Pathways of Feminist Movement Building in post 2011 Syria

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Badael is a feminist and a right based organization, our mission is to foster transformative justice as the foundation for real and sustainable peace in Syria, by supporting organic civil society development and promoting discourses and narratives within and around the Syrian context that are rights-based, pluralistic, inclusive and that facilitate holistic truth and understanding.

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List of Abbreviations

ENA – Europe and North America
FUI – Follow-Up Interviews
FGD – Focus Group Discussion
HNC – High Negotiations Committee
IDI – In depth interviews
MENA – Middle East and North Africa
LGBTQIA+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual
NRCA – Non-Regime-Controlled Areas
RCA – Regime-Controlled Areas
R:I – Region - Iraq
R:J – Region - Jordan
R:L – Region - Lebanon
R:T – Region - Turkey
SNC – National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces

Theoretical Framework

This research report is informed by three areas of literature: current comparative studies of women's movements and feminist movements around the world; scholarship on social movements; and research on Syria and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), specifically. In reviewing these bodies of scholarship, we highlight the key principles, ideas, and insights that we take from each area.

Women organising

We approach women's political engagement as a bottom-up mobilisation rather than a top-down one. An early focus of the literature on women's rights movements has been women's marginalisation from political participation, and the actions necessary to increase women's access to formal political mechanisms. In line with the accelerating impact of social movements and civil society, the literature on women's political participation shifted in the 1980s and 1990s from "a focus on women's political behaviour in conventional, primarily electoral political terms to an appreciation of women's engagement in community action, social movements, and discursive struggles unobtrusively mobilized" (Beckwith, p. 431). Such a change of focus from formal politics to social movements has greatly informed research such as this report, since this new literature takes into consideration how the course of formal politics cannot be dissociated from the social context in which it is being practiced, and also how not just formal politics, but also the politics of everyday life, is gendered. This literature also focuses on political struggles in contexts where formal political participation mechanisms are absent, or are blocked by those in power, thereby refocusing attention on bottom-up social change rather than top-down formal change. In short, such a change in perspective takes wider sectors of society, such as women, as political actors, rather than merely a small cast of privileged politicians.

This report attends to the multiplicity of dimensions constituting women's identities. Theorists such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) have drawn attention to the concept of intersectionality as a means of understanding different "layers of identity" by determining how different categories intersect with each other to create multiple and diverse experiences. Salem (2018a) traces the concept of "intersectionality" back to its formulation by feminists from the Global South, and African-American feminists in particular. They argued that Western feminism, the roots of which lay in European imperialism, was presented as a "universal" framework, capable of representing the experiences and struggles of feminist movements from all over the world. These scholars believed that the liberal assumptions that characterised this kind of mainstream feminism did not apply to contexts other than the "West", as the notions of "gender" and "feminism" are context-specific (Salem, 2018a).

Salem (2018a) argues that thinking of feminism through intersectional lenses has three crucial effects. First, it allows an understanding of women's activism as a multi-layered process; one that takes place in different countries at different paces, rendering every experience of feminism the result of a specific process. Second, it recognises the existence of other "systems of oppression that have been downplayed by liberal feminists", such as race, religion, class, and

imperialism. Third, it focuses on "power relations", in terms of how different configurations of power relations result in women from different backgrounds experiencing and resisting patriarchy in different ways.

We have drawn on these notions both in structuring our interviews with Syrian women and in analysing the narratives that emerged. This report takes into consideration the heterogeneity of Syrian women's identities and experiences, as well as how gender intersects with ethnicity, political orientation, and class, among other identities. It focuses on multiple dimensions of women activists' identities, and the different characteristics of the social and economic contexts in which they live. We argue that such heterogeneity results in different forms of patriarchy and oppression at the level of everyday life, the institutional level, as well as different forms of resistance by women.

Furthermore, we attend to critiques of the category of "women" in general, and its relationship to the notion of "gender" specifically. As Beckwith has argued, while feminist scholars recognise the complexity and importance of the heterogeneity of women's identities—such as women of colour, women in non-Western regimes, and women of subordinated castes and classes—they strive to avoid fragmenting the struggle against patriarchy and gender inequality on the basis of identities (Beckwith, p.432). In line with this argument, this report also aims to avoid the pitfall of identity politics and to recognise how different dimensions of structural inequalities are always gendered.

Chandra Mohanty has discussed whether the concept of gender suffices "as the basis for identifying women's, or to be more specific feminist interests, because, she argues, "gender [cannot be defined] in any transhistorical, unitary way" (Mohanty 1991b:5). Mohanty criticizes "white, Western, middle-class liberal feminism" for its "singular focus on gender as a basis for equal rights", especially insofar as it "takes the form of definitions of femininity and sexuality in relation to men" (Mohanty 1991b: 11).

Alvarez distinguishes between "proactive and reactive" women's movements. Proactive movements are defined as those that aim "to transform the roles society assigns to women, [challenge] existing power arrangements, and [claim] women's rights to personal autonomy and equality", whereas reactive movements "accept prevailing feminine roles and assert rights on the basis of those roles" (Alvarez 1990: 24: Kaplan 1982 in Beckwith, 2000, 437).

The difference between proactive and reactive women's movements has been critically utilised by this report as an essential tool to discuss women's organising as part of rights-based and humanitarian work within the context of the Syrian revolution. This resulted in three categories of organising:

i. Women empowerment groups: A reactive form of organising aiming to empower women within existing gender roles and parameters.

ii. Women's rights movement(s): A proactive form of organising, which believes women's rights can primarily be achieved if regulated through legal and constitutional frameworks.

iii. Feminist movement(s): A proactive form of organising, which recognises the heterogeneity of women's identities and struggles. Its work is either intersectional or subject matter/ sub-group focused.

This differentiation allows us to understand the conditions that led to the emergence of feminist or non-feminist (or anti-feminist) women's movements (Baldez, 2002) and to "predict the strategies and tactics that women employ when they are in movement" (Beckwith, 2007 :315). By "strategies", Beckwith means the movement's "plan of action", including its goals and objectives; the way in which it mobilises resources; and the actions taken to achieve these goals.

Such stipulations are especially important within the context of the Syrian revolution when discussing both networks and collaboration, as well as the differences among various Syrian women's forms of organising, women's rights, and feminist movements.

Social movements

This research puts individual political agency at the centre of its approach, and highlights the importance of changing historical and political contexts in analysing social movements. Women's rights movements are a subset of social movements, defined as "collective challenges to existing arrangements of power and distribution by people with common purposes and solidarity, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities" (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998: 4).

This report has been informed principally by resource mobilisation theory as well as new social movements theory. It focuses on organisational models and incentives when analysing Syrian women's and feminist movements.

Syria and MENA

More recent literature on Syria and the MENA region has begun historicising the region and recognising political and social change therein. One of its focuses has been non-state actors who operate outside formal institutions and formally organised political initiatives. This approach brings in the perspective of ordinary individuals and the politics of everyday life, recognising that grassroots movements such as women empowerment groups and women's rights and feminist movements have political agency and the capacity to bring about social and political change. In line with this perspective, we view the aforementioned forms of women organising in Syria as part of a burgeoning civil society in the region at large. Before 2011, research on Syria tended to focus on regime structures and policies, and neglected civil society (Brownlee, 2015, 32).

However, when discussing the existing literature on Syrian civil society, Brownlee argues that the field of Middle Eastern studies mostly ignores the actions of ordinary people in informal and fragmented contexts. She states that it is vital to take into consideration the emergence of a new generation of civil society activists who do not necessarily have a prior record of political activism, but rather were merely engaged in social and economic activities and in connecting

citizens. She further states that "because of their largely apolitical and low-profile form of mobilisation, they have been belittled or simply ignored as non-destabilising" (Brownlee, 2015, 49).

This report takes this transformation into consideration by carrying out a generational comparison between activists partaking in various forms of women organising in Syria, while also highlighting how the Syrian revolution changed the meaning of politics in Syria. With the revolution, politics was decentralised and expanded, moving outside the boundaries of both the state and the relatively more structured opposition. The report considers how the political domain expanded outside Damascus and Aleppo to include a variety of urban and rural areas, as well as a multitude of social classes and topics. While such new dimensions have been addressed in other studies, what is typically overlooked is an understanding of how the expanded political space and its new forms are gendered. Accordingly, the gendering of discussions on Syria and the revolution is among the primary aims of this report.

The literature suggests that it is necessary to understand the gendered political, social, and economic context that predated the conflict in order to understand the gendered dimensions of the conflict itself. In other words, gendered inequalities established well before the conflict played a large role in shaping women's responses to and recovery from violence during the conflict (Alsaba & Kapilshrami, 2016, 7). In his paper 'Armies of Women: The Syria Crisis and the New War Thesis', Timothy Abington similarly supports the inclusion of the gender perspective when discussing conflicts, war theory, and Syria. He argues that the conflict is not simply among armed masculine state and non-state actors, but that how the conflict is sustained through gendered dynamics also needs to be taken into consideration, which is possible only by adopting a feminist perspective.

Methodology

This research adopts qualitative research methods, comprising focus group discussions and interviews. 118 Syrian women activists participated in the research. Two phases of data collection were conducted: the first took place between December 2018 and February 2019, while the second was carried out in June and July 2020.

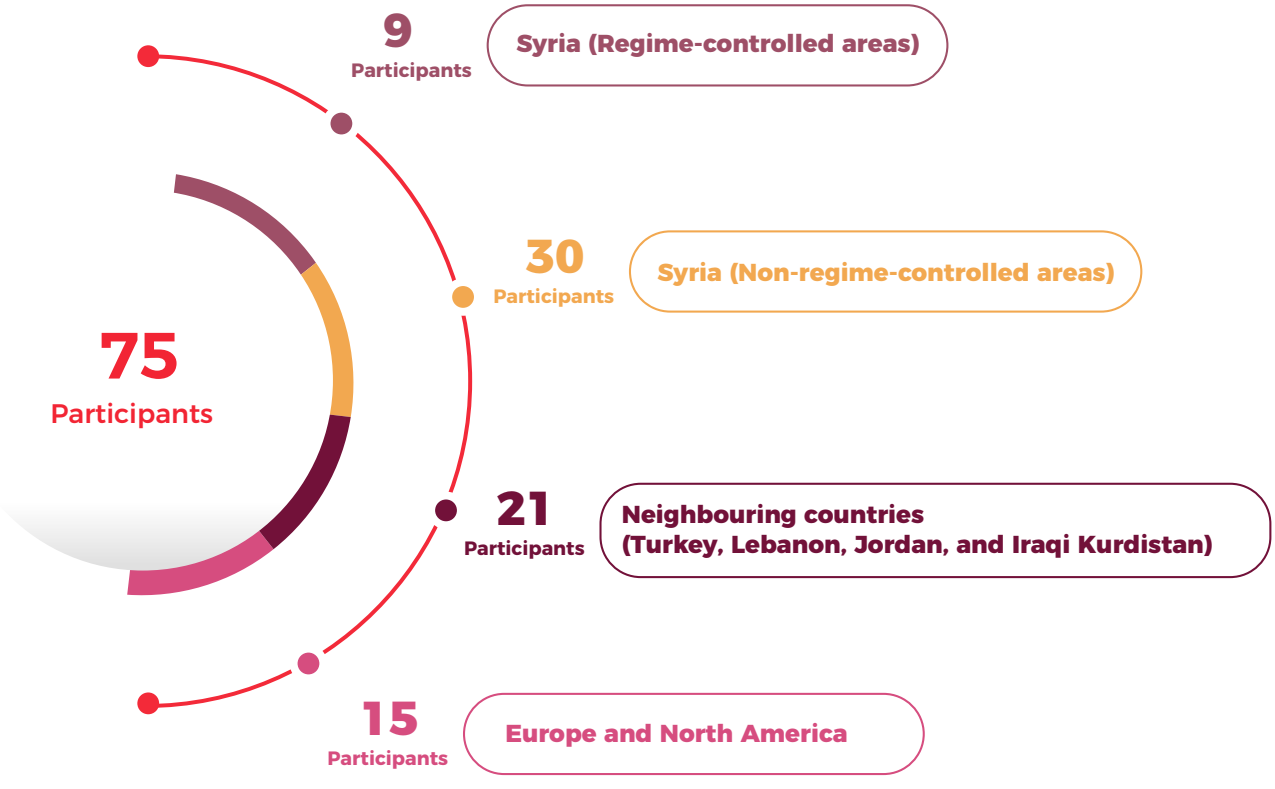
Phase I

The first phase of data collection (December 2018-February 2019) consisted of focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with Syrian women activists. In total, 103 women participated in this phase, and 75 in-depth interviews were carried out. These interviews were conducted with participants engaged in diverse forms of activism from varying socio-economic backgrounds, geographic locations, and ethnicities. In addition, six FGDs were held in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, and Germany.

i. In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted both in person and via Skype (all in Arabic) depending on the interviewees' locations. Interviews in Syria and neighbouring countries were conducted in person by the Badael research team, with the exception of Iraqi Kurdistan, where interviews took place via Skype. Those based in Europe and North America were interviewed either in person or via Skype. On average, each interview was approximately two hours long. In total, 75 Syrian women activists were interviewed. Their distribution by location was as follows:

ii. Geographic distribution of interviewees:



iii. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus group discussions aimed at creating conversations and discussions among selected participants about their experiences in the Syrian conflict as activists, providing a space that allowed reflections on the feminist and women's movements during the post-2011 period. Whereas individual interviews were very useful in terms of providing information about various forms of women's activism, FGDs were indispensable in terms of addressing issues that came up in the interviews through conversations and debates among different perspectives. FGDs allowed the research team to better understand where women activists from diverse backgrounds converge and where they diverge. To ensure a safe and comfortable environment, Badael took into consideration potential tensions, conflicts, and power dynamics whilst selecting FGD participants.

A total of six FGS were conducted with 28 participants. Three were conducted in Syria, in areas outside regime control (one each in Idlib, Aleppo, and Hasaka). Two FGDs were conducted in two neighbouring countries (Turkey and Lebanon), while a third was conducted in Germany. Each FGD ran for approximately three hours, and included between four and seven participants.

