating."¹

Economic Security Within The War Economy

Based on their own experiences, participants identified a set of factors as the essential pillars of an economically-safe environment. They shared the view that these pillars, already weak and shaken before the war, are now even more challenging to achieve within the current conditions. These pillars and their challenges are listed below.

Food and Water Security: "A hungry person would do anything"²

Syria suffers a real disaster in terms of food and water security as a result of the decline in sources of income, wages and the purchasing power of the Syrian pound, with the reduction in state subsidies for basic commodities³ and the massive increase in their prices, which reached tenfold in some cases⁴. The basic monthly food ration was estimated between %80-50 of monthly income, while the cost of water was %25-20⁵. This was accompanied by an imbalance in the nutritional composition with the absence of meat and fruit, and a threefold decrease in the ability to obtain drinking water⁶. As a result, critical cases of malnutrition proliferated in many areas⁷.



"We are a family of three, and we all work and earn. Still, we spend over %75 of our collective monthly income on food and drink"⁸

Participants stressed that this situation resulted from the politicisation of the basic elements of food and water security, in addition to the reality of war. "Before displacement, we used to depend on our farming. Our lands used to secure our needs of things like oil and pulses. We even used to get water from our own artesian wells. Today, our only resource is the salary which is not enough" said a few women displaced from the city of Saraqib. However, the agricultural sector itself has not been spared politicisation. Agricultural employment has fallen by nearly %50 while natural resources and agricultural infrastructure have been destroyed⁹. "Our last season was burned by bombing, and production stopped as my brothers stayed in hiding for fear of being arrested by the regime. Thus, we were forced as women and men to search for other sources of income," said one participant from Saraqib. A participant from Damascus added: "People in Damascus no longer trust the crops that come from Ghouta [countryside region surrounding Damascus]. We are concerned that the soil is contaminated due to bombing."

2 A participant displaced from Ghouta living in Suwayda.

3 The regime stopped subsidizing several essential commodities even raising the prices of some items like bread and fuel in early 2015 under the financial pressures to finance its military operations. 'Syria: Squandering Humanity', Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2014.

4 Food security and conflict in Syria, Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2019.

5 Humanitarian Needs Overview, Office of the Coordination and Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019.

6 Food security and the conflict in Syria, Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2019.

7 Humanitarian Needs Overview, Office of the Coordination and Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019.

8 A participant from Jaramana.

9 Food security and the conflict in Syria, Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2019.



De facto powers contributed to the decline in agricultural production by seizing land and imposing bribes. In the city of Afrin, one participant, critical of the Turkish-backed factions, says: “We plough and plant our land with our sweat and blood. Then, at the time of harvest, they either prevent us from accessing our land or confiscate the crops.” In Idlib, Hay'at Tahrir al-Shām (HTS) group imposes an ‘olive tax’ as noted by some participants: “The members of HTS wait at the door of the olive presses to collect their share.” “When the people of Kafr Takharim refused to pay, HTS mobilized its military might against them.” Moreover, agricultural production declined due to its high costs and the harsh climate. “Between land rent, the cost of fuel, fertilizer, and seeds, the land takes more than it gives.” Said one of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from Damascus Countryside. “Rain is falling in unusual times and our crops are damaged,” one participant from Saraqib added.



“We had to buy water from our own well after it was seized by the armed groups.”¹⁰

Participants confirmed that the lack of food security created a host of social problems whose burden was largely carried by women. They gave several examples in support of their view, explaining that many women were forced to join organized networks of mendicancy and prostitution, sometimes forced by their own relatives. Others were forced into early marriages.



“During the siege of Ghouta, some young girls were married for a dowry (marriage payment) of one sack of wheat.”¹¹

Services: “The state that builds its resources at the expense of its citizens”¹²

Although all de facto powers have exploited local resources, utilised local services, and imposed taxes and fees under the pretext of funding their personnel and projects, women from all regions were unanimous that the service sector was suffering seriously. Many people pay high electricity bills although they only receive it for a few hours a day, which forces them to pay additional fees to use private power generators. Many complain about the lack of fuel as well, even in the Autonomous Administration regions where oil is extracted and sold mainly to the regime via the Katerji Company.¹³

¹⁰ A participant from Afrin.

¹¹ A participant displaced from Ghouta living in Afrin.

¹² A participant from Damascus.

¹³ War Economy in Syria. Turkawi, K., 2018.

Participants also raised the fees imposed by local authorities as an issue. In regime held-areas, they discussed the new stamp duties imposed by the regime on official documents, and the need to pay accumulated service charges for the past years of war -despite the cut of services- as a precondition to repair infrastructure networks and services and/or to process certain official documents¹⁵ especially in 'reconciliation' areas. In the Autonomous Administration regions, fees have been imposed on vehicle and property registration, and on people and vehicle transit across its areas in the North East. Similar fees have been imposed by the Syrian Salvation Government and the Turkish-backed factions in the North West. In regions where control is shared by regime forces and the Autonomous Administration- such as in Qamishli- people have to pay double fees.