Phase II

Phase II of the data collection, occurring in June and July 2020, was designed around analysis of the findings from Phase I. In a notable shift from Phase I, six FGDs all took place virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Three of these were conducted with participants based in Syria (in Idlib, Aleppo, and the Kurdish-controlled Jazeera region), while the other three involved participants outside Syria (in Turkey, Europe, Lebanon, and Iraqi Kurdistan). Each FGD lasted approximately three hours and included between five and eight participants.

The questionnaire for the FGDs was structured so as to permit deeper investigation into the key findings of the first phase; a sample of questions can be found in Appendix A. In addition to the FGDs, a final component of Phase II was participant observation and reflexive methodology, as one of the authors of this report has been an active member of the feminist movement in Syria. The report thus includes her observations and analysis of both the Syrian context as well as Syrian women's and feminist movements.

Participant selection and location

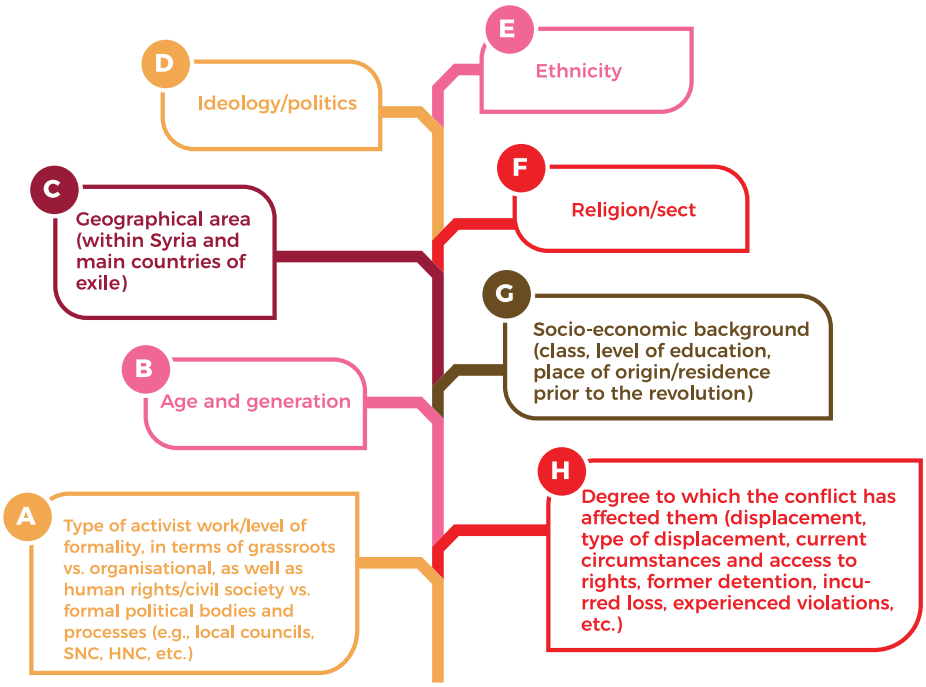
To select participants, Badael used its long-standing relationships in the field of women's rights and feminist work in the Syrian context. A purposive sampling was used, whereby Badael formulated a list of interviewees and focus group participants based on its large pre-existing network of contacts within the Syrian movements landscape.

A total of 118 women took part in the research as interviewees and focus group participants. 75 women were interviewed, and 28 participated in FGDs during the first phase, with 16 returning participants and 15 new participants in FGDs during the second phase.

All participants were Syrian women, including Kurdish Syrians not holding Syrian citizenship.

The primary selection criterion was that the women be activists, and that the total sample could be taken as a fair representation of The different forms of movements, as defined in this study. To this end, women were defined as activists if they identified and presented themselves as activists; were known and recognised as such in their communities; and engaged significantly in activist work. Activist work was loosely defined as any work, whether paid or voluntary, aimed at bettering the situations, or supporting the rights, of members of the Syrian population (including those with Palestinian or Kurdish heritage without formal citizenship) in the short, medium, or long terms. For the purposes of this study, activists are further defined as being non-affiliated with, independent of, or not knowingly or directly serving the interests of the Syrian regime and extremists. In other words, participants were women active in civil society and political entities or processes that broadly fall under the umbrella of the Syrian opposition.

While it was not a criterion for participants to define themselves as feminists, feminist identification or motivation were among the criteria according to which diversity and a fair representation of feminist and women's movements were ensured. Efforts were made to ensure that selected participants represented a diverse cross-section of women active at the community level, in civil society and political entities/processes. In addition to feminist identification/motivation, the selection of the sample as a whole took into account the following criteria for diversity:



Given the complexity and sensitivity of ensuring diversity according to such categories, this process was carried out in a qualitative manner, and was not translated into potentially reductive statistics. Further diversity was ensured by including participants spread between Syria (both outside and under regime control), its neighbouring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Jordan), and Europe and North America.

Data analysis

All interviews and FGDs were transcribed, and the transcriptions were read several times to gain a sense of the whole. The research team focused on both the similarities and differences in the data, especially those pertaining to the geographic background, socio-economic class, generation, and type of activism of the participants, as well as the level and type of institutionalisation of the movements with which the activists are affiliated.

Ethics

Informed consent was received from interviewees, whereby they agreed that their interviews would be recorded and used for the purpose of preparing this report. The same applied to those who took part in the FGDs.

Research limitations

Two main limitations of this research deserve mention: the limited number of interviews conducted in regime-controlled areas; and the varying levels of expertise of the field researchers who collected the data.

The data collection involved nine researchers with varying levels of experience, ranging from no academic background to PhDs and extensive field experience. Junior researchers received training and worked under close supervision from researchers with more fieldwork experience. Nevertheless, the quality of work was inconsistent, primarily due to junior researchers missing opportunities during interviews to ask follow-up questions which could have resulted in more in-depth discussions.

The second major limitation is that only nine interviews were conducted in regime-controlled areas; a significantly smaller sample size than the 30 interviews conducted outside such areas. The reason for this was that many activists based in regime-held areas to whom we reached out did not accept to be interviewed due to fear of regime surveillance and persecution.

However, despite these limitations, the research offers valuable insights and information on a topic which has not previously been addressed in depth within the Syrian context.

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, civil rights movements have advocated for the recognition of all Syrians' political and civil rights. To date, an extensive body of literature focuses on the exclusion of Syrian women from the country's political processes and the violations and abuses they have experienced. However, there is uneven data on the contributions made by feminist and women's movements in the post-revolutionary context, and how Syrian women have played a key role in the struggle for political and civil rights for Syrians. Accordingly, this report recognises both the gendered dimensions of war and conflict and the gendered dimensions of resistance. In other words, it does not consider women to be simply victims of a war, even though it acknowledges the structural inequalities women experience and the gendered violence tactics deliberately used against women in times of war and conflict. Instead, the report focuses on women's and feminist movements in Syria in order to shed light on the fact that women are also political actors of change, and shape resistance at multiple levels. This research adopts a feminist and intersectional framework to produce an in-depth analysis of feminist and women's movements in Syria as part of the political processes taking place in the period subsequent to the 2011 revolution, focusing on the dynamics that shaped these movements and the overall impact of women's mobilisations post-2011. The purpose of the research is to fill the gaps in the existing literature on Syrian women as political actors, and to highlight the social, political, and economic circumstances in which women's and feminist movements have been operating, both in Syria and in exile.

Moreover, this research approaches Syrian women's forms of organising as a non-monolithic body, aiming to describe the complexity of their different perspectives, aspirations, and interactions with other social and political movements in Syria. It also recognises the heterogeneity of Syrian women's experiences in politics and civil society, as well as the multiple forms in which women have been organising and resisting against the patriarchy at the social and political levels. Having a greater understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms that come into play with regards to Syrian women's participation in politics, both at the formal institutional level as well as that of everyday life, may lead to additional responsiveness and gender inclusivity in Syrian society. Furthermore, such an approach expands the definition of politics and the debates surrounding political participation and political change in Syria. This research differentiates between traditional political participation in political institutions and the politicisation of everyday life. Traditional political participation is defined as taking part in politics at the level of political institutions, such as local and central governance institutions and political parties. Politicising everyday life is based on the feminist perspective of 'the personal is political', and recognises the political struggle of feminists and women's activists which challenge patriarchy and gender norms within the private spheres, such as the family, household, and sexual life.

The main research questions addressed in this report are as follows:

- What are the key characteristics and dynamics of Syrian women's organising, women empowerment groups, women's rights movement(s), and feminist movement(s) in the context subsequent to the 2011 revolution?
- What are the key disparities and priorities for women organising?
- What are the strategies, tactics, accomplishments, and gains of the feminist and women's rights movements?
- How can the gains of the feminist and women's rights movements be maximised?

This research distinguishes between women empowerment groups, women's rights movement(s), and feminist movement(s) within the Syrian context, as follows:

i. **Women empowerment groups:** A reactive form of organising aiming to empower women within existing gender roles and parameters, led by and comprising women who mobilise women, without necessarily having a feminist agenda.

ii. **Women's rights movement(s):** A proactive form organising, with a belief that women's rights can best be achieved if regulated through legal and constitutional frameworks. Women's rights movements are perceived to be led predominantly by urban, educated women. This form of organising includes women and men.

iii. **Feminist movement(s):** A proactive form of organising, which recognises the heterogeneity of women's identities and struggles. Its work is either intersectional or subject matter/sub-group focused. Feminist movement leaderships are as heterogenous as their iterations, with a distinctive role played by young feminists, who have politicised the body and sexuality, and expanded the feminist debate in Syria. This coincided with the global #MeToo campaign, which resonated in the Syrian context, and through spaces for reflection in exile manifesting themselves in public debates on social media, away from spatial and societal requirements. This form of organising includes women, LGBTQIA+ persons, and men. They explicitly challenge the patriarchal structure of institutions, including those of both the regime and the revolution, and aim to bring a feminist and gendered dimension to political, social, and cultural change in Syria.

This report also notes that, in certain cases, these forms of organising overlap and complement one other. It focuses on movements, organisations, and individuals; the difference between each of which is often blurred in the Syrian context. In most cases, organisations are more vertically structured, whereas movements are more grassroots and horizontally structured. Notwithstanding that organisations may be part of a movement, this report demonstrates that, in the Syrian context, organisations and movements feed into each other, in the sense that many individual women carry out their activism both through the structures of organisations and through movements. Ultimately, what defines women empowerment groups, women's rights, and feminist work in Syria is this unique combination of work in both organisations

and movements. A key argument of this report is that these forms of organising ought to be analysed as emerging within the public spaces opened up by the period following the 2011 revolution, and that they are an integral component of the civil society renaissance process that took place in this period. With that said, the report acknowledges that post-2011 forms of women organising also need to be analysed within the long history of Syrian women's rights and feminist struggles during the past century. Furthermore, it is also important to recognise how the Syrian rights movements are in dialogue with international rights movements, both offering a critique of Western-centric approaches as well as gaining and lending support from international movements.

The Syrian revolution is the culmination of decades of struggle against the Baath regime, which has been invisible to many analysts of the revolution. As a result of this invisibility, analysis of the revolution over the past decade has often ended up with simplistic, reductionist, and binary approaches emphasising the ethnic, sectarian, and religious identities of activists and their organisations. By contrast, a study of Syrian women's organising as part of the Syrian revolution shows that the latter needs to be analysed beyond such reductionist, identity politics-based approaches. Historicising the movements enables us to understand the political, social, and cultural contexts in which today's activists were mobilised, and in which the current women's empowerment, rights, and feminist movements are operating. Furthermore, such historicisation and contextualisation also enable us to go beyond binary identities and understand how the diverse backgrounds of activists intersect with one other. Through the narratives of activists, this report analyses how these forms of organising in the post-2011 period pose both a continuation of as well as a departure from the feminist and women's movements of the decades prior to the revolution. Their structure, composition, and forms of organising, indeed, have changed profoundly over time, and their demands have become more explicitly political. Still, their overall quest for the advancement of women's rights and social justice in Syria remains unchanged. In particular, this report argues that the post-2011 movements are more community-based and grassroots compared to their predecessors, which were represented by more elitist middle- and upper-class activists. This report addresses the diversity of women activists in terms of generation, geography, political ideology, ethnicity, and sect. However, rather than approach these issues from a binary identity politics perspective, the report aims to understand how the intersection of such diverse identities results in different definitions of political participation and political struggle within the social and political contexts of the Syrian revolution.

The body of the report is divided into four chapters. The first focuses on understanding the characteristics of feminist and women's movements in Syria. This chapter locates women's and feminist movements within the context of the Syrian revolution, in order to analyse women's struggles within the broader Syrian socio-political context. It documents the various perceptions held by women organisers about women's rights and feminist movements in Syria; the reasons behind them; and the way in which they translate into both common and divergent priorities.

The second chapter describes the tactics and strategies of women organising, and the barriers to greater coordination. The third chapter showcases some of the key gains of the women's

rights and feminist movements, such as feminist knowledge production; personal and professional growth; and expanding the buy-in of communities in the movements' operational spaces.

The fourth chapter discusses the key challenges to maximising these gains, which primarily include a donor landscape with low appetite for risk; poor understanding of the heterogeneity of the political agency of women organising; agenda setting; and a colonial funding lens on gender which has led to NGO-ising movements and grassroots organising.

Historical Overview of Women's Activism in Syria

The emergence of women's organising in Syria can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century, to the Arab Nahda ('Awakening'); a moment of cultural renaissance that arose in Egypt and then spread to other Arab countries (SFJN, 2019). The period was characterised by an intellectual ferment that coincided with the development of Arab nationalist feelings. It is generally regarded as a time of reform and modernisation. Analysing the emergence of women's mobilisation in Syria and in the Middle East in general is important in terms of addressing public debates around the question as to what degree Middle Eastern women's movements mimicked their Western counterparts. A careful historical examination shows us that women's rights movements in Syria and in the Middle East developed within a particular regional socio-political context.

Looking back at the early stages of women's activism in the region is important to set the basis of Middle Eastern feminism as a local phenomenon articulated by women in the context of their own societies, different from European and American ones. This historical overview therefore aims to contextualise the emergence of feminism in the region

Upper-class educated women, widely seen as elitists, began creating charitable organisations to assist the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society, addressing their health, nutrition, and educational needs (Thompson, 2000). In the same period, in Damascus, pioneering women established literary associations, hosted salons, initiated women's press initiatives, and participated in local and international conferences that discussed women's rights issues. Activists such as Marianna Marrach, Maryam Nimr Makariyus, and Nadimash al-Sabuni had already been active in the years 1870-1893, publishing articles defending women's liberation.

Key figures of that time, such as Mary Ajamy and Nazik al-Abid, advocated for women's rights and social reforms in multiple domains, channelling their efforts towards literary, philanthropic, and, in some cases, also military actions. Al-Abid, for example, established the 'Red Star Association'; a precursor of the 'Red Crescent Society', as well as the 'Light of Damascus Society' (Jam'iyat Nur al-Fayha) and a magazine with the same name. In July 1920, she also took part in the Battle of Maysalun against the French, suggesting that the quest for women's rights was inherently interrelated with resistance to colonialism, and should be contextualised within this broader framework.

In the twentieth century, Syrian women activists engaged with the quest for women's rights

within the movement of national independence from colonial rule. These activists contested colonialism in several publications, and, in 1922, organised a women's demonstration to protest against French colonial rule. In 1930, the First Eastern Women's Congress was organised by Syrian women in Damascus, and in 1944 a delegation of Syrian women attended the first pan-Arab women's conference in Cairo (Vinson and Golley, 2012). This event was particularly important, as it led to the creation of the Arab Women's Union in 1945, which brought together various different women's organisations and fostered feminist ideas and pan-Arab unity. It also represented an early attempt at de-colonising feminist knowledge and praxis, while at the same time giving voice to the nationalist tendencies that were emerging in the region, and highlighting the distinct material realities of Arab women. A significant question that remains open to further exploration concerns the impact of feminism's emergence in the Middle East within the context of Pan-Arab nationalism on the voice and struggle of women from other ethnic groups. Little is known about whether this affected the agenda of the struggle for women's rights in the region for all women, rather than merely Arab women.

During the 1922 demonstrations against French rule, women symbolically unveiled themselves in public. This gesture represented how women saw their struggle for both women's and national liberation as interdependent issues (Atassi, 2010). Conservatives considered the gesture (known in Arabic as al-sufur) as a threat to traditional authority in Syria.

Following Syria's independence in 1946, Syrian women gained numerous rights, most importantly the rights to vote (in 1949) and to stand for elections (in 1953). In general, the democratic climate and socio-political freedom that characterised much of the 1950s led to the rise of several activist groups that advocated for women's rights, focusing mainly on enhancing their professional and educational skills, as well as fighting against illiteracy (Badael, 2015). Still, women were far from enjoying the same rights as men. In particular - as in many other Arab countries - they could not pass on their citizenship status to their husbands or children, and were significantly disadvantaged when it came to divorce, inheritance, and child custody rights (Joseph, 2000). All these matters were determined by the Syrian Personal Status Code, developed in 1953, which became one of the crucial issues contested by women's groups. The Personal Status Code reflected the interplay that characterised post-colonial Syria between patriarchal values in society; the colonial legacy; and women's subordinate position (Moghadam, 2004). As Elizabeth Thompson has written, 'nationalists who inherited the state perpetuated French practice in what amounted to gender pacts to underpin their regimes and continue to subordinate female citizens to male through support of religious laws' (2003: 62). Thus, the post-colonial situation was characterised by the ambiguous coexistence of state policies that promoted women's equality with structural impediments that hindered the attainment of these policies.

These contradictions continued after Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970. For example, Article 45 of the Constitution of 1973 declared:

> The state guarantees women all opportunities enabling them to fully and effectively participate in political, social, cultural, and economic life. The state removes the restrictions that prevent women's development and participation in building the socialist Arab society.

At the same time, the regime's attitude towards women's activist groups was to either 'ban, contain, or absorb them' (SFJN, 2019). Women's groups were asked to register under the General Women's Union (GWU), which was the only officially permitted women's organisation in Syria, stopping the 'natural development of the feminist movement' (SFJN, 2019) and representing an attempt by the regime at the co-optation and tokenising of women. The GWU was an affiliate of the Baath Party, and was funded by the government. It mainly supported projects targeted at children and marginalised women, focusing on literacy and vocational training. It officially represented all Syrian women; this monopoly worked to exclude any dissenting voices and to silence any opposition to the government's policies.

After 2000, when Bashar al-Assad inherited the Syrian presidency, the country experienced a brief period known as the Damascus Spring, during which the margins of the civic space were expanded. This resulted in the emergence of several elite-driven women's groups, mostly based in the urban centres of Damascus and Aleppo. Their members predominantly came from middle- and upper-middle-class families, and were well-educated. The main agenda of these groups was to contest the Personal Status Code. There were two distinct strands: one advocating for eliminating (physical) violence against women from the Personal Status Code; and another advocating for citizenship and inheritance rights. Citizenship was - and still is - a political taboo for the regime, used to subjugate Syrian Kurds, as well as to claim 'resistance' credentials by preserving the Palestinians' right to return. Further work on 'honour killings' and domestic abuse enjoyed wider margins of civic space, given that the regime later appropriated these struggles to burnish its 'secular' image.

Women's groups enjoyed a degree of freedom during the initial years of Bashar's rule, especially with regards to the fight against illiteracy or the demand for rural women's rights. These objectives aligned with the governments' priorities, and posed no threat to its stability. However, when women's groups tried to contest the regime more explicitly; exposing human rights violations or shifting the focus onto political matters; their attempts were brutally suppressed. The regime's control over women's actions gradually tightened, especially after the assassination of Lebanon's prime minister Rafic Hariri, which put Syria at the centre of international attention and led to a decline in political tolerance in the country. In the years that followed, the consolidation of this climate of fear and discrimination, together with the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, led to the emergence of grassroots, organic, and more inclusive women's movements.

The Syrian revolution has been a complex and multi-dimensional process, in terms of providing a social, political, and ideological context in which Syrian feminist and women's movements have operated. In March 2011, when Syrians took to the streets demanding political reforms, freedoms, and social change, the revolution began. These demands are still being fought for today. Unity, solidarity, bonding, and friendship have been experienced since Syrians first unified over calls for these rights. These concepts were also driven by shared experiences of risk, such as the risk of detention, kidnapping, disappearance, and general security threats.

Many women activists have brought to the light the gendered dimension of risks, as well and how sexual harassment and rape are being used as war weapons. This has resulted in women coming together, not only around the ideals of the revolution, but also around recognising their unique experiences as women and developing strategies to overcome the risks, threats, and challenges they face due to being women. Accordingly, this research will address how the shared experiences of women brought about by the revolution, although challenging, have provided opportunities for the growth and development of solidarity and coordination going beyond identity politics and political and ideological differences.

I. Characteristics of women organising

Women organising and the revolution

According to many of those interviewed for this report, the groundbreaking events of the Syrian revolution brought together Syrian women seeking gender equality, and paved the way for organised movements to emerge. What is the relationship between the various forms of women's organising and the revolution?

While it is important to recognise the history of Syrian women activists' struggle dating back decades before 2011, the revolution paved the way for public visibility and diverse forms of organising openly. A number of interviewees argued that, while there were feminists and women activists in Syria before 2011, the civil and public spheres were largely closed due to the regime's oppression, and therefore it was not possible for many of these women to come together and organise under a movement until the revolution. With the outbreak of the revolution and its demands for equality and rights, women's rights movements also appeared on the stage as part of the larger social movements in Syria. One interviewee said:

> Women's movements are part of the social movement against dictatorship and repressive regimes, and are an integral part when we talk about equality. They are part of democracy. For society to become democratic, women must have full rights and be free to act as they want, and be equal everywhere, whether in political negotiations or in important positions. This is part of my struggle against repressive regimes, and I am against the dictatorial regime. (R:L 11:15)[1]

Moreover, prior to the revolution, the decision-making positions within political movements - even oppositional ones – were held mostly by men. During and after the revolution, however, women worked to reach positions of organising and decision-making. As one interviewee said:

> In the past period, the role of women was absent politically. Decisions were in the hands of men only. Now, the participation of women in organising demonstrations is considered a women's movement. (NRC 6:16)

It was women who, through their own struggle, achieved positions of decision-making, whereas previously these positions were mostly occupied by men, with a few token titles sometimes offered to some women. With the revolution, women, like other actors demanding equality and rights, were mobilised through various movements. Through feminist and women's rights movements, as well as women empowerment mobilisation, women altered the revolution and with it the definitions of politics and public affairs in Syria in general.

> From the beginning of the revolution, when we did the revolution, our dream was to change everything. There was a very strong and effective participation of women, and there were challenges to women's participation as having a real role

1 https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/5/syrian-women-rise-above-differences-and-forge-a-statement-of-unity

> in the revolution. The primary goal of the revolution is to reach justice, and justice only happens by removing discrimination against women, from women and from all Syrian citizens, all of Syria. (ENA 6:16)

While the revolution enabled women activists and community leaders to organise, those women developed their own gendered tools throughout the revolution and transformed the revolution itself in a way that took into consideration the wide spectrum of concerns and demands of Syrian women. Women activists and rights advocates do not see themselves as against the revolution, but rather as part of it. According to women activists, the initial demands of the revolution were in line with their own demands, including but not limited to rule of law and equal citizenship rights for all Syrians; freedom of expression; equal economic opportunities for all citizens; and an end to discrimination based on religion, sect, or ethnicity. Thus, they see the goals of the women's movements as being in line with those of the revolution; the difference being that feminist movements look at the revolution from a critical gendered perspective.

> The revolution opened the way for a big change of society. I think from the beginning of the revolution until now many tools have evolved - women have assembled themselves, and expressed their demands by talking about influencing public affairs and their will to be part of public affairs. It is still immature, but I imagine it is a step on the right path. (R:T 20:31)

Women's Understanding of the Movement

Feminist and women's organising in movements and community groups

This section explores women's perspectives on feminist and women's organising in Syria, defining them according to the interpretations offered by interviewees. Moreover, it analyses the common features of these forms of organising, as well as what sets them apart from one another.

Some interviewees stated that an 'organised movement' is 'a group of women who are active, have a vision, a goal, a message and act on them'. Others argued that it is not yet possible to speak of an organised movement in Syria, but rather initiatives, institutions, and organisations to which women belong. Others still did not focus on whether movements were organised or not, but instead defined movements as those which met the criterion of 'looking at society and politics from a women's point of view'.

The fact that women organise differently, and do not necessarily all share the same ideology or scope of political and social work, is not seen as a negative factor by many activists. Both the revolution's initial ideals and the women's struggle recognise the heterogeneity of Syrian society, and emphasise the importance of pluralism and freedom of expression among their major demands. Women activists also represent and express this plurality based on their socio-economic background; the social and political issues of the locality they come from and represent; and the inequalities present in the societies where they live. In other words, many activists consider their differences as a contribution to the public debate and communication

among different sectors of Syrian society, rather than being a hindrance to the movement. They consider the heterogeneity of political and social work as addressing different problems faced by women in Syrian society, and as complementing one other.

In line with the above, geographical differences and the varying needs of women in different parts of Syria further challenge the notion of a single, unified movement.

Contextualisation also goes beyond regional or national differences. According to many interviewees, internal differences inside Syria also need to be taken into consideration in order to develop effective strategies. According to some interviewees, such local differences, and the fact that feminists or women's activists are unable to represent these differences, are the main reasons for the lack of an organised movement in Syria.

> I believe that there are groups that work, but there is no complete political movement because there is no clear perception or framework in which everyone can work together. There are a lot of initiatives and small groups that work ... Now there is no such thing; that is, when I talk about a feminist movement, I really represent the women in Idlib, the women who were in Daraya, the women of Raqqa, etc. ... No, because each of these contexts is separate from the other. (ENA 3:17)

For other activists, the lack of any one unified goal is actually what defines the localisation of the feminist and women's struggle. It is not possible to talk about a single definition or understanding of a movement, but rather the definition will depend on the local context and local goals of that specific movement.

> As a term in general, it is a group of women working for a particular goal that does not necessarily have to be a fixed goal; i.e., not all women's movements have the same goal. There are feminist movements that have goals at the local level, and I don't see any feminist movement in the world that could have [exactly] the same goals. (ENA 3:15)

Despite differences in the geographic locations in which activists reside and work, the Syrian revolution, war, conflict, and displacements provide the overarching political, social, and economic contexts in which activists define feminist and women's struggles. The general differences outlined by interviewees are expressed along a generational divide, whereby young feminists are perceived to be more keen on taking the feminist debate further, and politicising the body, sexuality, and knowledge at large.

This generational difference becomes especially apparent with regards to issues of sexuality and expanding definitions of politics. Activists of the younger generation mention sexual freedoms more frequently as feminist issues, expanding the definition of political struggle to include the struggle for sexual freedom. By contrast, those of older generations tend to focus more on economic equality and traditional definition of politics, such as increasing women's role in traditional political institutions and in decision-making positions through the application of quotas.

> I want women to have the right to be single if they want to, and to not be exposed to any danger in the future. A woman should not be exposed to any kind of danger as a result of her sexual life choices. (ENA 13:91)

A young activist (NRCA 19:13) emphasised the lack of strategies that invest in and are inclusive of young people, whom she described as 'neither adults nor children; a lost category'. An activist (ENA 14:24) attributed this to a lack of awareness of sisterhood, alongside the will and interest of older activists in supporting adolescent and young women by sharing power with them.

Another difference pertains to the gender roles promoted by the movements' activities. According to some interviewees, women's empowerment groups are furthering traditional gender roles through their activities, while women's rights and feminist movements have integrated approaches to rights and empowerment:

> I reached out to many women's organisations, and their work was purely service-oriented, such as languages, sewing, and cooking, whereas feminism is different: it empowers leadership, political action, and political demands that are linked to the suffering of women and how their rights are represented by any political document. (ENA 1:41)

> The concept of the women's movement is a revolution in itself. What we are doing today is not a revolution against a regime, but a revolution against everything that offends women. And I am talking about everything; a revolution against violence, and a revolution against ignorance and any injustice befalling women. (NRCA 23:16)

It is important also to analyse the specificity of women's organising, and how it shifted in various ways from locally-organised groups involved in social and humanitarian work to politically active movements that formulate their political demands and assert their voice and presence in the political sphere. One differentiation pertains to the various ways of engagement with political and/or social work carried out by women activists.