"I sometimes have to wait for ten minutes in order to cross the road as the convoy of Katerji oil tank trucks passes by, only to return to my diesel-free home. We struggle to get some fuel while they [those in power] enjoy it."¹⁴



"The Salvation Government formed local councils in order to rob, not to govern."¹⁶

Furthermore, participants highlighted several practices linked to the economies of violence. The regime's paramilitias, such as the National Defence Forces, finance themselves through kidnappings, ransoms, and imposing fees at checkpoints, in addition to acts of looting that follow military operations and target both private homes and public facilities. These practices are not confined to the auxiliary militias but were also carried out by the official military and security forces, who also use techniques of extortion against the families of detainees and those conscripted for military service. Armed factions and gangs, practice killing, robbery, and kidnapping against individuals and goods in exchange for money. Such acts are often carried out in coordination with official military forces or by impersonating them.¹⁷



"I sometimes have to wait for ten minutes in order to cross the road as the convoy of Katerji oil tank trucks passes by, only to return to my diesel-free home. We struggle to get some fuel while they [those in power] enjoy it."¹⁸

14 A participant from Raqqa.

15 Such as War Effort, Martyr Support and Reconstruction stamps among many others.

16 A participant displaced from Saraqib.

17 War Economy in Syria. Turkawi, K., 2018.

18 A participant from Daraa, referring to 'reconciliations' between armed groups and the regime in 2018 which saw many leaders of armed groups receive amnesty for past actions.

Medical Services: “Illness put them off work and turned them into consumers rather than breadwinners”¹⁹

Participants identified difficulty in accessing medical services as one of the most challenging issues linked to their economic security and ability to earn and be productive. They especially highlighted the high prices of medicines, the high cost of medical services, and the absence of health insurance and other forms of medical support. Participants also pointed to the spread of many chronic diseases due to the deterioration of the socio-economic conditions and the spread of fear and anxiety²⁰. They noted that infectious diseases were spreading, especially among displaced people, due to the deterioration of medical services and the lack of vaccines.²¹



“My husband is our breadwinner. He tries very hard not to get ill so that he does not miss work”²²

The health sector has been systematically targeted,^{23 24} and used as an authoritarian tool, especially by the regime²⁵. It also witnessed manipulation and exploitation by the de facto powers and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) alike. Participants indicated that hospitals that were spared from bombing were looted during military operations. This has exacerbated the cost of medical services as people had to meet the expenses of purchasing drugs and supplies needed for their health checks and surgical operations. The health sector also deteriorated sharply due to the unreliability of essential services such as electricity, heating, water, and transportation, which often led to a higher cost of medical services borne by ordinary people.



“I sometimes have to wait for ten minutes in order to cross the road as the convoy of Katerji oil tank trucks passes by, only to return to my diesel-free home. We struggle to get some fuel while they [those in power] enjoy it.”²⁶

19 A participant from Damascus.

20 41 % of the population is classified as in need for treatment for chronic non-communicable diseases. Humanitarian Needs Overview, Office of the Coordination and Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019.

21 Weaponisation of healthcare in Syria, A Sparrow, F Foad, A Tarakji, and S Jabbour., 2018.

22 A participant from Salamiya.

23 Half of all health facilities in Syria have been destroyed. Humanitarian Needs Overview, Office of the Coordination and Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019.

24 Direct attacks have led to the attrition of an estimated %70-50 of the health workforce. Weaponisation of healthcare in Syria, A Sparrow, F Foad, A Tarakji, and S Jabbour., 2018.

25 Weaponisation of healthcare in Syria, A Sparrow, F Foad, A Tarakji, and S Jabbour. 2018.

26 A participant from Daraa.

Educational Services: “Education is more important for a woman than it is for a man; it is her only weapon.”²⁷

Participants stressed that education is the first line of defense when it comes to economic security, especially for women. They also explained that education is directly linked to the economic situation through a vicious cycle. The war and the deteriorating economic situation impacted negatively on the dynamics of compulsory and higher education, causing many to drop off school for various reasons²⁸, especially girls who registered very low enrollment rates²⁹.

In addition to the systematic targeting of educational facilities and staff³⁰, and the exploitation of many schools as military headquarters, detention and torture centers, and shelters, participants listed further discussed the interference of de facto forces in managing educational facilities, their staff, and curricula. In Idlib, for example, a large part of school funding by international NGOs was withdrawn because of the intervention of the Salvation Government. In the areas of Autonomous Administration, the imposition of education in the Kurdish language led to the reluctance of many Arab and Kurdish students to go to school because of the difficulty of follow-up study and the lack of conviction in the validity of certificates given.



“I am Kurdish and I am really proud of my language. But imposing the Kurdish language on schools in such a way was a wrong decision. There are no qualified teachers and no recognized certificates.”³¹

Although the militarisation of education services resulted in high rates of drop off among students, it was the economic factor that had the highest impact³². Participants from all areas denounced the high costs of compulsory education and school supplies. The poor quality of state education forced many families to resort to private tuition which is an additional financial burden. As a result, many students have stopped attending school, and child labor -including in harsh conditions- has surged. Participants said that low teacher salaries made many qualified teachers search for better sources of income, or forced them to have additional jobs, which led to a decline in their capacity.