While the distinction between the political and social fields was blurred for some interviewees, other activists emphasised the importance of women becoming more active in traditional political institutions, and thus defining women's rights movements as movements that strive to increase not only the number, but also the active role of women in decision-making positions at this specific conjuncture in Syria. Women advocating this perspective argue that the goals of women's rights movements need to focus on political institutions rather than the social field:

> Women's [rights] movements advocate women's rights issues in social terms, and there are movements that are concerned more with the political field and advocate for women to take their role in decision-making positions. I see at the moment that we need more to work on the political side, especially at the current stage of writing a constitution for Syria. Women should be participating in peacemaking, writing the country's constitution, amending laws to equalise women and encourage them, and this is more important than advocacy at the social level. (NRCA: 24:15)

When it comes to women's organising it is crucial to make the local and universal engage in a dialogue in order to work and grow together. To that end, it is important for Syrian women's rights and feminist activists to be informed about international movements and to be engaged with them while also being rooted in the local context, in order to develop appropriate strategies to achieve universal rights in Syria.

> I think this is the third wave of feminism that has a political dimension, and we do not take the Western terms as they are. We are establishing a women's [rights] movement that takes into account gender issues from the local reality that has our specificity. It is true that our reference to international resolutions and women's movements are in Europe, but there are different reasons and data for the feminist movements that Europe has experienced, [which are] different from us. We may have taken it as a copy, but we took care of the local specificity from our Syrian perspective. (ENA 1:43)

Many interviewees active in rights-based organisations argue that the revolution did indeed make it possible for Syrian women to strive for universal rights, through its demands to change the regime and its political and legal systems. The revolution made it possible to bring together the local struggle and universal women's rights standards.

> I saw the beginnings of an opportunity to achieve salvation from tyranny; [an opportunity] that I see as key to achieving full freedoms for both women and men; and an opportunity to re-codify Syrian laws in accordance with international human rights law and conventions concerning women, such as CEDAW, and to achieve a civil family law and a law against domestic violence. (ENA 8:24)

An overview of the characteristics of various forms of organising

The Syrian Revolution has crystallised different social and economic inequalities that exist within Syrian society. An analysis of women's organising in women empowerment groups, women's rights movements, and feminist movements thus allows us to recognise the political and social change demanded by the actors of the revolution as results of intersectional variables of gender, class, ethnicity, and political ideology. This section addresses the factors that intersect to shape Syrian women's activism.

One activist living in a regime-controlled part of Syria said the following:

> I define myself as an 'intersectional feminist' [...] For me, intersectional feminism sees hierarchy as the problem; our problem is no longer just a woman/a man. I mean, for example, white women in Europe or America are better placed than black men or other men of colour! The problem therefore has to do with the marginalisation of several elements; each case is a special one. (RCA 2:18)

Understanding the ethnic lines, geographic differences, political priorities, ideological differences, and class identities are essential to developing a Syrian intersectional lens on women's rights activism. When it comes to ethnic identities, Kurdish feminists highlight how

Kurdish women are oppressed differently from Arab women. As one Kurdish activist noted, Kurds' lack of citizenship rights is a major item on the agenda of Kurdish women activists: 'I want to claim Syrian citizenship for the Kurds of Syria, and this is one of my priorities' (NRCA 7:31). This research recognises that this view may not represent all arguments by Kurdish activists, and acknowledges people's right to self-determination.

It is important to note that, in this example, the inequalities experienced by Kurds in Syria are linked not only to the legal inequalities and politics of the regime, but also a sense of alienation from Syria's Arab majority. Women active within different women's movements may clash due to the fact that regime policies are able to have deeper influence at the social level, without being limited to the legal inequality aspect.

Geographic differences focus mostly on women activists inside and outside of Syria, as well as women residing under different forms of formal and informal governance in Syria. In certain cases, geographic differences further intersect with ethnic identities. As one Kurdish activist said:

> We always take into account the geographical areas, i.e., areas with a Kurdish majority that are not the same as the areas of Raqqa, al-Tabqa, and Deir al-Zor, because the concepts are different, the social reality is different, and the tribal reality is different, and therefore the perspective of women's rights is different (NRCA 7:49).

Many interviewees indicated that economic independence is one of the major issues prioritised by women empowerment groups and women's rights movements, especially within the context of war and conflict, which have increased economic burdens tremendously. Class and economic background intersect with gender, and are determining factors of the degree to which individuals can live their lives independently. Similarly, access to educational opportunities (or lack thereof) is also among the joint priorities.

Within the context of the Syrian conflict, geographical differences and displacement intersect, resulting in different needs for women who lived through the war in different parts of Syria. As one activist put it, displacement produces new kinds of economic, cultural, and social inequalities which should be taken into consideration by women's movements.

Women's organising goals in the larger context of political change in Syria

Where do women's empowerment groups and feminist and women's rights movements situate themselves in relation to political change in Syria? This section looks at their common goals, and how they relate to such broader discourses as gender equality, women's rights, and political change at the national level.

The section examines the goals of women's activism with regards to their agenda for changing the political regime at large, and/or achieving political and legal gains for women. The major cross-cutting issue for women in all locations is political change in Syria. While some activists define political change generally as change of the regime, others define it as a constitution that grants equal citizenship rights to both women and men. Much is left to be discussed and

debated around the shape of the state, federalisation, self-determination, and regional and international alliances. Even though there appears to be a clear difference between these perspectives, there is consensus that regime change needs to come first, in order to create a space for debating those questions and lay the ground for building a gender-equal society which ensures everyone enjoys their human security.

> There must be elections and a constitution that respects gender equality, and parties should be on this basis as well as associations and civil society organisations. There are no elections without political transition; nothing can happen without political transition (R:L 11:75).

Some activists do not support prioritising gender struggle in the Syrian context, but rather advocate a focus on all vulnerable groups, instead of just women, as they perceive it. Such a perspective might assume that the causes of suffering and injustices in Syrian society affect all genders:

> I am feeling the women's movement in Syria is taking a stricter character for women […] and I sometimes have a problem with this. I always feel there are other groups in society that deserve to be focused on. I always [tell] my friends that I know women in this period who suffer, but also many men are suffering and no one is focusing on men (RCA 3:16).

Some interviewees indicate that the main reason why they find it challenging to relate to the feminist movement in Syria is their perception that the feminist movements ignore larger inequalities within Syrian society caused by the regime itself, which is seen to be the most pressing priority for women empowerment groups. They believe that achieving gender equality will not be possible in a Syria which is still ruled by the same regime, the existence of which is conditional in the first place on perpetuating injustices and inequalities within Syrian society.

Other interviewees who identify as feminists, on the other hand, argue that even though it is undeniable that all sectors of Syrian society are subjected to abuses and violations, this broader approach risks inadvertently shifting the focus away from women's struggle against patriarchy and blurring the distinction between violations that are direct consequences of the conflict and those rooted in the patriarchal structure of Syrian society, which are likely to recur even after the fall of the regime.

A common perception of women's organising and struggle is a solidaric encompassing one. As one activist put it: 'We are part of all, and I am part of the women's movements because I am a Syrian woman, because I carry my country on' (NRCA 9:22).

It is both an ideal and a sense of togetherness brought out by the Syrian revolution. Such a notion encompasses all under a common struggle, regardless of geographic location or any identity denominators.

The revolution has provided a larger context for women's movements, and at the same time the women's movements have brought out a gendered perspective of the revolution itself.

Disparities among women organising

i. Ideological and political positionalities

There is a consensus across the divide of women organising in empowerment groups, women's rights movements, and feminist movements that the political rights and participation of all Syrian women, regardless of their backgrounds or ideological stances, need to increase. Most interviewees agreed that women from all backgrounds should have equal citizenship rights in Syria. They argue that this is in line with the core demands of the revolution (democracy, human rights, justice, and social equity).

While many interviewees assert that the political representation of women has been the common focus of many feminist and women's rights groups, others say Syrian feminists or women's rights activists are not exempt from the divisions within Syrian society in general, and within Syrian civil society specifically. The political polarisation within Syrian society is mirrored within civil society institutions. Some interviewees said that the success of women's movements depends on being able to create a collective effort to reach their goals and to stay out of the political conflicts that plague other movements in Syria.

> I hope that [the women's movement] will be far from political conflicts. I hope that the women's movement will know and determine what it wants, and I hope that it will coordinate its collective efforts, not [act as] individual and small groups, so that it will get some results. As I mentioned, this movement is a victim of social and political conflicts (R:I 2:22).

The political differences were summed up by one interviewee as follows:

> The differences are more on the political issues. For example, do we want to get involved in the constitution or not? Are we going to believe in a piecemeal political solution or not? These are the differences I see, at least from reading, and from communicating with a lot of young women activists who are linked to the political issues concerning the country (ENA 15:26).

Within women's rights and feminist circles, the key political lines of division are as follows:

i. Position vis-a-vis forced consensus across the conflict divide imposed by the international community.

ii. Position regarding the militarisation of the revolution.

These two issues have become the focus of debates among women activists and their movements.

Notably, on several occasions during the interviews, many interviewees emphasised the significance of recognising women's political agency, and the security concerns that come with addressing the international community's interventions in peacebuilding and dialogue. This emphasis is symptomatic of several issues. It reflects how these allegiances are overlooked

by the international community in their attempts to bring women from different political backgrounds together in the hope of creating 'gains', which are perceived by many interviewees as window dressing. Interviewees emphasised the need for a 'do no harm approach' by the international community in light of the safety and security of participants. An example of this is the Syrian Women Peacemakers conference organised by the UN in Beirut in May 2016, which brought over 130 women from different political backgrounds together in an effort to build consensus to end the Syrian crisis. Such efforts are seen as producing shallow outcomes, due to compromised security, introducing topics prematurely, and low pre-existing trust amongst participants.

Some interviewees stated clearly that they were against the use of any kind of violence, and that they supported peaceful political transition in order to achieve the ultimate goal of democracy. Nonviolence and democratic values were cited as foundational commitments for the ability to work across the various forms of women's organising. [I] can work with any women's organisation or individual women who believe in nonviolence and in democracy, against militarisation, against sectarianism, and with democratic transition (ENA 8:88).

On the issue of armament, some interviewees focused on the differences among women's groups which are affiliated with certain armed factions and those that are independent of any de facto authority in the non-regime-controlled areas:

> There are some women's movements that are affiliated with a[n armed] faction, not an organisation, that is not civil society. So here the vision is different, or you feel that working within this movement is different from working within other movements, and their orientations are different and [they] have other priorities. They do not fight the same as the rest of the women's groups (NRCA 22:28).

The point of divergence between women living in regime-controlled versus non-regime-controlled areas is their perspective on what constitutes human rights, according to many interviewees. Some said regime loyalists can also be defenders of human rights: 'I am in contact with loyalists; women who are loyal [to the regime] but who believe in human rights. I have no problem at all in communicating with them' (ENA 8:95). Furthermore, some interviewees indicated that there were political agreements between women who supported the regime and others who opposed it.

However, some interviewees said that being in agreement over certain issues did not necessarily mean diverse groups of women activists were always able to work together. They added that feminist and women's rights movements and women empowerment groups across diverse constituencies of Syrian women needed to develop mechanisms to be able to take action together: 'There is general consensus on slogans, rather than specific mechanisms for implementation' (NRCA 24:24). Some interviewees said that debates around concepts were also part of the differences between women's organisations, the reason being related to the distinct political orientation of each group: 'There is no agreement, for example, on the topic of empowering women. Each understands the topic of empowerment differently from the other, according to their orientation' (NRCA 2:22).

In addition to ideological differences, another major difference pertains to the diversity of challenges faced by women in different geographical areas, resulting in different sets of needs. The needs of women in different regions of Syria differ due to cultural, economic, and educational opportunities and challenges present in each region. Therefore, the diversity within the movements represents the intersecting interests and strategies according to which region inside Syria they are located in. In most cases, geographical differences interact with ideological differences and position vis-a-vis secularism too:

> They assume this is part of religion and they are committed to religion. [It is] the same thing in Daraa region, and even in areas under regime control. There are those who say, 'No, this is from God and Islam, and we can't work against Islam and work with women's rights' (ENA 11:26).

While part of the narrative on different perspectives of Islam and secularism has a culturalist and essentialist focus on more conservative regions inside Syria, others focus on the de facto political authorities and political processes that result in the prevalence of non-secular perspectives in the region.

It is also important to note that there have been many attempts by women to bring activists who argue for secularism together with those who are against secularism. Despite such attempts to foster dialogue and communication between them, in many cases ideological differences overcame their common interests as women:

Now, in women's movements, there are Islamic movements that put forward a different thesis than those of the liberal feminist movement. There are a lot of clashes between them. They are not sitting together to find a compromise, because they are hard-liners (ENA 6:38).

ii. Generational differences

Secular activists of the younger generations identify themselves more as feminists compared to those of older generations, who have certain reservations about the term 'feminism'. Their main reservation is that feminism relegates the problem of the Syrian regime to a second degree of importance, while emphasising gender inequality. One major reason for this difference has to do with the fact that younger activists interviewed considered the achievement of sexual freedoms, such as issues of virginity or recognition of LGBTQIA+ rights, as an integral part of the realisation of a broader project of political freedom, whereas older generations' struggles were more narrowly channelled towards the achievement of citizenship rights and a gender-equal personal status law.

Older activists are generally considered more elite and better-educated, hailing mostly from urban backgrounds, whereas younger activists represent the diversity of Syrian society across urban-rural localities. Interviewees also said that the Syrian revolution diversified the geographical background of activists by creating public spaces throughout Syria, not limited to major urban centres. As one interviewee stated, it was only with the revolution that women from different parts of Syria got to know each other.

iii. Ethnic and sectarian differences

While some argue that gender identity and the struggle for women's rights should go beyond ethnic and sectarian differences, others hold that such divisions within Syrian society have an influence on the specific demands and methods of the different women's movements as well.