“My 13 -year old son left school to help us pay our rent.”³³

27 A participant from Afrin.

28 Over 2 million children were out of school while 1.3 million others were at risk of dropping out. Humanitarian Needs Overview, Office of the Coordination and Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019.

29 Syria: Squandering Humanity, Syrian Centre for Policy and Research, 2019.

30 By 2017, more than half of the educational facilities in Syria were wholly or partially destroyed including %19 totally destroyed i.e. one out of four educational facilities were destroyed. The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria. The World Bank, 2017.

31 A participant from Qamishli.

32 85 % of drop-outs were caused by financial factors as they needed to work. Education under attack 2018. Country profiles: Syria. Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2018.

33 A participant displaced from Darayya living in Suwayda.

With regard to higher education, participants agreed that economic factors, such as the high costs of accommodation and transportation, as well as the cost of supplies and materials have deprived many students from continuing their education, or forced them to choose less demanding and hence expensive fields of study, or choose specialisations that guarantee faster access to the labor market. Many have also resorted to fields that are available in nearby universities so that they can avoid the cost and risks of travel. Compulsory conscription, especially in regime-held areas, played a different role in higher education, as it provided an opportunity for young men to postpone their military service. However, this meant that many of them unnecessarily delayed their graduation and thus put off joining the labor market.

Housing, Land, and Property Rights: “We do not want to settle in areas we have been forcibly displaced to. We demand to return to our lands, our homes”³⁴

Participants discussed the issue of property rights in its political dimension, as they talked about economic security before and during the war. They addressed the problem of expropriation in border-line areas, agricultural areas, and areas of informal settlements. They reviewed the problems that resulted from systematic destruction^{35 36 37} forced displacement³⁸, and the unjust legislative frameworks of urban planning that have been enacted by the regime and utilized as a weapon of war. Participants reflected on their personal experiences in the housing crises as many have lived in camps or in partially-constructed houses; and many have been exploited in an inflated rental market with no contracts but oral agreements to secure their tenureship, rendering them vulnerable to forced evictions³⁹.



“When I was displaced from Raqqa, I lived with my husband’s extended family. Thirty-three of us, all lived in one house.”⁴⁰

34 A participant displaced from Salqin.

35 A third of all homes in Syria were destroyed. The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria. The World Bank, 2017.

36 Scholars argue that destruction was systematic, not a collateral damage. Destruction-in-Progress: Revolution, Repression and War Planning in Syria (2011 Onwards), Vignal, L., 2014.

37 In addition to destruction, the regime also carried out demolition campaigns using bulldozers and dynamite. Razed to the Ground: Syria’s Unlawful Neighbourhood Demolitions in 2013-2012. Human Rights Watch, 2014.

38 6.2 million IDPs have been recorded in 2019. Humanitarian Needs Overview, Office of the Coordination and Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019. in addition to 900 thousand IDPs as a result of the latest military campaign against Idlib. UN High Commissioner for Refugees appeals for safety for civilians trapped in Idlib. UNHCR, 2020.

39 Approximately %14 of IDPs live in organized gatherings or random camps in harsh and inhumane conditions, while about %54 live in rented houses. . Humanitarian Needs Overview, Office of the Coordination and Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019.

40 A participant from Raqqa.

Participants raised the issue of seizing houses of displaced people in favour local and foreign militias, especially in regime-held areas, using acts of forgery, and -in some cases- along sectarian lines⁴¹. Additionally, many of the displaced people had to live in the homes of other IDPs. While many have tried to rent homes directly from landlords to preserve the rights, there were some documented cases in which armed factions, especially the Turkish backed militias in Afrin, confiscated the houses of IDPs and exploited them in their own interests.



“After I was displaced from Ghouta to Afrin, I failed to reach out to any of the local displaced families to seek their permission to rent one of their empty houses, and I did not have enough money to do so. Therefore, I lived in a part of an abandoned factory.”⁴²

Participants emphasised the regime’s practices to prevent the repatriation⁴³ of IDPs, which were enforced by a set of urban laws⁴⁴ enacted to bolster the regime’s authoritarian influence during and after the war, particularly, with regards to seizing the properties of those identified as ‘terrorists’⁴⁵ and planning reconstruction.⁴⁶ In certain areas, preventing repatriation took a sectarian dimension, as Christian communities were allowed to return to their areas which were also exclusively rehabilitated while other areas were not.⁴⁷ In other cases, the prevention of return was the result of pressure from pro-regime communities who threatened displaced residents identified as sympathetic to the opposition against returning.

What exacerbates issues of property rights is that many people lack the their property and/or civil documents necessary to claim rights. “We fled due to the bombing with our clothes only. We had no time to carry our civil or property documents” a participant from Deir Ezzor said. Another from Jaramana elaborated: “Many of those who fled non-regime held areas had not been able to register marriages, births or real estate transactions in their areas. Doing this now means high legal costs and fines.” She added, “Many people would not be able to return to their areas because of issues with their property and civil documents. Even those who might, would most probably not be able to afford the cost of reconstructing their houses.”⁴⁸

41 Several studies have documented the sectarian dimension of property ownership issues in Syria. Destruct to Reconstruct, Yazigi, J., 2017.

42 A participant displaced from Ghouta living in Afrin.

43 Many of these practices were documented by HRW. Syria: Residents Blocked From Returning, HRW, 2018.

44 The war of property, Hussein, A., 2019. (Arabic)

45 According to Law no. 2012/63.

46 According to Law no. 2018/10.

47 No Return to Homs, PAX, 2017.

48 Residential apartments in the new Marota City Project cost around 6,000 USD per square meter. Damascus Businessmen: The Phantoms of Marota City, Al-Lababidi, M., 2019.

Participants emphasized that women bear a greater burden in problems relating to property rights, as they face them from a socially-marginalized position. A lawyer participant from Raqqa said: “Although the Syrian constitution gives women and men equal rights to inheritance, women rarely inherit due to social customs,” meaning that real estate assets are often in the names of men, not women who only have the right to use them. Women suffer marginalization in divorce issues as well. “The woman invests all her income and savings in her home. Upon divorce, she returns to her parents’ house with nothing but a small handbag deprived of any right,” said a participant who lived through the divorce of her parents in the city of Suwayda. This systematic marginalization of women in matters of property rights has made the laws enacted by the regime harsher for women from a legal, economic and social point of view.

This is especially true in cases where men are disappeared for security reasons. Displaced families whose men are disappeared face more challenges in claiming their property rights as women have no legal rights, and hence, cannot file a claim. Thus, families lose their rights to their properties, simply because women are systematically excluded.



“Transitional justice must be gendered, especially in matters of restitution and compensation of property rights.”⁴⁹

Job opportunities: “Yes, women left their homes and ventured into the workplace. But the society still has not left its male chauvinism.”⁵⁰

Women shared the view that work dynamics have shifted within the current political and military situation, especially from a gender perspective. They added that the rising unemployment,⁵¹ the inflation of prices, and the fluctuating currency impacted the true value of income negatively,⁵² resulting in deteriorating living conditions as the dependency ratio soared.⁵³ Most people are relying on savings, selling property and borrowing, while many seek income linked to the economies of violence.



“I am a university professor and I earn 70 USD a month. If I did not have my inheritance from my mother, I would never be able to pay rent.”⁵⁴

49 A participant from Damascus.

50 A participant from Salamiyeh.

51 By 2015, the unemployment rate among young people had reached %78. Nine million Syrians of working age were outside the scope of economic activity. The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria. The World Bank, 2017.

52 The average real income in 2017 was equivalent to %24 of its value in 2010. Food security and conflict in Syria, Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2019.

53 In 2017, dependency ratio was 7.73 as opposed to 4.1 in 2010. Food security and conflict in Syria, Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2019.

54 A participant from Damascus.

Discussing the government sector, participants denounced the prevalence of bribes and corruption, the lack of qualified staff, low salaries, and the absence of work benefits or insurance. “A pensioner’s monthly payment equals the price of 3 kgs of meat. Pensioners also lose access to health insurance associated with their job,” said a participant from Qamishli. “Most government vacancies go to children of martyrs (war casualties) regardless of qualifications. Meanwhile, many university graduates can’t find a job,” added a participant from Damascus. The participants also mentioned that NGOs have emerged as a prominent sector providing good incomes, despite its shortcomings. “Working in the NGO sector in regime-held areas implies constant threat of losing the job if the NGO does not conform to the regime’s policies,” said a participant from Damascus. Another participant working for a local NGO in Raqqa said: “My income is dependent on funding. I receive a salary when there is funding. But when there is not, I work as a volunteer.”

Participants raised the issue of exploitation in the labor market in all sectors. A participant from Jaramana said: “Many women work in workshops, shops, or as maids in homes. They are subject to all types of physical and sexual exploitation, physical and verbal violence, and they are always threatened with dismissal in favor of those who work for less pay.” Participants believe that some exploitation was systematic as women are always paid less than men, and work environments do not take gender sensitivity into consideration. Household chores done by women are undervalued and underrated. Therefore, working women in a patriarchal society are always exhausted.

On the other hand, participants unanimously agreed that the current reality contributed to the empowerment of women, and their departure from stereotypical gender roles at home and at work, making them financially independent and have more confidence in themselves and their ability to be in charge of their lives.



“We have become more independent. We know our abilities better. We know our rights better. And we seek to realise them. This is one silver lining of the war.”⁵⁵

Although many job opportunities today go to women, many women do not consider this a real achievement for women in the labor market, especially in light of the loss of male breadwinners and military pressure on men to join armed groups. “Women’s work was a result of economic pressure. A woman does not have a say regarding the income she receives nor does she have the ability to control it. This is not a genuine involvement for women in the labor market,” said a participant from Damascus. Another from Suwayda added: “Even within projects of women economic empowerment, women are marginalized because it is men who make decisions and control expenses.”

55 A participant from Salqin.

In the sector of NGOs, participants expressed that it is disrespectful to women and their abilities to hire them under pressure from donors and under the pretext of economic empowerment without structural change in women's work conditions and their rights and responsibilities. Participants agreed that hiring women, exclusively with no consideration of men was problematic as it led to social pressures and marital problems.