In certain cases, ethnic differences are explained through essentialist political allegiances, where being Arab is equated with being Baathist. In other cases interviewees gave examples of alliances established among women's organisations representing women of different ethnic and sectarian backgrounds. The following quote from an activist living in a non-regime controlled area is an example:

> There is a kind of relationship. I work as a coordinator of the Syrian Women's Alliance and this alliance brings together Kurdish women with Alawite women in Banias and Homs, meaning there is an alliance of about 40 organisations participating in it. Certainly, there is one goal that we seek to achieve (NRCA 8:32).

iv. Inside Syria and the diaspora

The issue of elitism among activists is raised quite often, and is addressed beyond the issue of the generational gap. A focus of discussion concerns the differences between women who are inside Syria and those who are outside. Those outside of Syria are considered by some to be speaking from places of comfort, without actually knowing the reality of women on the ground:

> The women's movement in Syria is still in an ivory tower, unfortunately, and does not come down to society. The women's movement needs to reach the housewives, the women who are not working. Syrian women's movement today is limited to some meetings in Turkey (R:T 19:31).

This is due to multiple factors. Exile can mean access to greater resources, space, and political freedom. For example, interviewee (ENA 14:105) describes her experience as follows: 'Exile gives us time […] to be able to think more strategically […] it allows us to interact with other nations and ideas and to better organize ourselves.'

A further element of the experience of exile highlighted by interviewees was access to new communities, specifically other feminist organisations who may be able to support Syrian women in exile in their endeavours. One example was highlighted by (ENA (2:71): It is true that there is a weakness in the diaspora, but [there are] also opportunities to advocate' (ENA2:71).

A further possible dimension of the experience of exile is the increase, or beginning of, communication between women activists in the diaspora and those within Syria. For example, (NRCA 11:43) details her experience:

> I lived my whole life in Ras al-Ayn, inside [the] Jazeera [region]. I didn't have any relationship with women from Latakia or Daraa or [Damascus], but from outside Syria I was able to communicate with all these women and learn about their suffering' (NRCA 11:34).

Therefore, it is possible to argue that the experience of exile from Syria, although undoubtedly a challenge, has also provided Syrian women activists with new opportunities - both at the personal as well as the political levels.

Feminist and women's movements' priorities

The priorities of women's movements in Syria are to a certain extent determined by the intersecting factors previously mentioned. In certain cases, activists in different locations do not agree as to the priorities of the movements, as the needs of women in each geographic location vary according to the particular economic, social, ethnic, and class make-up of that specific region.

It is important to note that the priorities of women's movements have changed over time. As one interviewee observed, in the early years of the revolution, women's demands and priorities were mostly subsumed under the priorities of the revolution. One overarching transformation that the majority of women activists struggle to achieve might be referred to as achieving equal citizenship rights, which necessitates a radical change in the political regime. Here the 'political regime' does not refer only to specific individuals or even a specific party, but rather to a complex web of political and security structures and institutions that are still in place. Such a perspective prioritises political change over social change, and politics is defined narrowly in terms of formal political institutions and processes.

> [...] Democratic transition, accountability and justice, because without creating a safe democratic environment or democracy, women will not be safe to exercise our freedom in the movement, and to achieve change to reach the equality to which we aspire (ENA 15:43).

Dismantling the patriarchy: An overarching priority

The need to dismantle the patriarchy has provided the opportunity for solidarity and support, according to interviewees. Syrian feminists show how state politics and legal systems strengthen patriarchal structures at the local levels, and therefore how feminists should prioritize change at the legal and state levels in order to achieve social change, such as prevention of underage marriages and achieving gender equality in inheritance and educational opportunities.

The acknowledgement given by women's rights and feminist activists to one another, and their prioritisation of solidarity in the face of patriarchy, subsequently resulted in a collective sense of movement.

> I feel supported. I believe that if a man tried to defame me, a massive number of Syrian women would defend me with all their powers. Some of them might know me, and others might not. I feel the existence of the movement in these details. This makes me forever grateful and protected. I always have the feeling that a mass of Syrian women, some of them I know personally, inside and outside Syria would defend me. They are my source of protection (ENA 12:53).

This is corroborated by testimonies from other interviewees, as well. For example, another said: I believe that I should stand with any woman struggling in order to break the patriarchal system or to improve the status of women. I should support her even if I disagree with her on many other things (ENA 14:102).

Political representation and participation

Women activists who focus on formal political change argue that the priority of women's movements should be increasing women's participation and role in the formal political processes, rather than grassroots work that targets transformation at the social level.

Nevertheless, this priority is not shared by all members of women's movements. Feminists have indicated that political and legal change need to be accompanied by societal change in order to achieve an impact on the everyday lives of women; otherwise, the impact will remain limited only to written law without a concrete change in the norms and living conditions of Syrian women.

Some interviewees indicated that the top priority for women in the peace process is to be representative and to have a presence as women activists. However, women activists also cited the importance of women's active participation in political processes instead of being simply token participants. From such a perspective, women are critical of the quotas that might include women in political bodies only to make up numbers, rather than including women as active political actors.

Release of detainees and safe return of the displaced

These priorities are defined as non-negotiable by any armed or non-armed party on the ground. These demands are also accompanied by and made possible only by 'stopping the war and working on national reconciliation' (NRCA 10:41). Even though there might be differences and debates regarding the conditions under which the war will end and national reconciliation will take place, activists emphasise the release of detainees and safe return of refugees as priorities that will not be given up. Women activists living outside of Syria placed particular emphasis on the issue of return:

> There are mechanisms that you have to work on for the safe return of refugees, and these are the priorities. Instead of staying in the camp at the mercy of humanitarian aid, and being subjected to sexual violence, my priority is not to link it to a political transition, because it could take ten or twenty years for political transition. My first priority is increasing humanitarian assistance and enabling them to live independently economically in the camps without [facing] security risks (ENA 1:39).

Priorities at both the private and communal levels, as well as the legal levels, are deeply interlinked. Activists raise certain issues that they indicate need to be prioritised in order to achieve gender inequality. Amending the personal status law, the nationality law, the penal code, and all discriminatory laws are at the top of the list. Secondly, providing equal educational

opportunities to all girls is prioritised, so that women can overcome the conditions which hinder them from finding and living independent lives.

Strengthening the movement

In addition to the above, other activists prioritise strengthening both the women's movement and the collaborations among various Syrian women's and feminist groups. They tend to focus their priorities on strengthening the structure of the movement itself, in order to achieve the desired social and political changes. Here one of the bifurcations among different movements occurs between those who are located inside Syria and those who are outside. Activists on the inside are especially keen on producing contextualised knowledge through a critique of institutions and movements that believe there is a one-size-fits-all solution to social inequalities. This is clearly expressed in the following quote:

I will say that the priority is designing programmes and ideas based on the data on the ground, and not based on theoretical ready-made templates and giving academic labels to things that people live in reality, which is very easy! (RCA 2: 46)

Activists in Europe and North America were especially likely to emphasise the importance of establishing such connections, since they are further away from the local contexts than activists in the neighbouring region. As such, they emphasise being more engaged with the Syrian interior, and concerning themselves with what the future will bring to Syrian women in terms of building peace. As one activist put it:

> We should prioritise from our geographical and political positions how much we engage and we should be involved more. We should be involved in reconstruction, for example, and the return of refugees. We should be involved in what it means to build peace for women (ENA 2:42).

Some interviewees focused on the lack of coordination between various women's and feminist movements, as indicated in the following quote: 'There is a lack of communication between women's movements and groups, with each group working on its own separate agenda, and there is no vision or dialogue to reach the topics that concern all women' (NRCA 24:24). A priority of women activists in this matter is to achieve coordination between localised groups in order to achieve collective organising work to do advocacy, not only for a particular area, but across localities on issues that concern all Syrian women.

Protection and participation as mutually reinforcing priorities

Many activists indicated that the first and most important priority of the feminist movement in general; in any location inside or outside Syria; is to protect women from all kinds of violence, including sexual violence. Feminists argue that women should not back down from their demand for transitional justice, because the crimes of sexual violence should not fall by statute of limitations nor into any possible amnesty. Therefore, it is particularly important that women participate in negotiations, because, as one activist said:

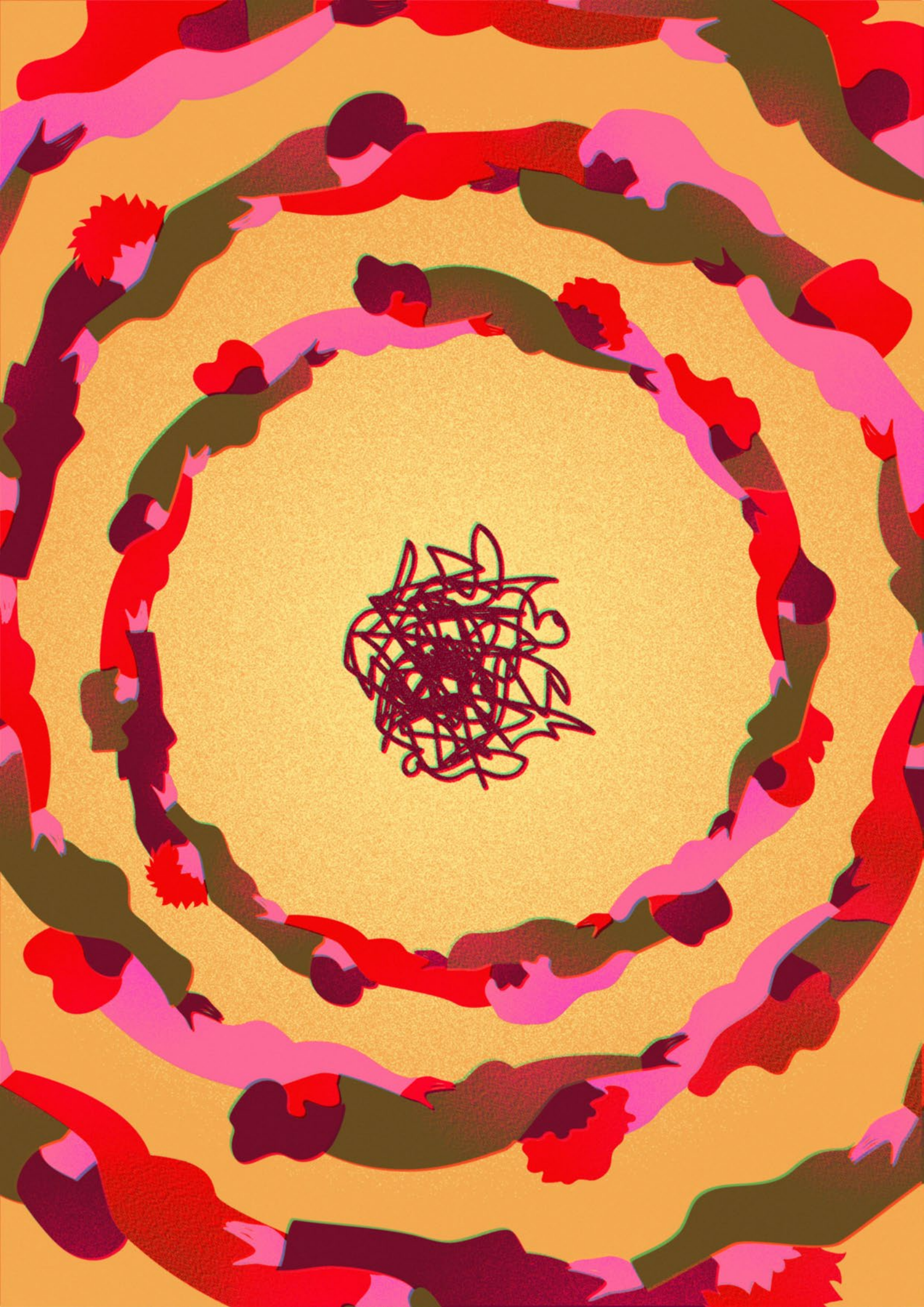
> It is not possible that I accept that a woman has been raped and then she lives

> with her rapist in the same place. It is a disaster. Women should focus on punishing those who are involved in sexual violence crimes. These should not be included in any amnesty (ENA 11:30).

Occupying the public sphere

As women activists aim to contribute to the struggle of achieving equality from their current geographic and political positioning, women in Europe and North America in particular prioritise their networks in the countries in which they reside, in order to shape national and international public opinion regarding women in Syria. Activists prioritise Syrian women's appearances in the media in order to break stereotypes against women, and also to increase women's appearances in the public sphere so as to transform public affairs through a gendered perspective. As one activist said:

> We have media appearances, and this is very important, because we need public opinion to get used to the faces and voices of women in Syrian society. The opposition voice today is dominated by men, and, when women appear, the issues that women can talk about are issues of children, relief matters, civil work, etc. Women don't hear women talking about politics or security issues, so that's what we really need to develop: it's one of the priorities for working to change the stereotype of women (ENA 7:28-29).



II. Women organising strategies and tactics

Principled pragmatism

Some activists state that the patriarchal perspective can scarcely even fathom women being active politically. Women activists were able to exploit this during the initial periods of the revolution in order to pass through the regime's checkpoints, since the checkpoint guards were not suspicious of them. In other words, the patriarchal perspective provided women with opportunities for freedom of movement which were unavailable to male activists. This, of course, was not exclusive to the Syrian context; the history of revolutions is full of such examples, of which women in the Algerian independence struggle were among the best-known.

Furthermore, the traditional gendered division of labour also provided cover for women to be active in the revolution. While some women practiced traditional gender roles in order to 'help' male revolutionaries, women activists have narrated how traditional gender roles were transformed into opportunities for women to break out of the areas designated for them and challenge the patriarchal systems of traditional society as well as the revolution itself.

Coordination as a key to movement-building

Coordination, here, is understood to be the collective efforts made to transform systemic oppression against women and the work done towards the realisation of women's rights. Coordination does not need to happen in a continuum to build an accumulative practice. This strategy shows the way in which individuals coordinate and organise their actions within women's movements, and the way in which they 'energise and inspire' each other.

The interviews demonstrated that there are multiple ways and strategies of coordination, which create a suitable environment for the organic growth of the movements.

Coordination has numerous positive effects. The collaboration between female Syrian activists and organisations can be seen as a further example of resilience. Individual activists and groups within the movements are constantly developing new strategies and approaches to enhance coordination amongst them. For example, (ENA 6:63) described her experience as follows: Coordination is difficult due to closed borders [...] but they are always developing mechanisms to facilitate communication (ENA (6:63).

Beyond the traditional meaning of the word, coordination can take different forms and have varying agendas. However, the shared experiences of Syrian women indicate that one of the key goals is to support each other. For example, (ENA 9:148) said, 'I build coalitions with other women and men, but mainly with other women, working together to support each other (ENA 9: 48).