"We have always aspired to achieve our rights in the workplace. But these arbitrary claims of women 'empowerment' has rendered 'feminism' as the archnemesis of our men."⁵⁶

Job vacancies were not spared politicisation and authoritarian interference by armed groups. Participants agreed unanimously that the regime used unfair dismissal from government jobs as a weapon against political activists and those working in areas outside regime control, while still paying the salaries of some employees inside these same areas in order to maintain certain economic and political equilibriums with the powers in control there.⁵⁷ The policy of arbitrary dismissal was practiced by most de facto authorities against workers in their institutions. The Salvation Government dismissed many employees who worked for the Interim Government in Idlib. It practiced further pressure on those who refused to join its ranks by prohibiting their employment by other organisations. In the areas of Autonomous Administration, it was noted that in some cases, job opportunities were reserved for supporters of specific political parties. In regions with multiple authorities, political chaos has contributed to restricting people's ability to apply for jobs.



"Even though the Autonomous Administration pays higher salaries than the regime, we are reluctant to apply for these jobs for fear of security harassment if the regime re-gains control of the region."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ A participant from Saraqib.

⁵⁷ War economy in Syria, Almahmoud, H., 2019. (Arabic).

⁵⁸ Participants from Qamishli.

Investment environment: “Investors collide with obstacles, but people pay the price.”⁵⁹

Participants agreed that the regime employed a set of regulations that were detrimental to the business sector and forced many businesses to relocate abroad,⁶⁰ while creating a new class of opportunistic war merchants. Such regulations include the regime abandoning its role in protecting investment establishments and convoys, and entrusting security to investors themselves through private security companies that were allowed to have armed staff.⁶¹ Another regulation by the regime was prohibiting trading in anything other than the Syrian pound, be it foreign currency or precious metals.⁶² Along with this restriction in regulations came the state of security chaos, which led to widespread seizure of goods trucks for ransom, the imposition of protection money, and the spread of corruption in customs. This situation caused investors to bear additional costs to secure protection, in addition to the increased costs of insurance, storage, money transfer, together with the high price of fuel, and the wide daily fluctuation in exchange rates.⁶³ As people’s purchasing power declined, many companies exited the market, and this was reflected in a huge hike in prices that the consumers had to endure.



“I tried to start my own small investment, but I had to stop because production costs were too high; not because of labor costs, as labor is cheap. Rather, it was the cost of bribes, inflation and the impact of sanctions. The general atmosphere does not encourage investment at all.”⁶⁴

Participants stressed that the absence of a safe legal environment for investment had particularly negatively impacted investors who did not have direct security links, opening the space for a group of war merchants to become at the forefront of the investment scene. This was especially true of some capitalist cronies such as Rami Makhoul and Samer al-Fawz who had the largest role in financing the regime and its militias, in addition to a group of new businessmen such as Hussam al-Katerji, who managed to reach economic understandings that crossed military lines, and who contributed to supplying the regime



“War merchants must be held accountable in efforts of transitional justice, first among whom is al-Katerji.”⁶⁶

59 A participant from Damascus.

60 The war has inflicted huge losses on the investment sector estimated at 28 billion USD in investment decline, 27 billion USD in idle capital, 78 billion USD in damaged capital until 2014 only. Funds withdrawn from Syrian banks were estimated at 10 billion USD until the end of 2012. War economy in Syria, Almahmoud, H., 2019. (Arabic).

61 According to Legislative Decree no. 2013/55.

62 According to Legislative Decree no. 2013 /54.

63 War economy in Syria, Almahmoud, H., 2019. (Arabic).

64 A participant from Damascus.

65 War Economy in Syria. Turkawi, K., 2018.

66 A participant from Raqqa.

with oil and wheat for years. Moreover, participants touched on the investment contracts obtained by the regime's military allies, specifically Iran and Russia, as an attempt to enable them to play a major role in the reconstruction process in compensation for their military interventions.⁶⁷ Participants in Damascus and Jaramana pointed out in particular to the agreement according to which Russia was granted the right to invest in Tartous Port for a period of 49 years.⁶⁸ They elaborated that, in addition to violating public interest by exploiting the country's resources, the agreement had a negative impact on Syrian employees at the port because it required dismissing more than %60 of employees after transferring their contracts to the Russian company that became in charge of the port as it had its own rules. Thus, employees were deprived of their rights and severance packages for their years of work in the public sector.⁶⁹ Participants also reflected on the impact of the political economy in the region, especially in Lebanon, on the economic situation inside Syria. They noted that the financial crisis in Lebanon led to major shocks in Syrian economy⁷⁰ as Lebanon represented a main export market for many Syrian goods,⁷¹ a source of foreign currency from the money transfers made by Syrian workers in Lebanon,⁷² and a financial center for importers and for Syrian capital.⁷³



“People in the city of Suwayda are highly dependent of expatriates, especially those working in Lebanon. This has created a relative balance in the economic situation in our region. But the current crisis in Lebanon has turned the tables. Many of our relatives in Lebanon are now dependent of their families in Syria to survive.”⁷⁴

67 Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria, Hatahet, S., 2019.

68 The agreement gives Russia the right to invest in the coastal region and territorial waters, including natural resources such as gas within these borders, and gives limited shares to Syria, while stipulating free provision of Syrian lands and immovable property used by the Russian side. The terms of leasing Tartous Port reveal the extent of Russian hegemony in Syria

69 The terms of leasing Tartous Port reveal the extent of Russian hegemony in Syria, Abdurrazzaq, A., 2019. (Arabic).

70 How is the Lebanese crisis affecting Syria, Advani, R., and Al Nofal, W., 2019.

71 In 2017, Syrian legal exports to Lebanon reached to 132 million USD, excluding illegal smuggling or black-market exports. How is the Lebanese crisis affecting Syria, Advani, R., and Al Nofal, W., 2019.

72 Money transfers from Lebanon constituted %17 of the total transfers to Syria in 2015, making it the second largest source of transfer, which constitute %19 of all Syrian revenues, according to 2016 statistics. How is the Lebanese crisis affecting Syria, Advani, R., and Al Nofal, W., 2019.

73 The percentage of Syrians keeping their money in Lebanese banks is estimated to be %80 of wealthy people in Syria who keep their money abroad. How is the Lebanese crisis affecting Syria, Advani, R., and Al Nofal, W., 2019.

74 A participant from Suwayda.

The economies of NGOs: “We became the source of income for NGOs.”⁷⁵

The political economy of local and international NGOs in all areas is an essential component of the war economy in Syria. NGOs have helped, in one way or another, to support local authorities in general, and the regime in particular. Participants discussed the framework imposed by the regime on the work of international and local NGOs operating in areas under its control as a means to exploit international aid to finance its plans and political interests to the detriment of the impoverished communities.⁷⁶



“The regime allows international organisations to repair the infrastructure according to its agenda. The regime chooses where and when they are allowed to work.”⁷⁷

In areas outside regime control, participants talked about aid diversion to serve the interests of de facto authorities. This, however, was less systematic and institutionalized and more often subject to the prevailing conditions of corruption, favoritism, and imposed loyalties. This situation still had significant consequences, especially in areas under the control of HTS, where many international NGOs halted funding for local organisations after the Salvation Government took over. Participants, moreover, condemned the ultimate subjection of local NGOs to donor policies which imposed what types of projects were funded and through which mechanisms they were implemented, with no consideration to the reality on the ground, and no attempts to ensure conflict-sensitivity or prevent fraud.



“Funding usually follows fads. Yesterday, awareness was the buzz word, today it is economic empowerment. NGOs follow these trends blindly and transform themselves to fit within the sponsors’ policies accordingly.”⁷⁸

This reality has led some NGOs to develop coping mechanisms that enable them to comply with donor requirements on the one hand, and to accommodate needs on the ground as they see fit, on the other. While some NGOs have used these mechanisms to respond to the real needs of the communities they serve, many have taken advantage of them for personal interests, producing a new pattern of war merchants who work in the NGO sector. As a result, projects thrived ‘on papers’, presenting donors with activities and budgets that do not match reality.

⁷⁵ A participant displaced from Salqin.

⁷⁶ Rigging the System: Government Policies Co-Opt Aid and Reconstruction Funding in Syria, HRW, 2019.

⁷⁷ A participant from Jaramana.

⁷⁸ A participant from Suwayda.

Additionally, cronyism spread in hiring and distributing, and the dignity of beneficiary communities was largely insulted. In many cases, regional, sectarian, and ethnic vulnerabilities were further exacerbated, sometimes as a result of a perceived –and not necessarily factual– sense of injustice feeding into a feeling of marginalization. All this was done in a complete absence of accountability either by de facto authorities or by international donors.

However, participants confirmed that the aid provided remains much less than the existing needs. They also noted that aid focused almost completely on relief at the expense of development, although the latter could contribute to creating job opportunities and thus leading to self-sufficiency. As a result, people have become too dependent on relief baskets. The few projects that were outside the framework of humanitarian aid, such as livelihood projects, faced many challenges as they often focused on training,

rather than addressing the root causes to create real job opportunities. Community awareness projects suffer a similar flaw, especially those tackling issues with socio-economic roots such as early marriage or child labor. They did not take into account root causes and thus did not provide effective solutions. In addition, the association of the work of NGOs with the existing political climate – especially in supporting the institutions of governance outside the areas of regime control – contributed to creating an unsettled reality incapable of institutional or financial independence.

All these factors have made the economies of NGOs a critical factor in the Syrian economy whose withdrawal will result in several problems. This has started to be evident in the ‘reconciliation’ areas or areas of displacement where parts of local communities were allowed to remain or return. The unemployment of individuals who were left with no jobs upon the withdrawal of NGOs, the helplessness of families who were entirely reliant on aid, and the disrupted services that were entirely run by NGOs are all evidences on how fragile reality is in areas whose economy is almost entirely dependent on the presence of NGOs.