It should be noted that, throughout the interviews, repeated mention was made of other women activists. Dozens of interviewees named others working in the fields of women's rights, detainees' affairs, education, local governance (local councils), and other feminist-related work both inside and outside Syria. However, during the research, the naming of those based inside Syria, especially in non-regime-controlled areas, was more noticeable. Thus, appreciations of others' work should be perceived not only as a form of sisterhood and solidarity, but also as a significant potential that may pave the way for more strategised feminist work. This position should be taken despite certain participants having mentioned a lack of trust and competition when discussing the problem of the lack of coordination.

In this sense, coordination appears to be more than communicating and working together effectively with other groups; the focus shifts to the human dimension of the connections created among women who share similar experiences. Hence, coordination here takes the form of solidarity, appreciation, and empathy, and becomes a substantial component of feminist and women's movements. Moreover, its non-hierarchical form of association facilitates the creation of connections and support networks among the members of women's movements.

Also of note during the research was the differentiation of collaboration between individuals and organisations. Positive examples of collaboration between individuals were also prominent in the interviews. This shows that coordination at the local level occurs more frequently between individuals than groups.

Other interviewees highlighted positive examples of coordination between women's groups across the country that were then jeopardised by the security situation. The time it takes for a displaced women's group to recover and re-establish itself in its new location results in infrequent communication and a fragmented network. For instance, (NRCA 12:35) said:

> Here in the north, there were links with the southern movement in Daraa, but this failed, as land in Daraa was gone. The same [happened] in Aleppo; it failed, too, due to the political developments and military battles [...] When an area is taken over, the connection is lost, as the collective moves, and by the time it re-establishes itself and becomes active again, there is a disconnection with the existing women's movements (NRCA 12:35).

Connections to regional/international networks

It should be noted that the questions asked in the interviews and focus groups were not designed to obtain in-depth analyses of these relations. A full examination of these forms of relationships would require a more in-depth research project in order to map them out and analyse them in the wider regional and international contexts. This is beyond the scope of this paper.

During the course of this research, there were few mentions of relationships built with other movements and groups in the region or internationally. Notably, as mentioned in the introduction, the examples that were cited were mainly by interviewees based in Europe and North America. The Europe-based interviewees were all members of entities with names

including the word 'movement' or 'network'. This differentiation is important, as the data demonstrate that these entities place greater attention and/or effort on building relations with other movements in comparison to those involved in civil society organisations or grassroots activists. For example, one respondent said, 'Now we want to connect with other feminist movements in the region and those in Syria. We are trying to do this broadly and openly' (ENA 13: 91).

With one exception, none of the interviewees based in Syria (whether in regime- or non-regime-held areas) mentioned any relation with other movements in the region or internationally. Instead, the focus of these interviewees was on relations with other Syrian groups and/or movements both inside and outside Syria. The ability (or lack thereof) to travel and mobilise is one of the main reasons for the lack of relationship-building and networking between groups within the Syrian movement and others globally. Those who have managed to build such relations and widen their understanding of the importance of these relations were those which were able to move freely, without border limitations or visa restrictions.

An additional factor that has influenced inter-organisational relationships is the global Covid-19 pandemic, which has created a more hospitable environment for connecting online, providing space for coordination and movement-building. The significance of this should not be underestimated. However, the recentness of these events, and the communication strategies born with the pandemic, mean that further exploration is needed to understand these strategies and their use in the context of Syrian and global feminist movements.

Coordination barriers and challenges

According to some interviewees, especially those based in Europe or North America, in order to achieve sustainable and lasting results for women's coordination efforts, structured and strategic coordination must take place. Thus far, this has not been the case. For example, some interviewees described how past coordination efforts were mainly project-focused, and often emerged in the form of initiatives created by Syrian women groups. These efforts therefore occurred within the context of a project which, although it brought several groups together, did not necessarily create a platform or space within the wider context. For instance, one interviewee said:

> We're reacting to opportunities to meet and discuss. This does not necessarily mean that we are being proactive in acknowledging that we need to have a regular space where we can discuss issues and share information. What are our priorities? How can we address these things? What are the best practices? (ENA 9:39).

The coordination efforts referred to by interviewees were usually undertaken in reaction to a crisis, or the needs created by one. In consequence, the coordination efforts only endured for as long as the crisis itself. Once the crisis ended, the resources mobilised were directed towards the next crisis, which would quickly become the new priority. However, long-term coordination efforts are critical for efficient and sustainable action. This was emphasised by one respondent as follows:

> The coordination efforts are always of a reactive nature, as opposed to being based around an established plan. A potential consequence of this is the creation

> of a paradigm of general behaviour within which coordination is of an ad hoc and reactive nature. Rather than having a clear plan for the future achieved through continuous work, such as meetings or regular collaborative work, maybe the current situation or the situation on the ground affected us instead of the other way around (ENA 14:35).

As seen in this section, the critiques of the lack of coordination raised by some of the women interviewed are rooted in a traditional understanding of the concept, and mainly refer to the absence of formal structures and models of collaboration among groups. However, this vision is not shared by all participants. If we consider coordination in its broader sense, and look at the internal structures of the movements, as well as at the strategies enhanced by individuals to collaborate and reach out to others, positive models of collaboration emerge. This will be discussed further in the following sections, after analysing the main challenges faced by women in terms of coordination.

The women interviewed highlighted several factors that hinder coordination among movements. First of all, the inability to physically meet constitutes a great challenge to collaboration and hampers the organic growth that would otherwise occur among various groups. Security issues, visa restrictions, and the risk of detention and/or arrest were some of barriers most often cited by interviewees. Internal borders within Syria, and the variegated military dynamics, are cited as having limited women activists' ability to meet and widen their networks, as in some regions movement carries a high risk of detention, kidnapping, or other potentially life-threatening events. In this regard, one interviewee said:

> There are no links between [the] Jazeera [region] and Idlib because of the geography of these locations. If there was not this geographical separation, the activists present in these regions would communicate with each other. If the military, political, and ideological separation did not exist, women and feminists would communicate with each other, learn from each other, and stand in solidarity. The reason for this absence of communication is the severe geographic division (ENA 2: 50).

When discussing this issue, (FGD Ant 137) noted that the low participation and competence of women in Idlib, Aleppo, rural Aleppo, and other northern areas were due to the closed borders and a lack of official documents that would allow them to seek opportunities abroad. She said:

> One of the reasons for not meeting with women inside Syria is them having no passports or papers; not being granted a visa (T 21:59).

Besides limiting women activists' opportunities to meet other women, the limitations on visas have contributed to the marginalisation of the voices of those operating from within Syria. This is particularly significant in the context of important political events. For instance, one interviewee said:

> When the borders were open, people were naturally coming and going, and many women used to come here to attend events, enhance communication, and build

> trust with people. There was space for more relations (FGD- T 181:181).

On top of that, and as mentioned above, the security situation in Syria is dire and continually changing. Activists' networking efforts have been constantly jeopardised by this political and security instability. When asked about the factors contributing to fragmentation within the movement, (NRCA 9:36) responded that:

> The reasons are either political, or the authority controlling the area or geography [...] [Coordination] efforts might require meetings, training, or face-to-face gatherings. But that is very difficult, due to checkpoints and roadblocks and the general security situation (NRCA 9:36).

Moreover, in light of the presence of de facto authorities in non-regime-controlled areas, and due to the violence of the regime, internal borders have been erected around the country, preventing sufficient communication and dialogue among women activists. In consequence, the 'relationship between women in liberated areas is stronger' (NRCA 9:43).

However, some interviewees raised another important point for discussion, noting that even organisations located in the same region do not necessarily have the space for public debate. 'There are a lot of women's centres, but they don't have a public platform' (R:L 11:27). The problem is not only a lack of coordination or dialogue among different regions, but also a lack of public spaces for activism in these regions. Several women detailed how war and instability result in the exhaustion and frustration of women activists. Overall, it can be argued that security issues, in the various forms they take, create a ripple effect of detrimental consequences which hinder the coordination efforts and potential within Syrian women's activism.

A lack of resources, funding, time, and capacity to coordinate were identified by interviewees as further challenges to coordination. Indeed, many groups are understaffed, and experience a wide range of challenges in carrying out their work. Most of the time, activists find themselves in the position of having to choose their (or their organisation's) own priority, thereby undermining opportunities to coordinate.

A final factor to consider when discussing coordination is the differing priorities of different activists and movements, which vary depending on the contexts in which they live, and other factors such as living conditions (e.g., poverty, war, bombing) as well as class and ideology. As one interviewee put it:

> A middle-class woman who lives in Damascus faces different challenges, and has different priorities, from a woman in Eastern Ghouta whose children have been all displaced because she doesn't want Bashar al-Assad's army to arrest them (ENA: 12).

Women are not a homogeneous group, and they experience conflict, patriarchy, and local circumstances differently. For this reason, their priorities may differ, and this must be acknowledged when approaching and researching activism.

III. Gains and accomplishments of feminist and women's rights movements

Feminist knowledge production and sharing

The term 'feminist knowledge production' is relatively new within Syrian feminist groups, dating back to 2018. This does not mean that members of the feminist movements were not knowledge-producers prior to that date, but the term itself was not in widespread use. The feminist knowledge production process does not have start and end dates, like movements, but rather is linked to freedom of expression, and requires a space to allow it to emerge. Prior to 2011, there was little feminist knowledge production, as the oppression and totalitarianism that characterised the period placed limits on all knowledge production in the country. Feminist knowledge production is part of a learning process to understand how to make the production itself feminist, not only the knowledge product. The feminist and women's rights movements are now taking steps to engage and experiment with this question.

One interviewee leading a feminist organisation said, 'We and other feminist groups were producing knowledge, but we didn't call it feminist knowledge production until recently' (FUI-1). It could be argued that the usage of the term shows how some feminist groups began to include feminist knowledge production as part of their strategies. It reflects an increased awareness of the need to produce such knowledge to reclaim the narrative and ensure women's perspectives are recognised and their voices heard.

The process of feminist knowledge production by Syrian feminist and women groups began to take shape a few years after the revolution. It took various forms, including but not limited to the production of research and reports, training manuals, booklets, and educational videos. Moreover, several feminist groups1 have established oral history projects since 2016, collecting testimonies from Syrian women, turning memory into a foundation of history. An analysis of these outputs shows that Syrian feminist knowledge production is context-driven, problem-focused, and interdisciplinary.

Several developments in feminist knowledge production over the past few years are notable. Firstly, there has been a shift in the target audience. For example, according to one interviewee:

> I feel like there has been a change in our approach. Before [between 2011- 2017] we were producing knowledge for external actors, to educate them about the Syrian context, but now we produce knowledge for ourselves (FUI, 1).

This illustrates a shift in perception regarding the audience for whom the knowledge is produced, reflecting the realisation among feminist groups that knowledge production is a need. Knowledge production symbolises an empowering tool, which is able to influence social change and public debates, and contribute to the centralising of feminist perspectives when constructing a future Syria. A further dimension of knowledge production is the agency it is

able to provide to feminist movements and their members. Capitalising on this knowledge helps feminist movements build and reclaim control over their lives. There is a general feeling among interviewees that Syrians have lost control over their destinies. The war does not appear to be ending soon, and political change is unlikely in the near future, nor is it a matter in Syrians' hands. Knowledge production provides space for analysis, reflection, and documentation of women's voices. This is a form of resilience, and symbolises the possibility of reclaiming agency and creating lasting change.

Ownership of knowledge production is an additional factor and priority in the Syrian context. Feminist knowledge production is identified as a priority for some of the feminist groups, whereby Syrian women are the producers of the knowledge, and not merely its subject. This shift from subject to creator is significant, and was highlighted by a number of interviewees. For example, one said:

> The priority is that women become producers of knowledge, and not just subjects of study. It is important that it be produced from Syrian women to Syrian women. And this should be followed, in the next stage, by a discussion of this knowledge (FGD 2 – Europe – second phase).

Case Study: Women Now for Development's 'Gender Justice and Feminist Knowledge Production'

This project, which started in late 2018, presents a unique approach to feminist knowledge production. It entails the provision of a space, platform, and critical post-colonial feminist tools for Syrian women and activists, with the aim to 1) enable them to put forward, and gain influence for, their own analyses of and strategies for the conflict and Syria's future; 2) document and voice Syrian women's and feminists' concerns, experiences, needs, and actions; 3) support and strengthen the development of grassroots feminist activism, as well as alternative and original activism, which connects social, economic, and political justice to gender justice; and 4) develop ways to facilitate Syrian feminist thinking, knowledge production, and dissemination. The project brings together Syrian women activists of various age groups, from both academic and non-academic backgrounds, to discuss, reflect on, and jointly analyse data collected through field research with Syrian women. The research itself was designed in a way that encouraged its subjects to analyse and provide their perspectives instead of answering a set of questions. The project's original approach truly places Syrian women and activists at the centre of research as primary feminist knowledge producers and conflict analysts within relevant discourses.

Personal and professional growth and sharing among feminist and women's movement participants

Despite several interviewees highlighting a lack of technical expertise within their groups that would enable a more structured implementation of their strategies, many from across the various geographical areas also reflected on their own personal and professional growth since 2011, as well as that of other Syrian women activists. One said:

> The situation today is different from what it was seven years ago. There is a great maturity among Syrian women activists regarding our causes [...] I think that there is stronger awareness, greater capability, and broader experience (ENA 7:50).

Another activist said:

> I met a lot of women from Douma, for example. I observed how they used to talk before and how they talk now. There is a huge change in the level of consciousness, awareness, participation, demands, and how they see the future of Syria and the role of women. I see all this as positive (ENA 5: 16).

Interviewees tended to cite two reasons for this acquisition of skills and learning. The first was the training opportunities they had received, either within their groups in the form of internal capacity-building, or outside their groups, together with other women activists. Secondly, women reflected a lot on learning from each other during activities coordinated by other Syrian feminist/women groups or their allies; predominantly international feminist organisations.