“NGOs discriminate between displaced Arabs and us Kurds. Despite our miserable situation and our need to work, and despite the fact that Arabs managed to collect their valuable belongings when they were displaced, all aid goes to them and we get nothing.”⁷⁹

75 A Kurdish participant from Afrin.

Foundations of Economic Security: Suggestions and Recommendations

Participants agreed unanimously that reaching an economically-secure environment requires dismantling the economies of violence and liberating what they suggested are the basic foundations of economic security from the control of powers of war and their offshoots, as well as from militarisation and politicisation. This requires work on both the individual and collective levels in order to reinforce social responsibility. It also needs a structural approach in which security, political, legal, institutional, social, and economic environments intersect, alongside a timeline that begins at the present and reaches a state of economic recovery. The following are a number of suggestions and recommendations raised by participants in the hope of pursuing economic security from their perspective.

First: General recommendations to achieve an economically-safe environment

○ Achieving security and political stability

An economically-secure environment cannot be reached without stopping violence and creating a safe political environment that guarantees the dismantling of authoritarian powers along with the warlords they created, including the regime and its official security forces and paramilitias. This requires disarming, restructuring and reforming the security sector, guarantees for a multi-party political system, and a real parliament representing the needs of the people. It is also essential to achieve transitional justice that guarantees the accountability of military and economic warlords, and perpetrators of war crimes and human rights violations including forced displacement, targeting medical and educational facilities, and the use of food and water as weapons of war. A safe and voluntary return of the forcibly displaced must be ensured. Restitution and compensation especially of property rights must be pursued., and transitional justice must be gender-conscious.

○ Creating a just legal environment

An economically-safe environment requires an effective legal environment that guarantees safe and affordable access of all individuals to legal information and legal institutions without obstacles or discrimination. It further requires finding practical mechanisms to enforce the rule of law, as well as reviewing existing laws to ensure a fair legislative system that is not prone to control or manipulation.

○ Establishing an effective institutional environment

An economically safe environment requires dismantling authoritarian institutions and creating efficient ones based on respect for rights and preventing discrimination in relation to identity politics. This requires activating effective accountability and transparency mechanisms and enabling the civil society to take its role as a watchdog to observe institutions. It is also essential to ensure equality in accessing state institutions, freedom of movement and the right to water, food, work, housing, education and health care.

○ Supporting civil activism and the social environment

Economic security at the individual and societal level is based on the existence of a safe and effective social environment, which in turn requires the codification of civil activity to guarantee its independence, prevent its exploitation by political or military powers, and inhibit its subordination to donor policies. It also requires activating civil structures –including women’s– that strive to represent, empower, and build the capacities of different groups, in addition to addressing social customs that violate women’s rights and promote discrimination in any form.

○ Building a productive and just economic environment

Economic security necessitates an economic system based on social justice which, in turn, requires a transparent planning of the state’s budget to ensure an equitable distribution of opportunities, resources, and wealth. It also requires the existence of social security programs that guarantee decent income and safe access to services for marginalized or vulnerable groups who are unable to work. Moreover, it involves ensuring that mechanisms are in place to support those affected in emergencies (as with the current COVID19- pandemic) in all sectors of regulated and unregulated work. It is necessary to activate a fair and progressive tax system that guarantees transparency and accountability in the way tax is calculated, collected, and spent to serve the public interest.

As far as investment is concerned, it is necessary to support public investment locally in accordance with the needs and resources of each region in order to limit internal and external migration in search of work. It is also essential to control the market and the local and foreign private investment environment and impose mechanisms for control and accountability that ensure that investment serves public good and to prevent exploitation and monopoly. Social investment must be stimulated by creating an accessible legal and financial environment that allows work at all levels, especially small, medium and micro enterprises and cluster projects.

With regard to job opportunities, the rights of workers and employees in all sectors (including workers in unregulated sectors such as agricultural and construction workers, etc.) must be protected through controlling wages, working hours, and working conditions to ensure a decent and stable income that meets the needs of everyday life. It is also essential to provide fair job opportunities based on educational and professional qualification rather than favoritism and political loyalty and create a work environment that takes into account gender sensitivity in terms of equal opportunities, preventing harassment and exploitation, and ensuring paternal and maternal rights.

Second: Recommendations specific to the war economy in Syria

○ On the political level

- Prioritizing economic recovery and the pursuit of economic security in the political process, and exerting pressure on countries that militarily and economically support the regime and other armed forces to enforce this;
- Working with neighboring countries benefiting from the war economy in Syria to develop mechanisms that stimulate local economic recovery and ensure mutual economic benefit;
- Building on the economic agreements between de facto forces in order to reach military agreements to stop violence and activate the political process without compromising accountability efforts to guarantee people's right to resources that are currently exploited for military purposes;
- Including the rights of victims of economic hardships in the efforts for transitional justice, especially women who have had to work within human trafficking networks such as prostitution and others;

○ On international aid and the work of NGOs:

- Emphasizing a participatory reconstruction process based on human rights and non-discrimination, and aimed at achieving economic recovery and serving the public interest rather than the interests of a select few based on political loyalties or the payment of military debts;
- Activating accountability for the work of UN and international NGOs by donor countries, especially those working in regime-controlled areas where projects are being exploited to serve the regime's military, political, and economic purposes, and to pave the way for the regime's own reconstruction projects, despite international political conditionality;

- Lobbying for continued cross-border aid operations, in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions no. 2165 and no. 2139 as working in areas outside the regime's control through the regime's institutions means denying aid to these areas and diversion of fund to serve the regime as has been proven from previous experience dealing with sieges through cross-line operations;
 - Working directly with affected communities in regime-controlled areas, not through politically and militarily infiltrated institutions, to ensure safe access to aid by those who need it regardless of their political affiliation;
 - Finding effective mechanisms to ensure objective operation in areas controlled by extremist factions (such as HTS), instead of stopping aid for fear of diversion;
 - Creating an independent accountability mechanism that oversees the work of organizations to monitor and report violations of human rights and dignity, as well as corruption;
 - Linking awareness-raising with economic empowerment programs in order to structurally address social issues with socio-economic roots;
 - Emphasizing conflict-sensitivity in the work of NGOs and in civil initiatives, to account for and address potential perceptions of injustice due to discrimination based on religious, sectarian, ethnic, regional or gender affiliations;
 - Setting up a long-term withdrawal plan for international and local NGOs reliant on external funding in order to minimise dependency on aid and build local institutions capable of managing local affairs, and achieving self-sufficiency;
- On the economic situation
- Addressing the problem of investment contracts awarded to the regime's political and military allies in order to guarantee the Syrian people's rights in their own resources;
 - Holding to account war merchants and war beneficiaries who have amassed fortunes by investing in war economy through efforts of transitional justice, and returning embezzled funds to serve the public interest;
 - Encouraging policies that protect human capital and activate local production;
 - Supporting financial, fiscal, and investment policies that contribute to reducing inflation, encourage investment, end monopolies, reduce prices, and raise purchasing power;
 - Creating favorable conditions for the return of expatriate capacities, and the promotion of local capacities;

- Separating labor laws from political loyalties and addressing the problems caused by such inequalities as unfair dismissal, or job loss for political reasons.
- **On services, health and education**
 - Exerting pressure on the regime to stop the systematic bombing of hospitals, schools, and all educational and health facilities in non-regime held areas;
 - Ensuring the right to safe and affordable access to all services and infrastructure networks;
 - Ensuring the right to safe and affordable access to official documents necessary to activate political, civil and legal participation, including people who were denied official documents for security, financial or logistical reasons during the war, and providing financial and legal support to achieve this aim;
 - Allowing NGOs to work on restoring infrastructure networks and rehabilitating hospitals and schools while ensuring no interference by security forces, especially in areas that are experiencing voluntary return, as well as in reconciliation areas;
 - Ending interference by security forces in service facilities in general, and educational and health facilities in particular;
 - Improving the education sector by updating curricula, teaching methods and administrative practices; providing financial support to families with children of compulsory education age; supporting educational sector staff in order to stop the drain of talents into more lucrative sectors;
 - Overhauling the policies that led to shrinking support for state medical services; improving the performance of these services; facilitating programs of health insurance and mental health for all groups;
 - Stressing the need for institutional and service environments to be gender-conscious in order to provide safe access for women, mothers and fathers.
- **On food and water security**
 - Reviewing policies and laws enacted by the regime before the war with the aim of raising the efficiency of agricultural production, and providing guarantees to agricultural workers to prevent their migration or drain to other sectors;
 - Reviewing environmental laws and policies that would contribute to reducing the degradation of natural resources needed for agricultural production.
 - Devising response plans to address the damages done to natural resources and arable land caused by military operations and extreme survival measures adopted by people during the war;

- Ensuring safe access for workers in the agricultural sector to their lands; ensuring safe access to services and infrastructures necessary to advance agricultural production such as water, electricity and fuel; controlling and subsidizing the prices of seeds, fertilizers and fodder; providing affordable loans to farmers to purchase the requirements of production;
- on housing, land, and property rights
 - Creating a legitimate independent legal mechanism for documenting housing, land, and property rights including customary and unregistered rights for groups whose rights have been violated by property laws enacted by the regime since 2011 (including families of detainees, forcibly disappeared or displaced persons, inhabitants of areas outside regime control, among others); as well as for systematically marginalised groups (like women, Kurds, inhabitants of borderline regions, Palestinians, inhabitants of informal settlements, etc.)
 - Assisting communities affected by property rights violations to obtain the necessary documents, including civil documents, to follow legal procedures to claim their rights, and offering necessary financial and legal support for them;
 - Suspending all discriminatory laws enacted by the regime since 2011 in relation to housing, land, and property rights whose articles and procedural requirements have been exploited to punish certain groups of the population, and compensate those affected by these laws through efforts of transitional justice;
 - Linking the safe and voluntary return of forcibly displaced people with housing, land, and property rights and exerting pressure on the regime to stop policies that prevent repatriation;
 - Providing necessary financial and logistic support to local communities who are deploying individual and collective resources and efforts to repair homes and rebuild infrastructure in their areas.
 - Stressing the need for transitional justice to be gender-conscious especially with regards to the systematized marginalization of women's rights in matters of housing, land, and property rights.