The provision of spaces for the expression and exchange of knowledge, experiences, opinions, and messages around specific causes appeared to be considered the most impactful learning approach. The post-2011 period marked a new phase of the feminist and women's movements, often led by revolutionary women with shared grievances, experiences, and interests. The common ground of their experiences led to the creation of spaces to meet, mobilise, and act together. Having to face several constraints on multiple fronts, women activists came to understand the importance of operating in groups and trusting each other, opening up new spaces for exchange and reclaiming their right to organise politically. Their awareness of the fundamental importance of collaboration and building connections strengthened feminist and women's groups, and led to an increased presence of women in political and service-oriented spaces on the local, regional, and international levels. This indicates that the most effective learning took place at the intersection of personal experience; opportunities provided by like-minded/allied actors; and spaces for interaction, reflection, and peer-to-peer learning. Moreover, women activists developed greater awareness about mental health and personal wellbeing. The constant experience of traumatic events has led to a rise in stress levels, and to the emergence of psychosocial problems. For example, (J 7:41) described a feeling of constantly 'pulling and loosing up' [i.e., being in a state of alert], in which people live in constant fear. Only recently, as the armed conflict has deescalated, have people begun to realise how deeply it has affected their lives. The same interviewee said that although psychosocial issues began to emerge in 2015, they only became visible and drew significant attention starting 2018. (ENA 13:81) concurs with the importance of valuing healthy mental space, but asserts its connection to economic stability, saying that 'one of the things that might help provide mental comfort is to be able to not debate myself over carrying on with this work, or getting a job through which I can support my own family with living costs'.

These accounts show an increased awareness not only of the need to address the effects of trauma, but also of the links between mental health and the broader socio-political context, as well as a clarity vis-a-vis the steps that need to be taken to address this issue.

While this section discusses how feminist and women's movements have had an important impact on the growth of the movements' members, it is equally important to acknowledge that the transferral of skills between Syrian women activists happened not only within and as a result of the collective action of these movements. It also occurred in a more organic fashion, whereby the individual actions of women activists contributed significantly to the overall achievements and development of the movements. Indeed, these individual actions ought to be recognised as fundamental in the feminist and women's movements, which cannot be understood solely as formulations of women's and feminist groups, but also encompass individuals and their action. As one interviewee put it:

> Many women activists in Lebanon went to the refugee camps, on their own initiative, and provided awareness-raising workshops and dialogue sessions. Yes, this wasn't something structured, continuous, or sustainable, but it had an impact (ENA 5: 16).

To conclude, we can more accurately understand the feminist and women's movements in Syria and their impact when we include non-institutional and decentralised action.

Expanding the buy-in at the local and community levels

Interviewees indicated that building relationships with the communities in which they operate; particularly in non-regime-held areas inside Syria and in Lebanon; has paved the way for more acceptance of and support for the work they do. The importance of building and/or maintaining relations with the community is acknowledged and set as a goal by feminist and women's rights movements, expressed as follows: 'Knowing that their work is an indispensable tool for political and social change, feminist and women-led organisations have implemented numerous strategies to address the challenges they face. The most important of these may be establishing and reinforcing relationships with the communities in which they operate, in order to establish a social support system and supportive environment'.

The strategies and approaches utilised by the feminist and women's rights movements enable them to address the challenges they face at the societal level, especially at the intersections of the patriarchal structure and its associated security implications.

One interviewee described the change she has witnessed, which she attributed to a growth in community trust and acceptance or normalisation:

> We are able to see the difference in the level of participation. Years ago, we had to convince women to attend a workshop. We even had to convince their parents. It was very difficult. Now, that resistance has eased, because of trust and the large number of women centres and associations. People get used to it.

Forging good relations with the communities in which women-led, feminist, and/or women's organisations operate may not have been directly motivated by the goal of strengthening the influence or leadership roles of women with these communities. However, this can be certainly considered a by-product of this development, given that these movements' ' initiatives tend to be run by women; target women (if not necessarily exclusively); and aim to empower women.

Influencing policy and pressure groups

When discussing the issue of women's political participation at all levels, several interviewees from numerous geographical locations highlighted the impacts and achievements of collective and individual women's advocacy and lobbying efforts carried out in recent years. Indeed, despite the marginal progress registered in terms of women's access to decision-making bodies, many interviewees said that these advocacy actions were paying off, and had resulted in a change in the discourse around political participation at all levels. This is reflected in many ways; firstly, within existing political bodies.

According to the interviewees, the impact of feminist groups' action on women's participation and presence in decision-making positions has been noticeable, and the actions of feminist and women's groups have been a key factor in setting this process in motion. (FGD Syria 1:68) described the effects of feminist action as follows: In general, feminist action has pushed for the presence of women at all levels, such as Local Councils and organisations. This is a positive step (FGD Syria 1:68).

According to several interviewees across various locations, women are now more willing to seek decision-making positions than before, especially in recent years. This was emphasised by (FGD Syria 5:36):

> Women began to consider new roles, such as decision-making posts; running for electoral office; and Local Council positions. I am not saying that women had not been working in Local Councils, committees, or local coordination efforts at all. However, women's roles had been very limited. In 2018, women started to demand to work in specific posts. I believe that activism developed from women's work to feminist work (FGD Syria 5:36).

Other interviewees reflected on the fact that many women, even if politically active, were reluctant to hold positions in political bodies, such as the Syrian National Coalition (SNC). This was attributed to a number of reasons. Firstly, these bodies are male-dominated patriarchal structures, and it was thought that the present low participation of women in these bodies would discourage others from joining them, as, according to interviewees, there would be less potential for solidarity. The second argument was that women activists, like the Syrian population in general, have lost trust in these bodies, and fear that joining them would constitute 'political suicide'. Some interviewees who themselves hold positions within these bodies described the many challenges they face in relation to their participation, from operating within a male-dominated environment and having only superficial or marginal influence to lacking credibility with the public.

One interviewee, who used to hold a high-level position within the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), said:

> In 2016, after two years of work, conflict, and lobbying, we managed to increase the percentage of women participating in the coalition from 2% to 25%. As for myself, I used to put this on the agenda of every meeting at the Coalition (ENA 15:12).

Another interviewee said, 'We, Syrian women, were able to increase the representation of women within political corridors or negotiation corridors to at least 15%' (ENA 13: 26).

One local advocacy campaign was also cited as a successful example of support for women's political participation:

> I worked on an advocacy campaign in 2017, which aimed to enable women to vote for, and be elected as, Local Council members. The campaign resulted in 15 women running for election and nine winning seats' (R:T 15:17).

There are conflicting views among the Interviewees as to what the percentage of women's representation in political bodies should be, or what percentage should be demanded in negotiations. Some activists are of the opinion that, as a tactic to actually achieve 30%, 50% should be demanded, as they fear a demand for 30% could result in achieving only half this percentage. The majority of the interviewees, however, agree that advocacy efforts should focus on a 30% quota for women's participation.

Yet the impact on policymaking has not been limited to women's political participation and decision-making, however. One activist member of the Syrian Women Political Movement (SWPM) said:

> The political representation of women is still not where it should be. The representation of women in political bodies is much lower than 30%. Nevertheless, the SWPM's opinions are now being requested on specific topics, on both the international and national (Syrian) levels. This is extremely positive, and should be built on (FGD_04_Turkey: 31:31).

The impact of the feminist and women's actions has been observed on the international level by a number of interviewees, who mentioned that there were more consultations with women and feminist groups now on various issues related to the political process. While holding consultations with women and feminist groups is arguably a far cry from a fair and equal inclusion of women in the political process, it is a step, albeit a small one, towards desirable change. 'The voices of Syrian women are loud and can no longer be ignored.'

A recent example of the impact of the advocacy efforts of Syrian feminists and activists is represented by 'Syrian Road to Justice'4 (SRTJ), a coalition of feminist, women-led, and human rights organisations that came together to support seven survivors to file the first criminal complaint to the German Federal Public Prosecutor, calling for the prosecution of sexual and gender-based crimes (SGBC) in Syrian detention facilities. The complaint was submitted in June 2020, marking the launch of the SRTJ campaign. At the time, a trial of two former Syrian regime officials had already been underway in Germany's Koblenz for approximately a year.5 One defendant, Eyad al-Gharib, was found guilty of aiding a crime against humanity, while the other, Anwar Raslan, is still standing trial. The main achievement with regards to the trial is that the Koblenz Higher Regional Court updated the charges against Raslan, and the incidents of sexual violence have been prosecuted as acts of crimes against humanity; part of a deliberate and systematic attack carried out against Syrian civilians; rather than as individual cases under

German criminal law.6 Sexual violence has therefore been recognised as a weapon used by the Syrian intelligence services as a means of abusing members of civil society, and the witnesses had the chance to publicly denounce the widespread abuses and atrocities in Syria, and raise awareness about the need to pursue justice for the Syrian people. Beyond this example, several pressure and lobbying groups have been formed in recent years to advocate for causes including those of detainees and missing persons, which have gone largely unacknowledged at the international level. Discussing the developments and achievements of these campaigns, one interviewee said:

> The detainees [issue] was not on the table until recently. The work of civil society and a few women sitting on the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) [deserve] the credit for this (R:L 11:40).

It should be noted, however, that the influence on policies concerning political causes, such as detainees and missing persons, as well as the complaint filed in Germany,7 cannot be solely attributed to the efforts of feminist movements. Instead, they have been the result of the collective work of various rights-based organisations; victims' groups; and other family associations. Some of those leading these efforts were interviewed in this research, and see the work they do on this front as part of their feminist agenda.

Some interviewees, especially those based in neighbouring countries and Europe, also mentioned alliances with other feminist movements and international feminist organisations to advocate for certain issues as an important development. Examples given of successful collaboration included work focused on the genderisation of the constitution, developing joint advocacy papers, lobbying decision-makers, and other campaigns.

Whether or not the impact of feminist and women's action on policy can be considered substantial, it was clearly demonstrated in the interviews that women activists have no intention of giving up. There was an awareness among interviewees that there was a long way to go, and that the struggle would continue. As one interviewee based in Turkey put it:

> Women are the ones who are imposing their presence in spite of everyone, including the international community, which keeps trying to put them in decorative roles or on ineffective committees. They are imposing their presence in a real way, to be there and to be effective, because that's what they are in reality. The behaviour of many organisations has changed because of this pressure (R:T 20:86).

In conclusion, this section outlined how several initiatives have been launched by feminist and women's groups at the local, national, and international levels, and how important—even if modest—gains have already been achieved by the efforts of feminist movements and activists. The continuous struggle of individuals and groups to trigger positive changes in different areas, such as increasing women's participation; demanding the release of detainees; and seeking accountability are paying off, and the women interviewed believed in the importance of endurance. They will keep building on these wins to pave the way to more solid and durable changes.

IV. Key challenges to maximising the gains of the movement

Structural changes undergone by feminist and women's movements in relation to being grassroots movements have been among the main topics of discussion on links between international and local dynamics surrounding social movements. The definition of 'grassroots' varies for movements inside and outside of Syria. While activists based in Syria say they are more in touch with the realities on the ground in their villages, towns, and cities, this does not necessarily translate into being more grassroots. Being a grassroots organisation also implies being able to increase structural capacity locally, in the sense of establishing independence, and also being able to mobilise local women. Furthermore, for organisations outside of Syria, being grassroots also implies being able to establish structural networks with local feminists and women's movement activists in the countries in which they are based. Such structural networks are quite limited, especially in the countries neighbouring Syria, mostly due to the local political dynamics in these countries.

Another important structural dynamic relevant to discussions around grassroots activism vs. policies and structural demands by international donors has been the debate around the so-called 'NGOisation' of social movements. The 1980s and 1990s saw a process of 'NGO-isation' (Jad, 2014) of the Arab women's movement, which represented a 'return to the framing of women's rights according to global liberal discourses', forcing Arab feminists to adapt their understanding of gender equality to fit global liberal assumptions and resonate with the gender discourses promoted by the main donor institutions. In Salem's words, 'it is not a question of Western control through NGOs, but rather one of how neoliberalism dictates development agendas' (Salem, 2017: 605). This neoliberal influence resulted in a de-politicisation of social movements (Salem, 2017). In the Syrian context, 'NGO-isation' had two key consequences:

i. Low risk appetite on the part of donors, meaning that most resources were channelled to NGOs with strong governance structures, foreign bank accounts, and Western standards of accounting systems, which could bear the financial risks.

ii. Inaccessibility of funding modalities due to language, mobility, and technical jargon.

Women's grassroots movements inside Syria have the least access to financial support, whereas more structured organisations, which are mostly in the diaspora, have better access to international funding. This is because the donor community is not ready to take risks for women's rights, and channels most of its funding to and through organisations with secure bank accounts in Western hubs. This helps create hierarchies among groups within feminist and women's movements, due to the differing levels of financial, technical, and/or organisational resources available to different groups. This inequality in turn forces more grassroots groups to become more NGO-ised in order to access funding and continue their operations.

While some have criticised the movements for being transformed into 'NGOs', in the sense that they no longer derive their activism potential from local political activism on the street, others have established a link between the militarisation of the revolution and the forced displacement of many activists to outside of Syria. With increased violence on the part of the regime, as well as the militarisation of the revolution, civil activists started organising around civil society institutions, since that was the only public space in which they could continue their activism. While talking about the origins of their work, however, most interviewees went back to the initial days of the revolution and demonstrations on the streets. Being forced out of the streets, and having no option left but to organise around organisations struggling for access to financial resources to survive, led to the emergence of the term 'NGOisation' in the Syrian context. Whereas some interviewees indicated that a movement encompasses women who work either voluntarily or professionally in women's organisations, others noted the financial gaps between activists at different levels of organisations, as well as between activists at different organisations both inside and outside Syria.

Others see the 'NGO-isation' of movements as providing short-term humanitarian services and carrying out activities that strengthen traditional gender roles as part of international donor programmes. In other words, the NGO-isation of movements favours a political and social status quo to make the current crisis manageable, rather than ending it, whereas a movement aims for political and social change through grassroots mobilisation. The strategies and tools of such change, however, are to be developed by local activists, rather than being imposed by international donors and agencies. NGO-isation also implies more internal hierarchy and bureaucratisation, whereas a grassroots movement implies no internal hierarchies and open sharing of experience and knowledge.

Scarcity of funding in a landscape of NGO-ised movements

Putting money where the mouth is

The activists interviewed argued that a scarcity of funds has had an impact on the long-term potential for women's political outreach and influence. According to (ENA 13:30), women's influence remains minor 'even if you have the most committed people, [and] the most productive and passionate members of the feminist movement, if there is no funding, and of course political support'. She added that, 'the way to political support is funding'. Access to funding also plays an important role in the production and dissemination of knowledge. 'Knowledge production is a battle in and of itself. We try to preserve our narratives and the lack of funding is enough to silence us. We are small organisations, and our funding is nothing like that available for the regime areas' (FGD 4 T 68).

Access to funding is considered a feminist issue, as women's organisations in particular seem to face tremendous challenges in securing the precious little funds they have. The inadequate funding opportunities are also liable to foster competition between groups. While competition can sometimes be constructive, as (RT 16:59) believes, it also often leads to poor coordination between groups, which hinders rather than advances the movements' goals. When resources are scarce, feminist and women's activist groups are less able to share with others in the movement.

Some participants believe the current funding policies and criteria have created hierarchies amongst women's activists, whereby some have better access than others to resources and grants (RCA 1:30). Divisions also appear to exist amongst Syrian activists affiliated with donor organisations with different agendas and politics (Turkey 20:108). This was expressed by one interviewee as follows:

> [There is] support in some areas, and scarce or no support in others, for reasons that may pertain to donors' or countries' political agenda, which causes in the community due to unequal access to resources (ENA 9:74).

The impact of funding modalities design

As (FGD 1 S 46) has noted, one consequence of the top-down design of funding priorities and the implementation of projects that do not match needs at the societal level is 'creating tension and mistrust between women's groups and the local communities they work for and with'. In line with this, many activists stress the importance of transferring localised knowledge about the needs of women within a given social and political context to the international community: 'The women's movement must be aware of local needs, so that it can convey these needs to international opinion clearly, scientifically, and systematically' (NRC 14:44). Despite international organisations claiming to seek change by attaining information and views from women, many women activists perceive real change as coming from enabling local women themselves to design and lead projects and programmes that concern them (ENA 13:84). As one activist said, 'It needs to be more organic, and this type of work requires grassroots collectives and groups that hold such values and ideas' (RCA 2:39).

Consequently, part of the problem, according to (ENA 2:101), is that donors tend to see and interact with organisations, rather than a movement, and hence their support is determined by their interest at certain historic moments. Women's collectives also appear to lack the required skills to mobilise and network with donor organisations, which underscores the technical organisational support needed, which is continually overlooked by donors (ENA 10:88), in order for projects funded by the international community to fit local needs, rather than merely furthering the organisations' agenda. In order to achieve this priority, projects need to be based on knowledge produced by locals well-versed in the local dynamics. It is also important that feminists are able to communicate their politics, values, and demands clearly to the women whose lives they aim to change. In other words, the priority should be the local women determining both the projects as well as the language in which the projects will be delivered within a given context, as expressed in the following quote:

> I am finding another problem, which is that the projects feel very imported from abroad, and they are not detailed at all on the criteria of Syrian society, and they are sometimes creating a problem. You are sometimes going to a rural community and giving it a project that is not suitable for it at all. But this fits the organisation's agenda, or the funders' agenda, and it is creating a problem. Even women's movements always bring vocabulary to which people cannot relate' (RCA 3:20).

Agenda setting and resourcing

The scarcity of funds earmarked for women's rights and gender equality is a key detriment to the ability of women's rights actors to set and sustain their agendas, with the constant push to re-fit and re-purpose projects to improve access to funding.

Compared to other organisations within the broader Syrian civil society scene, women activists notably struggle to receive funding. As interviewees note, there are multiple challenges in obtaining appropriate funding and/or channelling it towards its desired purpose(s):

> There are small groups doing great work, but [they] have no space to get introduced to international actors. Therefore, support ends up directed to organisations with access [to donors], usually led and dominated by men. Male stars, be they intellectuals or politicians, play an important role in securing funding (ENA 2:93).

(NRCA 7:83) described a lack of interest from donors in the education sector in Raqqa, despite the presence of over 72 organisations working in almost every sector, with the exception of education, thus highlighting the presence of gaps in the field. In addition, (FGD 3 Jazeera 6) described the projects funded in the Jazeera region as being repetitive and hollow, with no substantive impact at the societal level.

Access and control of funding resources in a matrix of challenges

Most women's groups are actually unable to meet funding criteria, as the latter favour groups that are registered with bank accounts, and well-established, with satisfactory records of previous funding and evidence of activity. Even groups that comply with all legal requirements, such as being registered, and having work permits, with a track record of receiving funding in the past, are on the verge of being existentially threatened—like many other civil society groups—as international interest in Syria, and consequently funding, have begun to wane. (J 9:13) described the situation for Syrian organisations in Lebanon as fragile, with funds for even small activities becoming difficult to obtain. 'We had eight centres in Lebanon; we have six now', she said (J 9:13). In some cases, a sudden withdrawal of donor organisations has occurred without prior warning, which has caused a 'huge chasm', in the words of (NRCA 9:74). Women activists found themselves incurring extra costs to maintain their work, which is not always possible. For example, interviewee NRC 12: 37 said:

> If you have money, you are more able to move; difficult transportation and living situations and car rents have changed drastically. When I rent a car to go to Hass, I need SYP4,000 to go and SYP4,000 to come back. That is difficult, so currently coordination is through WhatsApp (NRC 12:37).

Women's groups are less likely to be registered, have smaller networks and access to external actors, and often end up working undercover to avoid conflict with society and persecution from local authorities. An activist based in regime-controlled areas said: There are registration

problem[s] and the sanctions against the regime; you can't work without a permit (RCA 2:108). Another interviewee said:

> In Lebanon, where 1.5 million Syrian refugees reside, it isn't permitted to found organisations that work with and for them. The legal obstacles are the biggest of all barriers. I think if such obstacles [were] lifted, it would be easier; women's organisations working in Lebanon would follow [the] same rules applied to the Lebanese organisations (RCA 6:25).

Other factors contributing to the imbalanced access to funding, according to interviewees, include constraints imposed by local communities, authorities, and funding policies, which impair women's access to financial resources, social support, skills, and experiences.

Funding allocation as a driver of tension and closure of the civic space

An additional issue under the umbrella of funding is its distribution. There is a general perception amongst interviewees inside Syria that funds are being distributed disproportionately. Women's groups in parts of north-east Syria, such as Qamishli, have been neglected, while others, such as those in Idlib, have been affected by sanctions and other political factors. Cutting funds from women's groups, even in areas under Jabhat al-Nusra, has been protested by women's activists. For instance, ENA 1:25 described the implications of funding cuts on counter-terrorism as follows: Cutting funds off from women increases the mainstreaming of terrorism. Women are the starting point of counter-terrorism on the ground in Syria (ENA 1:25).

Interviewees further indicated that international support tends to focus on women with established knowledge of politics and access to international platforms. Although this may be convenient in terms of resources (less money, effort, and time spent), it leaves the vast majority of women—especially younger activists, and those inside the country—unprepared to participate effectively in the public sphere, and creates a vicious cycle of political marginalisation, as seen with other issues in Syria as well. An activist in Gaziantep further explained the alienation of young female activists whose political awareness and activism were developed through the revolution:

> No one works with the revolution generation; we're a few women in Gaziantep and Istanbul. We know and invite one another. That does not include the broader spectrum (FGD AN: 48).

Sustainability

Several interviewees stated that, with the vast majority of international support focusing on maintaining the survival threshold offered through direct emergency relief and small, short-term projects, little attention has been given to creating long-term, sustainable impact.

When a fund is granted, it is usually conditioned and project-based, with results-oriented activities; periodic for the short term; unstable; and lacking in follow-up. One woman activist said during a focus group in the Jazeera that funding was 'unsustainable', adding that 'the longest project is three to six months' (FG Az 79). Short-term funding makes it impossible for women's groups to have a clear strategy for the long term. Such projects were also considered by interviewees to have unrealistic expectations; combating structural gender bias and changing women's lives in a matter of a few months. In some cases, women's groups experienced a sudden withdrawal of resources without being given any explanation or support as to how to proceed.

One interviewee said:

> There is good support for women in Syria related to economic issues, through workshops. But I still think of it as emergency treatment […] [it is] periodic/ temporary, [it] does not build much ahead' (RCA 1:87).

Secondly, funding has become politicised in terms of area of support, reach, timing, and quantity, according to (NRCA 4:70). (J 8:81) concurred, highlighting the tendency of donor organisations to focus on directing energy and efforts on one specific issue at a time; e.g., most project-based funds being given to issues of mental health or political empowerment in different phases.

(J 8:81) recognised the importance of such short-term needs, and yet asserted that an aggravated situation like the war in Syria requires simultaneous and complementary efforts that address various issues on different levels at the same time. Priorities should be set and determined by Syrians and Syrian organisations themselves, rather than donors, according to (ENA 8:115) and (ENA 8:11).

> Determining priorities [should be done by] Syrians, because they are part of their society. [Donors] can discuss and estimate the risks; they can advise; but [they should] not directly intervene (ENA 8:115).

Decolonising the funding lens on gender

Another important point raised by interviewees is that the support provided to women's groups or concerning women's issues can often be limited to Orientalist and gender stereotypes. The focus of the vast majority of women's empowerment programmes, as pointed out by participants such as (ENA 12:85), is on traditional gendered roles, such as cooking and sewing, whereas issues related to transitional justice received little attention and support. Some projects ended up becoming a waste of resources, due to partial or non-existent follow-up. For example, efforts to acquaint women with skills needed in sewing and hairdressing are

usually given without training in how to build up and manage a business, and are not followed up on. The majority of women end up staying at home with no means of generating income. Only rarely is capacity-building provided in other important fields, such as English, computer skills, accountancy, administration, and organisation management (FGD Id:76).

Overall, very few donors are willing to expand the various funding criteria and policies in order to make them inclusive of women's groups that would be otherwise difficult to reach. This may be due to major donors having little or no interest in gender issues and/or the feminist and women's movements in general. For example, they have not addressed the obstacles preventing mothers from participating in activism. This would involve factoring in social security plans for those on maternity leave in project-based funding, or additional costs such as childcare needed to facilitate women's participation in conferences. (ENA 3:76) mentioned that no funding or donor covers maternity leave, leading many women to feel insecure about their jobs in the event of pregnancy. 'There should be funding to allow the organisation to offer maternity leave pay. Breastfeeding and paternity leave are further issues with regards to funding' (ENA 3:76).

Concluding Remarks

The analysis presented in this report draws on the active participation of 118 Syrian women activists who shared their perspectives regarding the development of feminist movements in Syria, without whom the report would not have been possible. We express our gratitude and appreciation to each of these women for their trust in us; their willingness to engage in Badael's research activities; and the richness of the information they shared with us. Their words, reflections, and self-critiques built the foundations of this report and allowed us to offer the reader access to the contributions made by feminist movements to the construction of a democratic Syria.

Throughout the production of this report, Badael has strived to adequately represent the perspectives of the activists interviewed, and to do justice to their valuable insights and the topic at large. We have highlighted the perseverance of these women in facing multiple and complex challenges, ranging from safety concerns to military and physical barriers to the restrictive funding policies that limit their freedom of action. All these issues, combined with the burden of structures of gendered discrimination and exclusion from collective decision-making processes, proved challenging to women's efforts to organise in movements and carry out their work. Nevertheless, Syrian women activists found their way around these hurdles, successfully adapting their strategy to the volatile local socio-political context; reinventing themselves and developing creative tools to overcome these obstacles; establishing practices of true resilience, which became a driving force in the development of women's movements.

The report has also explored the ways in which Syrian women activists, following the 2011 revolution, embarked on an extensive learning process, which was neither linear nor consistent, reflecting the heterogeneity of the movement as a whole. The range of ideologies, generations, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and extent of physical presence inside Syria (versus abroad) created a multiplicity of learning spaces and processes for each and every member. However, the necessity of producing a feminist and autonomous form of knowledge without being limited to importing knowledge produced by social actors external to the movement created a common ground within this diversity. The beginning of the process of feminist knowledge production in Syria and its modalities are described in the report as critical gains of feminist movements through which Syrian women have reclaimed their agency and gained a degree of influence over the public debate and political developments in Syria.

The international community fails to recognise the heterogeneity of Syrian women, approaching them as a single organic and monolithic body. This reductionist view, which informs the practice of international actors, strips feminist movements of their identities and deprives them of their agency by failing to provide them with a space in which to affirm their political perspectives. This problematic discourse has disruptive political implications, as it contributes to further excluding women from political decision-making processes. In this paper we have argued that, by acknowledging the heterogeneity of women and feminist

groups, more inclusive modalities of gendered participation can be designed that celebrate heterogeneity, rather than dismissing it.

This report has highlighted the multiple ways in which Syrian activists have collaborated across movements, supporting each other and creating meaningful links of solidarity. The self-reflective attitude of the activists as they look back on their actions and initiatives is a further sign of perseverance, resilience, and willingness to constantly improve themselves and deepen their knowledge to strengthen the wider movement.

Overall, this report seeks to inform readers about the groundbreaking achievement realised by Syrian women and feminist activists over the last decade, which inspires hope for the future. The continued presence and efforts of these movements demonstrate that a future democratic Syria can be built, and that Syrian women have the ability to lead and shape this process.

To multiply and sustain these achievements, the donor community must invest in women's rights organisations. The donor community often outsources financial risks to women's rights organisations, owing to a gendered and very low appetite for risk sharing. The repeated justification offered for this is that development aid money comes from taxpayers, and donors need to be accountable to taxpayers. While we strongly support accountability to taxpayers, we believe that the manner in which the donor community approaches development aid is outdated, and does not reflect a belief in investing in peace and democracy. All investment comes with risks, and the donor community—and indeed the Global North in general—appear to have no qualms about risk-taking when investing in stock markets and neoliberal economic ventures that increase disparity and poverty gaps around the world. It is regrettable that they fail to show a comparable risk appetite when it comes to investing in peace and democracy, which offer invaluable benefits for the world as a whole.

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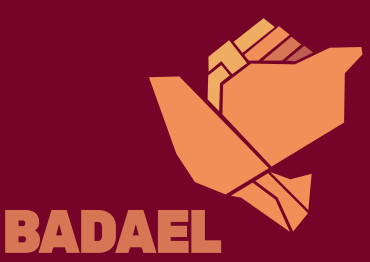
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